

Strategic Plan

2026-2029



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'I can genuinely say that the current Community First Oxfordshire team is the strongest, most creative and committed that I can remember.'

Tom - Co-CEO



Introduction

Over the last year, Community First Oxfordshire has looked carefully at the way we work. This new Strategic Plan sets out the values and principles which underpin and guide our community development and placemaking activity, while setting out objectives and priorities for our workstreams for the next three years. We aim for excellence and want to make sure we are doing everything we can to offer and provide support to those that need it.



As a first stage in the process of updating the previous Strategic Plan, in April 2024 we undertook a branding review. This included one-to-one interviews with a variety of stakeholders, group workshops with staff and trustees, and surveys of members and stakeholders. The findings were used to: set out an accessible description of the organisation (including our purpose and activities), establish a framework that contextualises our services, and sets out a narrative that connects our historic roots with our future, and the needs of the communities we serve.

Following this 'soft rebrand', which underpinned the development of a new website, in July 2025 staff and trustees came together for a Strategic Plan Away Day. The aim was to reflect on the old strategic objectives and start developing ideas that would help shape new goals. During the Away Day we:

- Collaboratively reviewed the charity's existing strategic objectives, assessing what has been accomplished and discussing areas where we could improve;
- Conducted a SWOT analysis, which reviewed the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and risks of the organisation as a whole and;
- Collectively generated ideas for what Community First Oxfordshire should focus on over the next three years.

The findings from the Away Day were subsequently shaped into a draft Strategic Plan by a core group of staff and trustees. The Plan was further refined following feedback from the wider group of staff and trustees and adopted by the Board of Trustees in November 2025.

We are confident that the 2026-2029 strategy identifies the richness of discussion and ideas captured over the past few years by our staff, our members, and our partners. We have consolidated our focus and work to improve our outcomes with the communities we work with.

Our activities will show how we will put into practice our aim to reach diverse communities and to address inequality and disadvantage. By improving our engagement with people in all their diversity across Oxfordshire and beyond, we will also make sure that people are able to fully participate in activities. This strategic plan sets out where we will be focusing our energy and activities over the next five years, providing a clear path and direction to reach our vision.



About

Community First Oxfordshire is a community development and placemaking charity. With over 100 years of working with Oxfordshire's communities, we offer services that support people and places across the county.

Community First Oxfordshire was the first rural community council in England. It initially focused on arts and literature and the provision of public libraries and village halls. However, in alignment with a growing appetite for social change, the charity soon began addressing a broader spectrum of societal needs which now includes affordable housing, community planning and stewardship, accessible health, community assets, community research and local enterprise.

Under the two umbrella areas of focus, we provide support for community members wanting to make a positive difference in their communities.

Placemaking

We offer support and advice to people and groups (including Parish Councils, Town Councils, Local Authorities, and community organisations) who:

- Are looking for support with neighbourhood planning or other planning issues.
- Want to deliver affordable or community-led housing for their local area.
- Need advice on stewardship and community management projects.
- Want to get the best from new housing development.

Community Development

We offer support, advice and training to people and groups who:

- Are interested in starting a community action project or want to get their community involved in volunteering.
- Need support with a community asset, like a hall or hub, shop, or transport scheme.
- Would like to run a community-led plan.
- Are interested in getting involved in community research.

Placemaking is a collaborative process where communities help create quality places to live, work, play and learn in. Using the community's knowledge, skills, and lived experience, good placemaking approaches balance the current and future needs of a community, and look beyond roads, power and water to social infrastructure—public spaces, facilities, transport, local services and green spaces. **Our Placemaking Charter details our vision for placemaking and how to achieve it.**

Community development is a process where people come together on a shared focus and act together to improve quality of life for all. Community First Oxfordshire is rooted in the art of community development, working with communities of place and identity to work together on the things that matter to them. **Throughout our work, we are guided by our community development core principles.**

Community Development Principles

- Listening and open communication
- Building trust – taking time
- Respect for local wisdom, culture, history
- Empowerment and self-determination (agency)
- Inclusive participation
- Collaboration, cooperation and mutuality
- Resilience/sustainability
- Accountability

Values

Our values and practices are rooted in human rights, social justice, and respect for diversity. We aspire to being a diverse, inclusive, and responsible organisation. These values are the golden threads running through Community First activity.

We respect and value our individual characteristics and differences, allowing staff to fully realise their potential. Our aim is to have a workforce and a Board of Trustees that can reflect and best understand the communities we serve.

We are committed to being inclusive, accessible, and fair in the way we design and deliver our services and to always treat everyone with openness and respect.

Equality, equity, diversity, and inclusion

We want to genuinely connect and work with all people from all backgrounds who live in a place, a community. We recognise that we do not all start from the same place and need to make adjustments for inequities to create a fairer society. We value the benefits of different perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences, identifying under-representation and taking active steps to address it.

We make every effort to create welcoming spaces for all, improving accessibility and enabling diversity. We have developed an EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) and Equal Opportunities Policy and an EDI Action Plan to hold ourselves accountable to our values and allow for an ongoing appraisal.

Integrity

To help ground us, we go back to our local knowledge and research with community members to make sure we are doing the right thing at the right time. We must be trusted to keep our word.

Adaptable

We are always open to change and to adapt, whether that's making changes within our own organisation or with others. To lead by example and be adaptable to change is a very important value for CFO. We engage with and listen to the needs of diverse individuals and communities. We advocate and support and help put into place what our communities are telling us.

Accountable

We ensure that we carry out our work with honesty and transparency. We are accountable to our members, funders and to each community we work with.



Our North Star Statement

Supporting Oxfordshire's people and places to work together and thrive

Strategic themes

Over the next three years we will focus our work and impacts under four strategic themes:

1 Community Infrastructure

Communities are supported to deliver projects and activities that help shape their local area by meeting locally-identified needs.

2 Health and Wellbeing

Communities are supported to improve general health and wellbeing of their community members

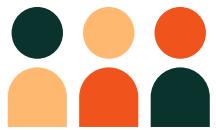
3 Truly Affordable Housing

Truly affordable housing is permanently and widely available in communities

4 Climate and Nature

Communities are supported and energised to positively respond to the climate and ecological crises

1 - Community Infrastructure



Communities are supported to deliver projects and activities that help shape their local area by meeting locally-identified needs.

Operational objectives - we will work towards this by:

- 1a** – Building strong relationships and fulfilling meaningful contracts with Local Authorities and other funders/clients which benefit communities and volunteers
- 1b** – Proactively engaging with diverse communities and working to remove barriers that deter grassroots community development (such as volunteering, funding and connectivity with other stakeholders) by increasing our infrastructure support offer to rural and urban based groups
- 1c** – Supporting Neighbourhood Plans, Community-Led Plans, and other forms of community-led action, and offering community development training and coaching
- 1d** – Promoting and supporting improved provision of local services and facilities and means of accessing services which cannot be provided locally
- 1e** – Developing and extending the CFO Town Planning, Community-Led Stewardship and research services
- 1f** – Developing, innovating, and seeking the involvement of other partners in the promotion and practice of community development and community-led placemaking
- 1g** – Influencing policies and programmes at national, regional and local level to take better account of the needs and views of people in rural and urban communities



Heyford Park Men's Shed



Training event



Shrivenham Memorial Hall

2 - Health and Wellbeing



Communities are supported to improve general health and wellbeing of their community members

Operational objectives - we will work towards this by:

- 2a** – Capacity building and supporting Well Together, Connected Communities Fund groups and community hubs to improve and sustain their grassroots-led community activities
- 2b** - Building strong relationships and fulfilling meaningful contracts with health agencies, Local Authorities and other funders/clients which benefit the health and wellbeing of communities and volunteers
- 2c** – Supporting all Community First Oxfordshire and partner wider work such as VCFSE local infrastructure work, community transport, halls, hubs and shops, Community-Led Plans, and other forms of community-led action to instil health and wellbeing as central to the activity
- 2d** – Ensuring accessible funding and proportional evaluation of health and wellbeing activities for smaller VCFSE groups is strongly advocated for
- 2e** – Community research not only encompasses but is owned and led by communities, and the actions from the research are acted upon to improve the health and wellbeing of communities
- 2f** – Community training and coaching provided for, by, and with Community First Oxfordshire is focused on improving health and wellbeing outcomes

3 - Truly Affordable Housing



Truly affordable housing is permanently and widely available in communities

Operational objectives - we will work towards this by:

- 3a** – Supporting and promoting the delivery of new housing projects through the Community-Led Housing and Rural Housing programmes
- 3b** – Exploring and extending practical means to achieve better housing options for Oxfordshire residents through partnership work with local planning authorities, housing agencies, etc.
- 3c** – Researching, developing, and advocating policy innovation to promote and improve affordable housing and community-led housing delivery at the Local Authority level (and nationally via our networks)

4 - Climate and Nature



Communities are supported and energised to positively respond to the climate and ecological crises

Operational objectives - we will work towards this by:

- 4a** – Upholding the zero-carbon transition as a driving principle of CFO's work
- 4b** – Developing a Community First Climate and Ecology Strategy to coordinate, design, and promote our activity and that of our community members and partners
- 4c** – Supporting locally-rooted and -led responses to the climate crisis through our community development and placemaking activity
- 4d** – Promoting climate and ecology at all levels (workplace, grassroots, and strategic) and working with communities and partners to enhance peer-to-peer learning.



Key Actions - 2026

On top of core workstream activity, we will:

- Source external funding to increase local infrastructure support for micro and small VCFSE organisations
- Develop a Young People's Strategy
- Continue to support the Volunteer Vision work
- Conduct focus groups with members to gain a deeper understanding of their needs and requirements
- Develop a Climate and Ecology Strategy
- Deepen our involvement in key networks and approaches such as Marmot Place, Health VCFSE Alliance and the Health and Wellbeing Board



Iraqi Women Art and War



Leys CDI event

'We're excited and energised to put this strategy into action, but we know it takes good collaboration with our partners and the communities we work with - that will make the real difference.'

Emily - Co-CEO

