Annual Review 2025/26

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

Community First Oxfordshire

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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 to work together and thrive.

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"A year goes by quickly in the world of Community First! So much excellent work has been undertaken by the Team - we hope you enjoy some highlights."
Emily Lewis-Edwards and Tom McCulloch
Co-CEOs

Chair Statement

It has been a very busy and vibrant year for Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) and I hope you have been following the highlights through the newsletters and social media. Our new branding and visual presentations made these reports really stand out.

Our new Strategy was the product of collaborative work from staff and trustees. It has four themes - Community Infrastructure, Health and Wellbeing, Truly Affordable Housing and Climate and Nature. These themes show the breadth of interest and expertise CFO brings and resonate with local communities.

Highlights this year include the huge success of the Well Together programme, which CFO led with our close partner, Oxfordshire Community and Volunteer Action (OCVA). The formal evaluation of the project showed considerable impact and **made the case for ongoing focus and funding to tackle health inequalities.**

As Well Together drew towards its close this year, CFO picked up a major role in making the "Small and Mighty" programme happen, not least through the successful application for Lottery funding. This is a partnership venture and aims to offer advice and support to those small community groups which enrich and enable so much across the county. Local voluntary and community groups are encouraged to get in touch to access the help and support on offer.

You will also see reports that CFO is **still supporting communities** through the Community Led Housing hub and through commissions for Neighbourhood Plans, Housing Needs Surveys and other planning related work. CFO support for village halls and shops is very much in demand and community development work in Heyford Park is ongoing. Support for nature projects, for example in Faringdon, and work to gain community insights for the Marmot County initiative has also developed.
I am full of appreciation for the whole staff team and all that they are achieving.

I am grateful to my fellow Trustees and would love to recruit others to join us on the Board – if you are interested and have some time, energy and insight then do get in touch. Times are changing but we are keen that CFO continues to sustain and develop the very important work of supporting Oxfordshire's people and places to work together and thrive.

New Strategy

This year, we spent time creating a new four year strategy, accompanied by a set of values and principles which we drew together from staff, trustees and community groups. Alongside our existing Placemaking Charter and Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) approach, these guide our existing workstreams and shape any future projects.

Strategic aims

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

Values

- *Equity, diversity, inclusion*
- *Accountability*
- *Adaptable*
- *Integrity*

Principles

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

Click to learn more:

Asset Based Community Development

Community Development Principles

Placemaking Charter

We also created sustainability and EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) roadmaps with step by step actions, which you can read about here.

Community Development

Building capacity, sharing skills, creating networks

11 Training sessions

95 People attended

We share community development skills and best practice with individuals, volunteers, community groups, and council members. Last year, we delivered training on Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), Bid Writing and Fundraising, Monitoring, and Project Development. We develop our training based on what communities tell us they need.

Community Led Plans undertaken:

Buckland

Upper Heyford

Letcombe Regis

Community Led Plans

Supporting communities to develop an actionable vision makes change tangible and enables people to use their existing skills and assets to improve their local areas.

We also offered more tailored advice to other groups in Oxfordshire on topics such as community engagement, youth provision, and more specific projects like the Bowls Club in Lower Heyford, Playing Fields in Horley and climate action in Faringdon.

Research

Marmot Place Rural Research

We regularly undertake research as we are uniquely linked to communities across Oxfordshire; our expertise lies in developing lasting connections and engaging more deeply with local people. Last year, CFO and Healthwatch Oxfordshire undertook research for the **Marmot Place project** to better understand the nature of rural inequalities. We held **focus groups, one-to-one conversations,** and undertook **surveys,** reaching **hundreds of residents in** Cropredy, Yarnton, the Heyfords, Chipping Norton, Hanborough, Freeland, and Charlbury.

Reflections on Accessibility

"**"How to engage not hard to engage"** is a phrase I keep coming back to. How can we reach people who don't usually show up because they don't feel its 'for them'?"

Last October we organised a bat walk in Faringdon with Wild Oxfordshire to encourage nature connection for wellbeing. We were approached by a father of autistic twins who was unsure whether the event would be suitable, given their unpredictable behaviour. With much reassurance we persuaded him that he and the boys would be warmly welcomed.

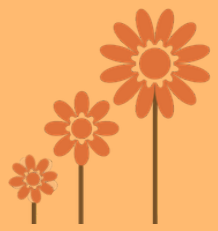
My enduring memory of that dusky evening walk was watching those boys delight in spotting low flying bats at the lakeside and the father's evident pleasure in participating in a community event. It was a fitting reminder of the importance of making extra efforts to ensure our community projects are accessible and inclusive."

Clare, Community Development Worker

Stop Smoking

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable ill health and death in the UK. Oxfordshire aims to reduce adult smoking rates from 10% to less than 5% by 2030. We know traditional methods are struggling to reach people, so this programme designed and tested new methods of reaching people and offered tailored support in communities.

After reviewing existing services and mapping community connectors, we started creating partnerships and employed a dedicated outreach worker who targeted disadvantaged groups with higher smoking prevalence. By repeatedly showing up in spaces like food larders, religious settings, and social clubs, our outreach worker built trust, and used their experience to write a report with our team of what works well and key challenges.



Full report click here

"The groups and clubs I visit are often in communities where the attendees are initially very sceptical about any health initiatives. The more people see you and the more visits you make, trust starts to build"

Duduzile - our outreach worker

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES FUND

CCF is a partnership between OCVA, Community First Oxfordshire, and Oxfordshire County Council to support The Oxfordshire Way, a countywide vision to help people live well and independently in their communities for as long as possible.

2025-26 was Year 4 of the CCF. **£271k funding was awarded to 86 community-based projects** (51% of applicants had not previously been funded by CCF). As part of the grant-making process, OCVA and CFO made visits to some of the groups.

A CCF highlight from Lisa (Project Development Worker)

"I had the pleasure of meeting John, an energetic and engaging 90-year-old who has been a member of the Bloxham Bowling Club for more than 40 years. He said, 'it's important to exercise and I still enjoy bowling as it keeps me fit and active'. Although he joked that he's not getting any younger he said he can still be useful: 'to volunteer with a club is a way to share experiences and make life interesting. I can't think of anything worse than sitting at home and fading into myself. I'm not alone here, I'm among friends.'"

And that's the point, community groups and the support and opportunities they offer are crucial hubs and 'second homes' for so many people in our communities.

Bloxham Bowling Club

*Well Together was a place-based programme that brought people, communities, and organisations together to strengthen wellbeing from the ground up, distributing **£1.3m alongside support** to groups in Oxfordshire.*

As well as giving so much to the local community sector, the programme was an inspiring example of the links between health, wellbeing, community connection, and physical activity, and how we can best support this.

Community-based groups are often best-placed to engage people earlier, build trusted relationships, reduce isolation, and support healthier lifestyles before needs escalate into more intensive health interventions.

With four skilled Community Capacity Builders alongside our wider team, we supported projects in 10 priority areas of Oxfordshire. You can explore the full range and depth of the programme **here.**

128
Projects funded

supporting

7250
sessions

with

14,000
participants

Anchor groups

Many areas already have strong local organisations with existing social networks. The Well Together Programme funded and worked closely with two such organisations in Oxfordshire as 'anchor organisations', building on trust which already exists rather than starting afresh. This successful approach used anchor groups to spread awareness, act as hosts for unregistered groups, and identify areas needing support.

Stories and reporting

It can be difficult but it's so important for groups to capture their impact. As well as supporting groups with more traditional monitoring, our Community Capacity Builders collected and shared stories from some groups to try communicate the deep impacts they can have across people's lives, which don't fit in a box. Explore stories here.

Heyford Park

In January, Marak joined as a Community Development Worker, continuing Rosie's role (who's now retired!) in supporting the community at Heyford Park to build on their strengths and tackle challenges.

With **44 networking events and meetings,** Marak supported many varied groups across Heyford Park: the Youth Partnership, Hub, Bicester Food Bank, Makers Shed, Parish Council, the Baton, the School & PTA, Chapel, Age UK, Community Action Group, Heyford Business Network, Dorchester Heritage Centre, Veterans Group, Heritage Volunteers, and Dorchester Living.

He has also been working on **improvements to structures of support** to encourage long term resilience - for example switching a coffee morning to an open 'surgery', and keeping noticeboards updated. Recently, Marak has focused on **youth work,** helping change the culture around young people and improving the provision of services and support.

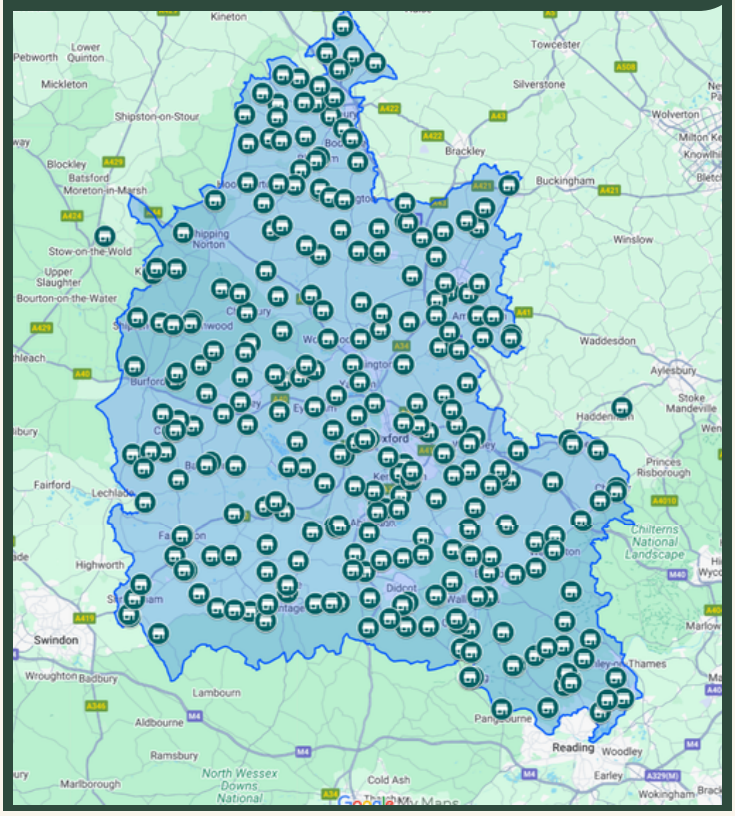
"My highlights were making connections with the community of Heyford Park, meeting so many people who, in the face of everything going on, want to embrace change and work to make communities work. The support from outside has also been wonderful."

Marak, Heyford Park Community Development Worker

Community Halls

Our adviser Tessa supports over 300 hall committees and community-owned shops across Oxfordshire. From sharing knowledge about legislation to organising networking events, contributing at partnership meetings to advocating for policy change, she is busy meeting the varied needs of our community buildings.

Map of halls supported by CFO



We support with:

- Governance and legislation
- Building refurbishments
- Funding
- Zero Carbon
- Volunteer recruitment

Tessa's highlight from the year:

"Last year I was very pleased to see two long-standing volunteers receive recognition for all their years of work for their community halls. John Kightley from Bucknell VH was the winner and Eveline Gillians from Carterton Women's Institute was runner up. I do hope that more hall volunteers will be put forward for this annual award. It's about time that the people tirelessly running our halls in the background receive more recognition for this important work."

84 Enquiries

8 Site visits

8 Training sessions

74 People

Ambrosden Village Hall consulting residents

OCVA Volunteer Awards 2025

Shops

This year, our advisor supported multiple community shops with fundraising, leases, low carbon improvements, volunteering, and general problem solving. Whilst visiting shops to offer support (including South Stoke, Ewelme, Little Milton, East Hagbourne, Appleton, Brightwell, Marcham, and Horton-cum-Studley), our advisor also heard how important shops and their varied services are to local communities - both for their products and the social and volunteering opportunities they provide.

8 Site visits

20 Community-owned shops supported

Community Transport

There are over 80 minibus and car schemes across Oxfordshire, relying largely on volunteers, which directly respond to local needs. Whilst many of the trips are for hospital visits, they are also used to access local services, shops, or social activities.

As well as supporting individual schemes with advice and skills, we worked in partnership with Oxfordshire Health to develop a provisional parking permit for volunteer drivers. We also granted more Octabadges to allow volunteers to park at hospitals under the current scheme.

We also celebrated Community Transport Week. This year's theme was 'More than a Minibus', highlighting how accessible, inclusive, and affordable transport strengthens community bonds.

60 Enquiries

167 Octabadges

3 Network/ training events

11 Meetings

"As a driver I find it very rewarding to help take a client for a hospital or clinic appointment, or an essential shopping trip. Usually it is because there is no family or friend available to help and having a friendly travelling companion takes some stress out of the situation for the client."

Volunteer, All Together In Charlbury

Housing

Rural Housing & Community-led Housing

A house is the starting point for a good life. Without an affordable place to call home, our rural villages are losing people that contribute to the community. By connecting different stakeholders, offering their skills of advice and knowledge, and building trust in communities, our Rural Housing Enablers supported 7 projects across Oxfordshire last year. Not to mention all the meetings, conversations, research, and networking which inspire others to think about their own local affordable housing project.

Fiona's highlight - Community-led housing groups event

"It was amazing to see so many passionate volunteers from a very diverse range of communities come together to see how we can best work as a movement and increase our impact and presence. It really showed the power of joining up as a unified force! Community-led housing has grown from very small beginnings to being a serious response to the housing issues our communities face."

Kay's highlight - Optimism on a cold evening

"I visited a Parish Council on a dark November evening and had a challenging conversation that explored different housing options and addressed many questions. We now have the results of a Housing Needs Survey that shows both need and support for affordable housing. The Parish Council is pushing the project forward with our support. There are challenges ahead but it is the first step towards better housing for and by local residents."

7 Community housing projects

123 Potential affordable homes

8 Housing Needs Surveys

3 Steering group meetings

Our Rural Housing enablers spend time getting out to villages and meeting residents where they live - all of them have different needs and challenges, yet they make up the bigger picture of rural living. Having this understanding will be particularly important as we adjust to the new Unitary authorities.

Planning

Town and Neighbourhood Planning

2025-26 was a busy year! Our Neighbourhood Planning (NP) support services hit a bump in the road with the government suddenly ending grant funding for NP groups. This was the key mechanism through which communities accessed monies to cover both general NP advice or more technical work (such as design codes, landscape studies and housing needs assessments). With Parish and Town Councils now having to fall back even more on their own resources, there could well be a downturn in NP activity across the county.

8 NP groups supported

5 Community Consultations

3 Major town planning commissions

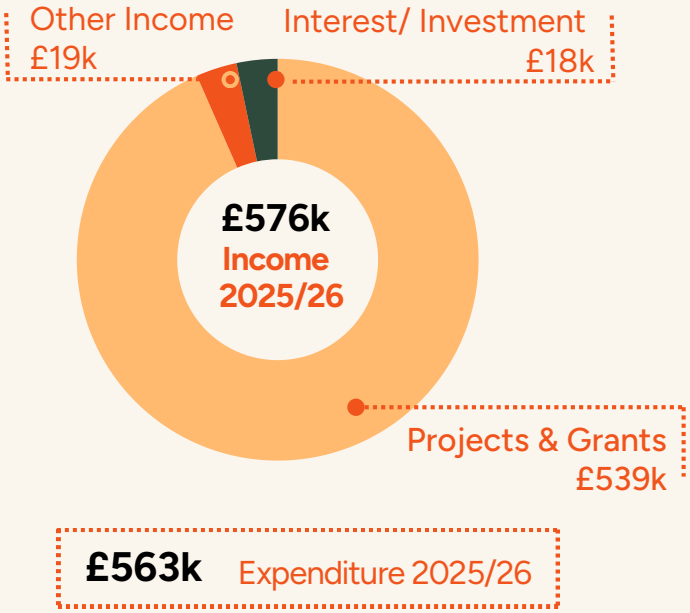
However, all of the groups that we support confirmed that they would continue their plans. This was excellent news as it allowed us to continue to work with these determined groups of volunteers to achieve the key aim of neighbourhood planning: making development best work for local people. To this end, certain policies are particularly useful: character and design, local green spaces, key views and – somewhat more controversially – housing allocations.

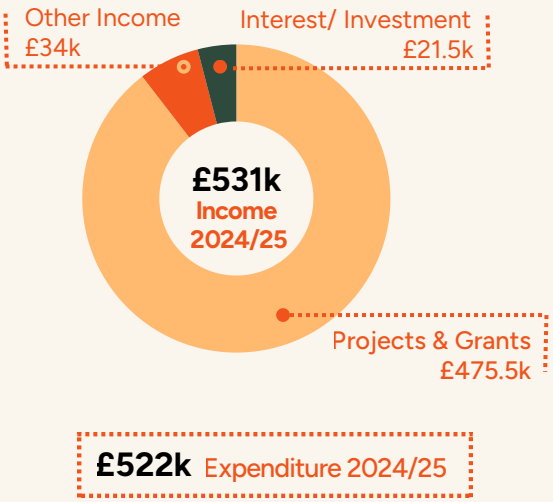
In other Town Planning activity, we pulled together a group of community activists and specialists to develop a proposal to bring a **heritage building** in Wallingford back into use. We also brokered a **Conservation Area appraisal** for Faringdon via the Town Council, which will feed into the town's Neighbourhood Plan review. Near Abingdon, we undertook investigations to support a potential new **community-led housing project**.

"I would highly recommend Community First Oxfordshire to any Parish Council as Neighbourhood Plan Consultants. CFO has expertly guided our Steering Group through each stage of the process. They always provide clear practical advice, explain what needs to be done, share examples for us to follow, and offer constructive feedback to keep us on track. I have found CFO to be knowledgeable, approachable, and kind. Their support is leading us through the process and giving us confidence that we are producing a Neighbourhood Plan that will be of real value to our village for years to come."

Cllr. Wendy Usherwood, Minster lovell

Financial Statement 2025/26





Our Staff

Emily Lewis-Edwards
Joint Chief Executive Officer

Tom McCulloch
Joint Chief Executive Officer

Fiona Brown
Community-led Housing Lead & Rural Housing Enabler

Stephen McKenna
Community Planning Officer

Marak James
Community Development Worker

Kay Sentance
Rural Housing Enabler

Shahdia Bibi
Senior Administrator

Maryam Grassly
Communications and Impact Lead

Lisa Stead
Project Development Manager

Tessa Hall
Community Buildings and Retail Advisor

Taymur Al-Saadi
Community Capacity Builder

Jane Gallagher
Community Capacity Builder

Assia Bibi
Community Capacity Builder

Dolcie Obhiozele
Community Capacity Builder

Clare Dodwell
Community Development Worker

Duduzile Gambe
Outreach Worker Stop Smoking

Lorna Mills
Finance Officer/ Oxfordshire Oil Coordinator

Trustees:

Jackie Wilderspin - Chair

Chris Kenneford - Vice Chair

Malcolm Taylor - Treasurer

Emily Urquhart

Linda Horgan

Jon Bright

Thanks to our Funders and Partners

CAG Oxfordshire COMMUNITY ACTION GROUPS

OCVA Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action

CCB Connecting Communities in Berkshire Helping Berkshire communities thrive

CHAMPIONING VOLUNTARY ACTION NCVO

navca local focus national voice

Oxfordshire Community Foundation

London Development Trust

Wild Oxfordshire

Community Impact Bucks supporting charities, communities, volunteering

BOB VCSE HEALTH ALLIANCE

NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board

acre network ACTION WITH COMMUNITIES IN RURAL ENGLAND

defra

Affinity Fuels

DORCHESTER LIVING

Vale of White Horse District Council

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Cherwell DISTRICT COUNCIL NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

OXFORD CITY COUNCIL

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL