

A warm welcome from me to our event today.

In my contribution, I want to do 3 things. First, to set out briefly what ORCC has achieved over the past year. Second, to let you know what we will be doing in the future. Third, to set out the principles that underpin our charity and explain why our work is important.

Looking back: a year of delivery and innovation

LOOKING BACK 2014 / 15: A YEAR OF DELIVERY AND INNOVATION	
Topic	Communities supported
• Community-led planning:	63 communities
• Neighbourhood Planning:	14 communities
• Village Halls & shops:	64 VH committees and community shops
• Community Transport:	20 Community Transport groups
• Health & ageing	Red Arrow Driver Team set up
• Health & ageing	Dementia Friendly communities report
• Health & ageing	Village Companies model developed
• Supported Transport	
Consultation	Independent facilitator for County Council
• New housing & community provision	Study for Cherwell District Council
• Satisfaction with ORCC services:	Survey results 3.5 / 4

During the past year, ORCC has continued to provide the services that rural communities tell us they need: advice on village halls and shops, rural housing, community planning and community transport.

We have done many other things as well. We have strengthened our work on neighbourhood planning, set up the Red Arrow Community Transport Team for vulnerable people and managed a regeneration project in South Abingdon.

Cherwell DC asked us to review social and community provision to inform the council's thinking about new development in Bicester and Banbury.

The County Council appointed us as independent facilitators for their consultation on proposed changes to Supported Transport.

HealthWatch commissioned us to report on how dementia friendly communities can make a real difference if there is more recognition of their role.

And we are working with the Local Enterprise Partnership to support rural business and enterprise.

We have supported more volunteers in Oxfordshire's communities than ever before. The scale of our activity is set out in our Annual Report where there is a snapshot of what we have done and what people said about it. We are proud of the testimonials we receive. These say much about our staff and the value they bring. Turning now to the next phase for ORCC....

Looking forward: new name, new scope, new direction

At 95, ORCC is the oldest of the 38 Rural Community Councils in England. All charities need to adapt to changing times. Last year, we reduced costs and developed new services. This year, we will make further changes that will help us thrive in a difficult financial climate.

We have changed our name to 'Community First Oxfordshire'. This follows other Rural Community Councils whose work is no longer confined to rural areas. We have a new logo and website. We will be moving to smaller offices. We will work with new partners and bring fresh thinking to bear on key challenges.

And we will focus our effort in 3 main areas:

COMMUNITY FIRST OXFORDSHIRE – LOOKING AHEAD

Housing and community planning
• Neighbourhood planning
• Community-led planning
• New housing development
Community enterprise:
• Community buildings (1): village halls and community centres
• Community buildings (2) shops, post offices, pubs
• Supporting business and community enterprise
Health, ageing and transport
• Dementia friendly communities
• Community transport support & Red Arrow Team
• Strengthening community support and improving care
AND
• Community oil buying scheme

Housing and community planning We will continue to support Community-led Plans. Community plans help local people agree and take forward a wide range of improvements to their area. We will also expand our work on Neighbourhood Plans. NPs are different to CPs. NPs are a formal part of the planning process and allow communities to influence housing and business development.

We will be offering a 'community development service' in new housing developments. Helping newly-arrived residents set up neighbourhood groups and activities and forge links with their new town or village can make all the difference in helping a community get off to a good start.

We also want to do more on Affordable Rural Housing. This is a big issue. It needs some new thinking in the light of various changes that have taken place. We will assess what can realistically be done and discuss options with district councils and Housing Associations.

Community Enterprise Our Village Halls and Community Shops advisory service is greatly valued. We will be talking to the relevant councils about extending this service to community buildings in Oxfordshire's city and towns. We will also be looking at ways of supporting rural businesses and community enterprises through our new Village Companies idea.

Health, ageing and transport We are working with other charities and the NHS to find better ways of resettling elderly people in their homes and communities when they leave hospital. Our role will be to support Good Neighbour Schemes across the county and ensure there is effective community transport backup. CT services are even more important as subsidised public transport is reducing.

And we run a first rate oil buying scheme!

So that's what we'll be doing. Let me say a few words about why we are doing it. There are some key principles that underpin our work.

Some key principles

We want to help communities exert some influence on a fast- changing world – whether it is new housing developments, changes to local bus services or taking on new responsibilities devolved to local communities.

We want to help communities make a real impact – whatever the project they are taking forward, we will do more to help V & C organisations make an impact and demonstrate that they have. We will shortly be promoting an innovative training programme on this issue.

We want to help communities meet the challenge of an ageing society – working with others to build good neighbour schemes, strengthen community transport projects and build better links with the statutory sector.

Finally, two examples to show why the sort of work we do is still important.

My first example involves a place.

Stanford in The Vale asked us to help them with their NP.

This included managing a public consultation event and public vote on options for a strategic housing development site in the parish

In the consultation, we focused on 3 key elements:

- an overview of the NP
- pros and cons of each option for a new strategic site
- a secret ballot on the options, using the single transferable vote system

It was a lively, informative event with 100+ people attending. Participants selected a preferred option for a development site and this evidence will be submitted as part of the SiV NP.

CFO built good relationships with both the Local Authority and the community. This event demonstrated the constructive role we can play in helping councils and communities work together on often controversial planning discussions that will have huge implications for the future of our towns and villages.

My second example involves a person.

The Red Arrow volunteer car scheme helps people with health needs to stay connected to family, friends and community. This helps them stay well mentally as well as physically.

Janice is in her late 80's and struggles with mobility. She has no family close by and has become increasingly isolated and housebound. She has led an eventful life. Her parents fled Russia during the revolution to live in France. They found that they were not welcome there so moved to Germany where she spent a few years before settling in the UK. Her AGE UK support worker found her a local German-speaking class to rekindle her linguistic abilities, but could find no means of getting her there.

A Red Arrow Volunteer stepped in and now takes her once a month to her classes. This is so important for Janice. She finds her ability to speak German is returning but what she really enjoys is the conversation and companionship.

The volunteer driver says:

"Janice cannot thank me enough for taking her to her monthly German classes. She had not left her house for 3 months before – all too common a problem - and it makes me feel great to think that I have made this much difference to someone's quality of life.

A final thought. Even at a time of austerity, or especially at a time of austerity, we need to help places and people manage their challenges and build their resilience. This is a big part of what V&C organisations and the public sector do. All activity funded by the tax payer needs to demonstrate its value. This is not always easy to measure. But we should take care to protect those services that if reduced or cut altogether will cost so much more.

Thank you.