

A Century of Supporting Communities



Strong, Inclusive, and Thriving Communities

Introduction



I was given strong advice by a very experienced Deputy Lieutenant when I took over as Oxfordshire's Lord Lieutenant 12 years ago: always bear in mind that the county has a strong rural backbone.

A third of the population of the county lives in areas defined as "rural" by the Office of National Statistics. This rural population is for the most part scattered over a wide area in what is the second

least densely populated county in the South East, and it comprises over 40% of those in the county over the age of 65. Provision of support and engagement to vulnerable groups, adequate transport links and critically, an infrastructure that encourages social cohesion, village by village, has long been of critical importance to this population. And the need for that support and engagement is of course at this time of the COVID crisis more important than ever. A really heartening element of the crisis has been the way in which communities around the county, of all shapes and sizes, have spontaneously and efficiently risen to

the challenge of supporting those made most vulnerable by the crisis. Sustaining that level of community involvement and engagement is going to prove of essential importance as we navigate through the long term consequences of COVID.

For all of these reasons it is wonderful that at the same time as the crisis we are able to celebrate the work of Community First Oxfordshire in its 100th anniversary year in 2020. Over that long period of huge social change in the countryside, CFO has demonstrated its ability to flex and develop the support and encouragement it provides to our villages and rural communities, its community centres and local shops, its development of neighbourhood plans, placemaking and housing, and provision of support for those who most need it. Respected for its knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced particularly by our smaller communities it has enhanced and developed its offering to those communities in an entirely appropriate way. Today it is as well placed as it has always been to maximise the support that it can provide – a vital element in meeting the challenges of a post-COVID world.

Tim Stevenson OBE
Lord-Lieutenant of Oxfordshire

In October 1920, Oxfordshire Rural Community Council* was founded.

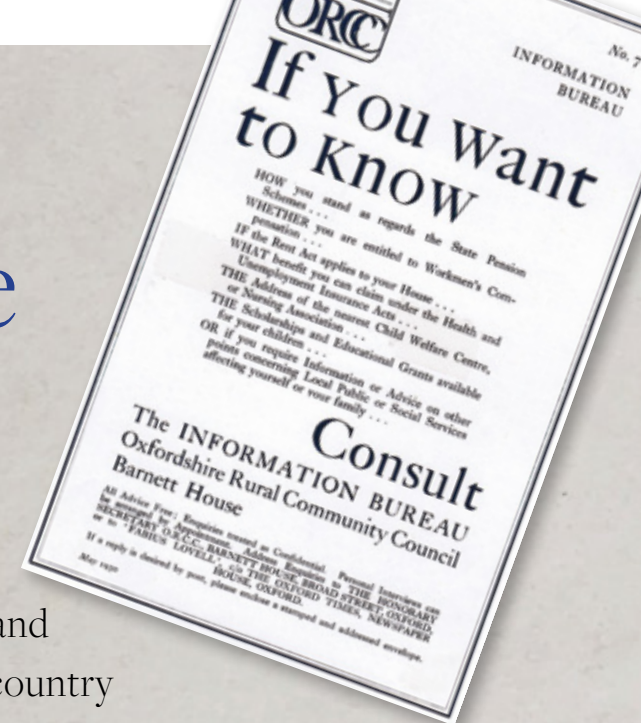


Hadow House, Oxford. First home of CFO

Back then, Britain was still reeling from the trauma and socio-economic fallout from World War One. The country was also recovering from the Spanish Flu pandemic. A century on, with eerie symmetry, COVID-19 finds us in the midst of a public health emergency of similar magnitude. In between times came the Depression of the thirties, another World War, and the huge social changes of post-1945 Britain. More recently has come austerity.

Throughout all these challenges CFO has adapted, ensuring that our services continue to provide what communities need.

*In 2015, ORCC changed its name to Community First Oxfordshire (CFO), which will be used throughout.



Community – always a work in progress

So how do you summarise a hundred years of community action? Answer - with difficulty!

In its early days, CFO had an ‘improving’ mission, focusing on arts and literature and public library provision. Through its founder, Grace Hadow, CFO had close links with the Women’s Institute, whose mission was education and self-improvement for women.

Central to CFO’s vision then and now are community halls. These are vital local assets. In the interwar period, CFO championed the building of new halls (there were 82 in the county in 1927 and 280 plus today). More hands-on support for management committees began in the 1950s and today the community halls support service continues to embed CFO in rural communities.

Community planning likewise has a long history. In the late 1940s, the focus was education. CFO held conferences to find out what local people wanted from informal educational programmes. Today the focus is broader. Community-led planning and, more recently, Neighbourhood Planning, encourage communities to take a deep dive into their needs and develop action plans to meet them.

Those needs can lead to the development of new CFO services such as the community shops support service, which began in the 1980s, and our work on low carbon communities in the more recent past and present.



Grace Hadow OBE
Author, principal of St Anne’s College, Oxford, Vice Chair of The Womens Institute and co-founder of CFO



1920

October 1920: Grace Hadow, Dr WGS Adam, chair of National Council of Social Services, and AH Griffiths form Oxfordshire Rural Community Council.

1920s

Campaign for new village halls; public library and local education advocacy; Rural Industries Group established.

1930s

Research report on housing in the countryside; initiatives to address rural unemployment; allotments campaign.

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

Wintering 2001 November 2004
10.30 - 12.30
Event cost: £4000

Dealing with rural isolation and social exclusion in Cotswoldshire

A unique one day conference covering

- The barriers that cause isolation and exclusion in rural areas
- Social exclusion affects rural rural roads
- What is going wrong in Cotswoldshire
- What about barriers?
- Realistic and achievable best practice models for improving rural roads

ODFC
Oxfordshire County Council

Please contact ODFC on 01295 820000 if you require a large print version of this invitation.

The need for high-quality, affordable housing is another longstanding CFO

Community transport has also had an enduring focus. The last century has seen the decline of local shops, pubs, banks and other services, with local train stations closing and bus routes being cut. This creates real problems of isolation and access to services. Since the 1970s, CFO's community transport service has helped new and existing volunteer car schemes. These provide a vital lifeline, such as making sure elderly and vulnerable people get to health and personal appointments. In 2018, we set up the Red Arrow Good Neighbour Scheme, which provides a volunteer-based service in Oxford City.



First development worker appointed; Rural Industries Loan Fund to support local craftsmen introduced.

Tenant and resident campaign to support those living in poor conditions in ex-RAF camps; Best Kept Village competition launched.

Charities Review Programme begins – advising ‘charities for the poor’ to modernise.



Changing communities – changing approaches

World War One had a radical impact. People who had given so much demanded better lives than before. This energy was even more apparent after World War Two and was manifested in the election of the 1945 Labour government. The cradle to the grave welfare state was born and the NHS created.

CFO was swept along by the same wave of social renewal. The National Council of Social Service saw more opportunities for partnerships between public and voluntary bodies, especially in rural areas. An early action was to get rural community councils working again after the hiatus of the war. Grants followed, allowing CFO to appoint field officers. A development committee carried out education work in smaller villages.

Social change of all kind accelerated into the 1960s and 1970s. New ways of thinking about people and community became popular. The 'patrician', top-down ethos that characterised CFO's early decades began to shift. People were supported to find and develop their own solutions. Community-led planning, another long-standing CFO service, has refined this approach from the 1970s onwards.

Today, CFO bases its work on the principles of Asset-Based Community Development. This means identifying, releasing, and combining already-existing skills and gifts rather than beginning with what is missing.



THATCHING
Skilled thatchers are becoming increasingly difficult to find, though there is still a considerable demand for their services.
During 1936 the O.R.C.C. made an inquiry into the supply and demand in this craft with the aim of preventing its disappearance.



1970s

Community Transport support service begins.

1980s

Parish planning service begins; Rural Community Care Forum established. Community Shops service introduced; Village Ventures competition started; Launch of Rural Housing Initiative.

1990s

Rural Inclusion Group (now Rural Oxfordshire Network) set up; Rural Action for the Environment launched; The Drama Wardrobe became increasingly popular; Rural Volunteer Awards launched; co-founded the Rural Stress Information Network.



Best Kept Village Competition

Whether in urban or rural environments, few things are guaranteed to rile people up more than litter and mess. Back in the 1950s this spurred the Women's Institute to create the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign. This in turn inspired a long-standing CFO initiative – the Best Kept Village Competition.

Launched in 1957, the competition aimed to make people aware of the condition of their communities and to spur them into action. There were two categories – villages with a population of under 700 and those of 700 plus. First prize was a not insignificant £185.15s.0d. Why so precise? Well, the Duke of Marlborough was vice president of CFO and the prize money represented a day's takings from Blenheim Palace. The award itself was named after the Duke, with the Marlborough Trophy expected

to be displayed on a post in the winning village.

Relaunched in 2006 as the Oxfordshire Villages of the Year Competition, there remained an award for Best Kept Village Environment. However, entrants were also judged on how they addressed other key themes and issues, such the needs of young people and older people, affordable housing, information communication technology, and local business. As Alun Michael from Calor Gas, the long-time competition sponsor, put it,

"This competition recognizes the most fundamental quality, which determines whether a village operates successfully as a community – that is, how inclusive it is to all its members, particularly the most vulnerable."



2000S

Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership formed; parish planning retooled as Community-Led Planning; Wired Up Villages Handbook developed; Breaking Down Barriers - report on social exclusion published.

2010S

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council renamed Community First Oxfordshire; Low Carbon and Dementia Friendly Communities partnership initiatives; Neighbourhood Planning consultancy launched; OxOil bulk oil buying scheme introduced.

A Place in Space – Hook Norton 1920-2020



*“For sixty odd years I’ve lived in this place
I’ve seen changes in various places
I’ve seen some old dwellings pulled two into one
And others just left open spaces.”*

George H. Dumbleton’s words in ‘My Life Then and Now’.
He moved to Hook Norton at the turn of the twentieth century and wrote this verse in 1963. He sums up very neatly the great constant in community life – change.

Alongside a number of written histories, Hook Norton has been uniquely documented in film, from *Twenty-Four Square Miles* in 1946 to a Granada TV programme in the 1970s and a 1995 film, *Hook Norton in Days Gone By*. With its past so accessible, the community is a wonderful case study in changes that have been mirrored across much of Oxfordshire in the hundred years that CFO has been in existence.

From poverty to prosperity

At the end of World War One, around 25% of the population of the UK lived below the subsistence level. Urban poverty often gets more attention but rural poverty was just as acute. Public health and nutrition were a concern. Life expectancy in Hook Norton was 60 for a woman and 56 for a man.



Health began to improve in the 1930s but the biggest advances came post-World War Two. The National Health Service was set up. In came health-checks, vitamin drops for children and milk at playtime, as well as immunisations. The roving doctor of the 1930s, moving from village to village, was replaced by a full-time GP surgery in 1965, with new premises opening in 2001. Across the last hundred years local health has vastly improved, with life expectancy increasing to 83 and 79 for women and men respectively by 2001.

Gradual improvements in housing also contributed to better health. The Addison Act of 1919 led to new council housing. Slum clearance took place in the local area in the 1930s. Yet most of the housing until the late 1940s was still cold and poorly ventilated sixteenth and seventeenth century cottages. Even some of the new housing built in this period was not linked to mains water, and outdoor toilets were still common. While electricity was available, not all homes were connected, with oil lamps still commonly used.



The step-change in housing quality would come from the 1950s onwards, when the economic growth of the 'Golden Age' of the 1950s triggered upticks in local health and prosperity. Wages rose, although in a land-based economy such as Hook Norton's they remained low. It is perhaps unsurprising that Slate and Thrift Clubs remained popular, acting like local economic safety nets, paying out money when a member was ill, distributing dividends, or allowing people to borrow money.

The continuity of community

George Dumbleton's poem hints at something else – if change is a constant it is also a process. Away from the big trends of history, economics, and health, Hook Norton really sparkles as a place of lived change when the people who have been both the subjects and the agents of this change are placed in the foreground.

A visit to the village website in 2020 gives a sense of the sheer range of community activity taking place, from mutual aid groups to Low Carbon initiatives and myriad of sports and cultural societies. Many of these have their roots in decades past.





Click on YouTube and you can visit Hook Norton in 1946; men in caps playing darts in the pub; a Women's Institute Meeting; young and old at a dance class. The history group is a treasure trove of community memories and anecdotes, pictures, and people. An ability to successfully adapt to the changes blowing through the community is a powerful thread in village history.

Unique responses to new trends can also be picked out, such as the local significance of community education. Educational provision in general has been revolutionised in the last century. In 1918, elementary education became free and in 1957 Hook Norton Primary School was extended. A secondary modern was opened in 1950 and closed in 1970 (local pupils now go to Chipping Norton). However, the post-World War Two boom in adult, community-based education took particular root in the village. From 1970 to 2000 there was 'admirable provision for adult education that made Hook Norton much envied', with some of today's groups and societies a legacy of these popular courses.



The challenge of change

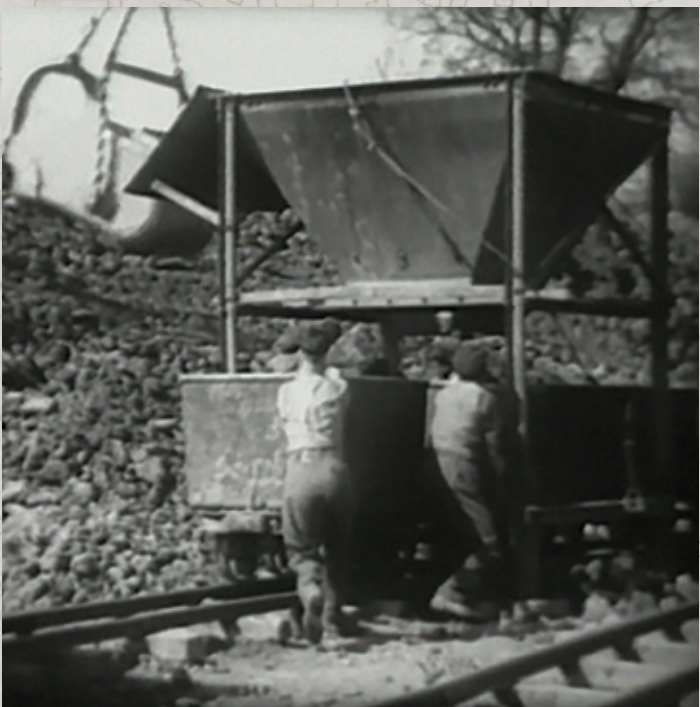
Today, the brewery remains but the railway has gone, so too the ironstone works. In their place have come buses and cars, financial and creative services. Hook Norton in 2020 is almost unrecognisably different to 1920. From the relative isolation of a century ago most people who live in the village now commute elsewhere to work. Health and housing conditions have vastly improved. Poverty has given way to more prosperity.

Yet this is not to suggest the inevitability of positive change. In Hook Norton, change has happened or been worked for in different ways. Major social and economic shifts had significant local impacts, change in this sense being something that was done to the community. Sometimes a new initiative from outside was boosted by community input, as with adult education. And sometimes the community has blazed its own trail, as with today's agenda-leading work of Low Carbon Hook Norton, or the Hook Norton Neighbourhood Plan, which sets out a vision for the future development of the community up to 2031.



This dynamic and ongoing relationship between external forces and community response, and often proactive community initiative, has characterised the last century of community life in Hook Norton. It offers the hope and the means for meeting the challenges of the present; the cost of housing and the outflows of young people, for example, the climate emergency and adaptation to the post-COVID-19 world.

Many thanks to the Hook Norton Local History Group for the superb source material.



2020s: Looking Forward – A Sustainable Future

CFO's rich history of working with communities and individuals in Oxfordshire, whether it is with an 'improving' mission in mind or finding the gifts in us all to enable the right questions rather than assumed answers, is here for us to see. However, it is now, more than ever, that we all need to work together to find the most sustainable outcomes for us and the environment before it is too late.

CFO has developed a five-year strategy (2020-2024), which combines the strengths of what we do with the challenges we face today. We are committed to four core themes: Community Planning and Action (shaping the place where you live for the better); Asset Based Community Development (ABCD approach to see the strengths first rather than the weaknesses); Zero Carbon Communities (climate proofing and adapting what we do); and Truly Affordable Housing (the affordable housing crisis can no longer be sidelined).

By addressing these core themes through genuine community partnerships and multi-agency working, we can adapt our lives and our communities for a brighter future.



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Our thanks go to all our Partners and Stakeholders who have helped and supported us over the years.

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