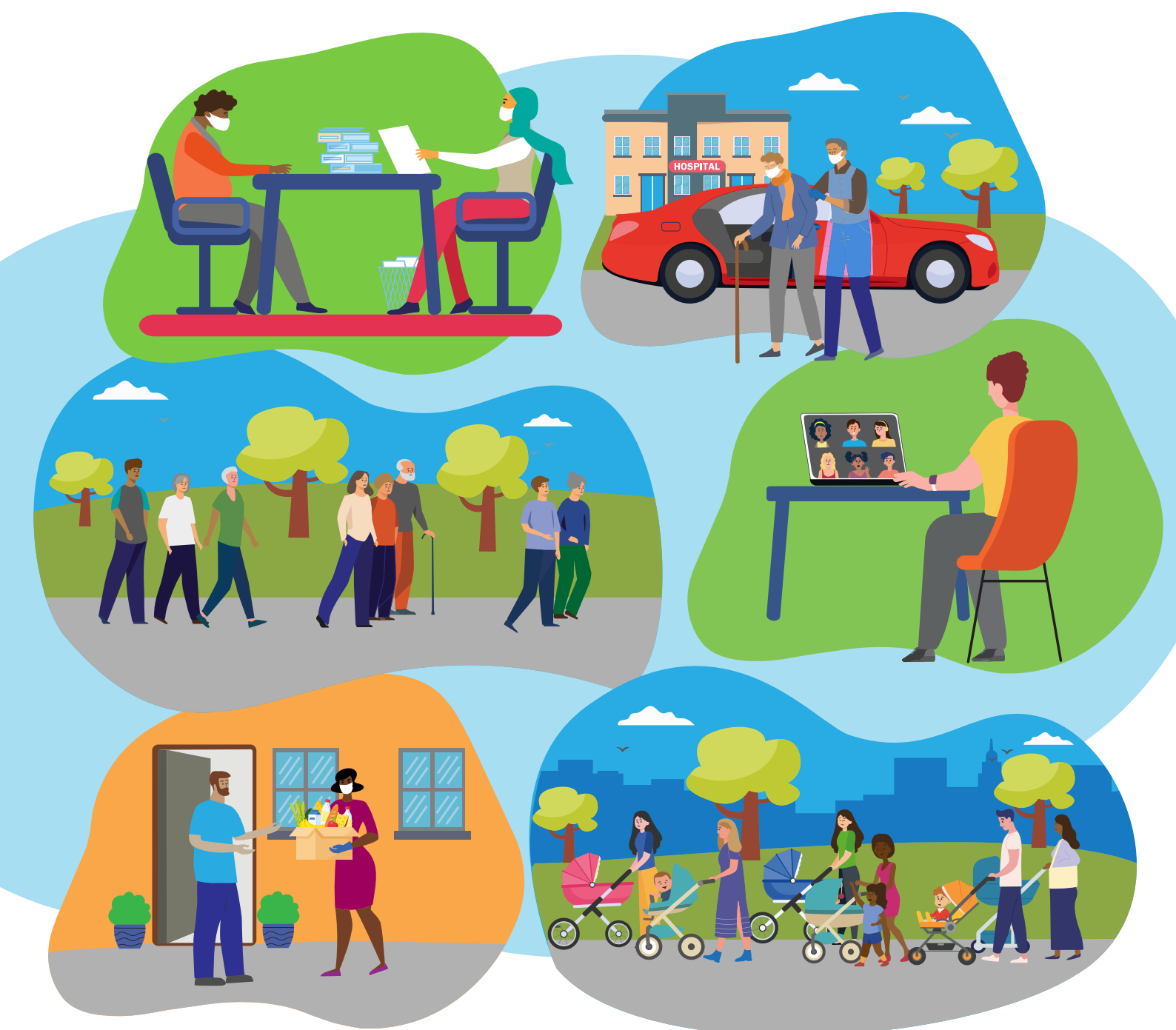


# Supporting Communities through COVID-19 Fund

Impact, learning and next steps  
April 2021 – March 2022





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# Introduction

**In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) was allocated funding from the Department for Health and Social Care Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) to support measures to reduce COVID-19 outbreaks and the spread of infection.**

The county council agreed that some of this funding should be granted to grassroots organisations across Oxfordshire with the aim to deliver activities that will help to reduce COVID-19 outbreaks and the spread of infection.

This £256,000 pot of funds was distributed to 26 groups and charities, administered jointly by Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) and Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA) with dedicated support from a Community Development Programme Officer. CFO and OCVA were selected due to their reach to voluntary groups and charities across Oxfordshire and to bring further benefits to recipients via a Grants Plus approach, providing capacity building as well as funds.

## Grants Plus or Funder Plus – overview

This is support that is shaped by the grantees which builds on their organisational strengths (and challenges) and helps to build resilience. The type of support offered can be training, peer to peer support, mentoring, collaborative workshops and so forth. It is support that is not direct funding but strengthens the foundations of the grantees' organisations and can be considered Grants Plus or a Funding Plus approach.

## The Supporting Communities Through COVID-19 Fund approach

A Community Development Programme Officer (CDPO) was employed by CFO to manage the fund and provide support to the grantees. A Grants Plus approach provides capacity building opportunities and organisational development support which can take a number of forms such as one to one support (project review and mentoring), signposting, training and facilitating learning and relationships across grantees. The aim to create greater organisational impact and sustainability.

# Funding Call

**The grants were split into two amounts; up to £10,000 for community action groups such as mutual aid projects and £10,000 to £50,000 for collaborative and broad brush projects covering a large geographic area. This encouraged smaller, recently established groups to apply without the need for a track history (usually two years history are required for funders), and groups to form consortiums or partnerships to apply for joint funding.**

The process also encouraged groups to seek advice from OCVA/CFO in completing their application forms and to review their application. This offer was taken up by many groups. Overall, 60 groups were recorded in seeking advice on their application or a review of their application.

The funding call was oversubscribed with 111 applications requesting a total of £1,582,329 so it was important to have a diverse selection committee with different viewpoints (Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council, CFO, OCVA, African Families in the UK and Oxfordshire Community Foundation) to shortlist 58 potential grantees and award the funding in a short time frame to ensure vital support to communities could continue. In total, 26 proposals were funded, six large grants and 20 small grants to the value of the fund (£256,500). All funds were disbursed by May 2021. It was a great achievement to move from funding call, through selection and to disburse funds in three months. Disbursing funds directly through the voluntary sector enabled new links to be made between grantees and OCVA and CFO and between experienced and newer groups to encourage shared learning and support throughout the grant period.

## Learning

- The process has created new links for OCVA/CFO with groups and organisations especially those who sought advice/support on their applications.
- The application forms were straightforward and groups found them relatively easy to complete. A word count on specific sections was suggested but many groups wrote too much, so a word count limiter would be recommended for future forms.
- Having the process run through the voluntary sector enabled us to provide ideas for collaboration to groups and to link groups up who were thinking of doing similar projects or working in specific localities. There was a huge challenge of receiving 111 applications amounting to £1,582,329 in total funds requested and only having £256,500 to distribute. However, having a Grants Panel made up of different organisations who each scored the shortlisted applications helped to make sure that the funding was awarded appropriately.
- The criteria of COMF funds was not always directly relevant to the type of work offered by applicants but the trust between OCC and CFO/OCVA allowed flexibility to the benefit of some of these groups/organisations and the people they were supporting.
- The timescale for the promotion of the funding and assessment of the applications was relatively short and it was a challenge to ensure that all deadlines were met. However, as it was during the pandemic, it was vital to get the funds allocated as soon as possible and both CFO and OCVA worked well together to ensure the grants were allocated in the time period.

# Grants plus in action

**A Community Development Programme Officer (CDPO) was recruited by CFO to manage the fund and facilitate support to the grantees through a Grants Plus approach. A key role for the CDPO was to reach out to each 26 organisations to understand the needs of each group and to ensure relevant support was offered.**

The following **core themes** emerged from one to one discussions, a survey and a network meeting: **sustainability, measuring impact, volunteering** (recruitment, management, inclusion and diversification), **working with vulnerable people/mental health and active listening skills and partnership working**. Training, support and signposting was provided in response to the areas identified.

## Emerging themes

<b>Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strategy</li><li>• Fundraising</li><li>• Corporate and partnership</li><li>• Social Enterprise</li><li>• Charitable structures</li></ul>
<b>Measuring outcomes towards impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Exploring the difference your organisation/ group is making</li><li>• Capturing and using positive change</li></ul>
<b>Volunteering</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Recruitment, management, inclusion and diversification</li></ul>
<b>Other training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Active listening</li><li>• Working with people/mental health</li><li>• Project management</li></ul>
<b>Partnerships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strategy and successful partnership working</li></ul>
<b>Other areas for research</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Translation/interpretation and employment opportunities</li><li>• IT</li></ul>

## Emerging themes

- Sustainability: Fundraising, social enterprise, corporate partnerships, strategic mentoring, charitable structures
- Volunteering (recruitment and retention, diversification, sharing volunteers) and volunteers as the front line of the health service
- Active listening, working with vulnerable people/those with mental health issues and project management
- Project management
- Collaboration and partnerships
- Translation/interpretation and employment opportunities
- IT support.

Training provided by external parties and by OCVA was negotiated at a reduced price for the funded and other shortlisted groups and charities, and other training and sessions were organised by the CDPO. Additional information was also collated and shared across the areas of interest.

## External training and information shared:

- Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA) – all training with a reduced cost offer for community groups and charities
- Joining instructions for the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Alliance for Berkshire West, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Integrated Care System. This initiative aims to engage community groups and charities in a broader integrated care system across Oxfordshire.
- Free IT support and data cards
- Charity Mentors drop-in support sessions for leaders
- Free or reduced rate mental health training from MIND and Restore with an offer to coordinate groups so that they could benefit from lower costs.

## Training and sessions developed and facilitated by the CDPO, in collaboration with other organisations.

- **‘Grow Your Fundraising’**, with presentations from Oxfordshire Community Foundation, The National Lottery Community Fund and ActionFunder who offered top tips for fundraising applications, highlighted what is important to funders, how to match donor expectations and local and national funding opportunities. The session was very well attended by 49 participants.
- **‘Build Your Volunteer Community’**, with presentations from OCVA, Oxford Hub and Volunteer Link Up. The session was attended by 22 people and provided information on how to recruit and manage volunteers and shared learning from across Oxfordshire.
- **‘Capturing change: an introduction to measuring the difference you make’**, with presentations from OCVA and the Old Fire Station. The session gave a basic introduction to monitoring and evaluation, the terminology used and why it’s important to capture and share evidence of project benefits to people’s lives. It also provided an introduction to the Storytelling Methodology developed by the Old Fire Station. The session was attended by 25 people and two groups requested further support.

A recording of the sessions and additional information was sent to all funded and non-funded groups and charities regardless of attendance.



### Additional training provided by the CDPO through CFO

- **‘An Introduction to Asset Based Community Development’** – starting with what’s strong and not what’s wrong in a community and putting the community and their assets at the heart of future development.
- **‘Active Listening’** – using active listening as a way to create understanding, build relationships and create thoughtful interaction with communities, volunteers and staff.

Second check-ins with groups and organisations took place towards the end of the calendar year to uncover any problems or challenges, understand if further support was needed and to enable grantees to ask questions about reporting. Project visits were also conducted to seven projects to understand the operations on the ground and talk to volunteers and beneficiaries where appropriate.

In addition, one to one support was offered to thirty groups who were shortlisted for grants but who were unsuccessful, and meetings were held with four groups who expressed interest. Areas of concern included, fundraising, IT support and volunteer training. Appropriate signposting and information was provided.

### Benefits of a Grant Plus approach:

Many grantees found benefits to receiving Grants Plus support. For some the one to one sessions gave **CEO’s and leaders a space to discuss their project** and reflect on challenges, the changes they had made and the benefits this had brought to both staff and beneficiaries. The CDPO was able to **link organisations together for collaborative working and to share learning**, such as the Volunteer Transport Service sharing their experience of using social media to recruit drivers with Benson Volunteer Helpline. Grantees were also encouraged and **guided on how to collect case studies and**

**testimonials as evidence of impact** for the grant funding but also to use as a resource to promote their service, recruit volunteers and prove their impact to prospective donors. Taking a Grants Plus approach enabled the CDPO to **discuss changes to projects** and budgets with grantees **to ensure their work remained relevant and timely**. The focused support also **enabled the CDPO to respond to the needs of organisations and tailor support as required**.



# Project delivery

Some grantees continued, expanded or tweaked projects which had started pre-pandemic, and other projects were developed in response to the direct need that COVID-19 brought to communities.

The projects covered a wide range of themes from support for refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants; digital inclusion; under-fives provision for children and families and youth activities; community food and transport; befriending and information/guidance and COVID-19 type support which included elements of the other themes such as befriending, community transport, prescription/food deliveries and exercise.

In a short video, six grantees discuss how they used the funding and the difference it made.



# Themes of projects



The table below shows the focus of the funding given to the organisations and groups.

Support for refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants	
Group	Project focus for the grant
<b>Asylum Welcome</b>	Continuation of COVID-19 response including advice and support, a youth service, foodbank and laptop project, and facilitating access to healthcare. Also support and information to other refugee organisations. <a href="http://www.asylum-welcome.org/">www.asylum-welcome.org/</a>
<b>Refugee Resource</b>	Bespoke Citizens Advice Service to address the multiple, complex needs of highly vulnerable refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants. <a href="http://www.refugeeresource.org.uk/">www.refugeeresource.org.uk/</a>
<b>Syrian Sisters</b>	Together we can better (Syrian Sisters wellbeing project) to run a series of activities and services which support the mental and physical wellbeing of refugee and migrant women.

Digital Inclusion	
Group	Project focus for the grant
<b>Citizens Advice North Oxfordshire and South Northamptonshire</b>	Oxfordshire Connect! Empowering digitally marginalised Oxfordshire residents to get online by developing volunteer Digital Champions. <a href="http://www.canosn.org.uk/cat/connect">www.canosn.org.uk/cat/connect</a>
<b>Oxfordshire Crossroads</b>	A digital inclusion project distributing tablets to carers and people with care needs to support them to live well at home, in care or in hospital. <a href="http://www.oxfordshirecrossroads.org.uk/">www.oxfordshirecrossroads.org.uk/</a>
<b>SOFEA</b>	Getting Oxfordshire Online - reducing digital inequality by setting up a third hub in Bicester to receive donations of devices, wipe them securely and reconfigure them, before distribution to those in need. <a href="https://gettingoxfordshireonline.org/">https://gettingoxfordshireonline.org/</a>

Befriending, advice and support	
Group	Project focus for the grant
<b>The Archway Foundation</b>	Telephone befriending for mental health and disability clients, to alleviate the stress caused by loneliness and social isolation. <a href="https://archwayfoundation.org.uk/">https://archwayfoundation.org.uk/</a>
<b>Berinsfield Information and Volunteer Centre</b>	Advice, help, social support and befriending. With the delivery of medicine and shopping during COVID-19. <a href="http://www.bivc.org.uk/">http://www.bivc.org.uk/</a>
<b>Citizens Advice South and Vale</b>	Funding two part-time advisers to provide advice on debt, benefits, employment, housing and COVID-19 support options. <a href="http://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/local/oxfordshire-south-vale/">www.citizensadvice.org.uk/local/oxfordshire-south-vale/</a>
<b>Oxfordshire Association for the Blind</b>	Being There for You – telephone befriending and information and advice for those with visual impairments. <a href="http://www.oxeyes.org.uk/">www.oxeyes.org.uk/</a>
<b>Royal Voluntary Service</b>	Village Visits and Afternoon Tea Sessions to provide support and companionship for older residents who are isolated. <a href="http://www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/our-services/service-search/oxfordshire-hub/banbury-cornhill-centre-46125000/">www.royalvoluntaryservice.org.uk/our-services/service-search/oxfordshire-hub/banbury-cornhill-centre-46125000/</a>

COVID-19 type support (prescriptions, shopping, befriending, gardening and exercise)	
Group	Project focus for the grant
<b>Great Western Park COVID-19 Support Group</b>	Software to manage COVID-19 support in the community. <a href="http://www.gwpra.org.uk/covid19">www.gwpra.org.uk/covid19</a>
<b>Kennington Strollers</b>	Support for weekly, short, gentle walks in Kennington for older people, people with mobility problems and those managing long term health conditions. <a href="https://kennington-pc.gov.uk/organisations-and-clubs/health/kennington-strollers/">https://kennington-pc.gov.uk/organisations-and-clubs/health/kennington-strollers/</a>
<b>Thomas Gifford Trust</b>	Charlbury Community Support – help for residents with shopping, prescription collection, befriending calls, virtual coffee mornings, online exercise and gardening. <a href="http://www.charlburycommunitycentre.org.uk/about-us/the-thomas-gifford-trust/">www.charlburycommunitycentre.org.uk/about-us/the-thomas-gifford-trust/</a>
<b>Volunteer Link Up</b>	Enhancing the Good Neighbours Scheme (GNS) network by providing support to GNSs across Oxfordshire and providing volunteering support for community transport, befriending services and practical tasks in West Oxfordshire. <a href="http://www.vlu.org.uk/">www.vlu.org.uk/</a>

Under-fives provision and youth activities	
Group	Project focus for the grant
<b>Chalgrove and Watlington First Steps Family Hub</b>	Provision for parents/ guardians and children under-five who are self-isolating, to gradually re-open the centre and develop online information, activity and support sessions. <a href="http://www.firststepshub.org.uk/">www.firststepshub.org.uk/</a>
<b>Home – Start Oxfordshire consortium</b>	Safe Connections: Reducing the spread and impact of COVID-19 in families with under-fives in Oxfordshire. Recruitment of an Inclusion Coordinator to reach disadvantaged, disproportionately affected families. Group sessions and support activities across three hubs in Oxfordshire and leadership of the Oxfordshire Early Years Network. <a href="https://homestartoxon.org.uk/">https://homestartoxon.org.uk/</a>
<b>The Maple Tree</b>	Online advice and support sessions for parents with new babies and very young children and in person, befriending outreach scheme for small groups of parents and young children/ babies in the Wheatley area. <a href="http://www.mapletree.org.uk/">www.mapletree.org.uk/</a>
<b>Leys Community Development Initiative</b>	Supporting young people in Blackbird Leys through COVID-19 and beyond with weekly evening activities (online and in person), lunchtime schools outreach and holiday projects. <a href="https://leyscdi.co.uk/">https://leyscdi.co.uk/</a>

Community volunteer transport	
Group	Project focus for the grant
<b>Benson Volunteer Centre</b>	Benson Volunteer Helpline - Ongoing costs of providing volunteer transport to the local community. <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Benson-Volunteer-Helpline-104695785268995">www.facebook.com/Benson-Volunteer-Helpline-104695785268995</a>
<b>FISH Volunteer Centre</b>	Community transport to vaccination centres, shopping trips and vaccination delivery including PPE for drivers. Befriending and monthly tea parties (when COVID-19 allows). <a href="https://www.fishvolunteercentre.org.uk/">www.fishvolunteercentre.org.uk/</a>
<b>Volunteer Driver Service</b>	IT equipment and software to support increased demand for volunteer transport to hospital and doctors' appointments across Oxfordshire. <a href="#">Volunteer Driver Service</a>

Community food	
Group	Project focus for the grant
<b>Barton Community Association</b>	Continue and expand the Barton Community Larder to include essentials packages (toiletries, PPE baby products etc.) and recruit a dedicated Larder Coordinator. <a href="https://www.bartoncommunityassociation.com/">www.bartoncommunityassociation.com/</a>
<b>Chinnor Rugby Football Club</b>	Packaging to provide meals for vulnerable residents in the Chinnor area. <a href="https://www.chinnor-rfc.com/">www.chinnor-rfc.com/</a>
<b>Rose Hill Junior Youth Club</b>	To support and enhance our work at the Rose Hill Food Bank including holiday food projects and food for young people during Junior Youth Club sessions. <a href="https://rhjyc.org/our-work-with-food/">https://rhjyc.org/our-work-with-food/</a>
<b>The Gatehouse</b>	Home delivery of food and other essential items to vulnerably-housed guests, and one to one support provided through our Casework Team. <a href="https://oxfordgatehouse.org/">https://oxfordgatehouse.org/</a>

# Working through COVID-19: Challenges, changes and learning

Of the 26 funded projects, 25 successfully completed delivery. The pandemic was an evolving situation and several organisations needed to change the focus of their project. The Royal Voluntary Service found that face-to-face door step support was out of favour with those isolated in villages and that individuals were keen to meet in person so when COVID-19 allowed they organised monthly Afternoon Tea Sessions in Banbury. Great Western Park COVID-19 Community Support Group applied for software to manage the large number of people they were supporting in the initial lockdown. This was unnecessary when the funds were available, as most people had become self-sufficient and the group disbanded and merged with the wider residents association. Unfortunately a suitable replacement project was not found.

There were many challenges delivering through different stages of pandemic which meant all organisations and charities had to take on new rules, adapt and in some cases, communicate to others in their network or other organisations to share new working practices. Grantees were required to be flexible and adapt to the changing situation, different levels of need (both increased and decreased), different modes of working and partnership working and a loss of volunteers which generated much learning. Working practices amongst staff and volunteers, and how support was provided to clients and

beneficiaries changed from in person, to online and telephone support or versions of hybrid working as restrictions eased. Although challenging, many groups and organisations found benefits to working this way which they will retain in the future.

In some cases, the urgency of the situation fast tracked organisational development and reinforced the power of partnerships and collaborative working to ensure support was holistic, not duplicated and efficient. However, it also highlighted that informal or formal collaboration takes time and areas of responsibility and working practices need to be clearly outlined and agreed. In some cases, the need highlighted during the pandemic has inspired new projects or thinking.

The main challenges and learning have been drawn from grantee reports and feedback, and are categorised below.

## Challenges and learning delivering projects during COVID-19

### Volunteers

- Volunteers were and are still crucial for all grantees to deliver their services and support. Many organisations and groups uncovered new beneficiaries who need support with or without the pandemic and rely on volunteers. Volunteer management, additional volunteer recruitment for peak times and volunteer succession planning for the future was highlighted.
- In a few instances volunteers became the front line of health and support services as residents struggled to access the formal health care system and new parents had limited access to health visitors. A situation which was further complicated by many services going on line and largely inaccessible to vulnerable groups. Some organisations/groups coordinated care and communication with other agencies instead of statutory services who were overstretched. This led to a heightened sense of responsibility amongst some volunteers and in one case increased the number of safeguarding situations.
- There was a loss of many volunteers who were themselves vulnerable due to age or health concerns and it was challenging to replace lost volunteers. This was a blow to most grantees especially those experiencing either the same or increased demand.

- As older volunteers sheltered, younger volunteers came forward for periods of the pandemic. Younger volunteers at the Thomas Gifford Trust and Chinnor Rugby Football Club provided gardening support and delivered food parcels, raising awareness amongst the volunteers of the need in their home area.
- Volunteer Driver Service and Connect! both endeavoured to expand their services within Oxfordshire and found that they needed to balance volunteer recruitment with advertising services to ensure that the demand could be met with the right number of volunteers in specific areas.
- It can be challenging to deliver activities only using volunteers so paid staff are necessary to coordinate key activities/projects. Many projects used some of the funds to recruit new roles or pay for key staff positions. However, funds for resourcing staff and volunteers is difficult to find.
- Personal connections became very important to recruit volunteers and Home-Start found that gathering case studies encouraged those who had received support to volunteer themselves.
- Chalgrove and Watlington First Steps Hub found benefit in increasing the use of voluntary local tradespeople to support gardening, music, graphic design and carpentry.
- Kennington Strollers used an Oxfordshire – wide volunteering website to recruit new volunteers. It was found to be a useful additional resource but ultimately it was more effective to use those who lived in the village, who weren't travelling from further away and knew the area.

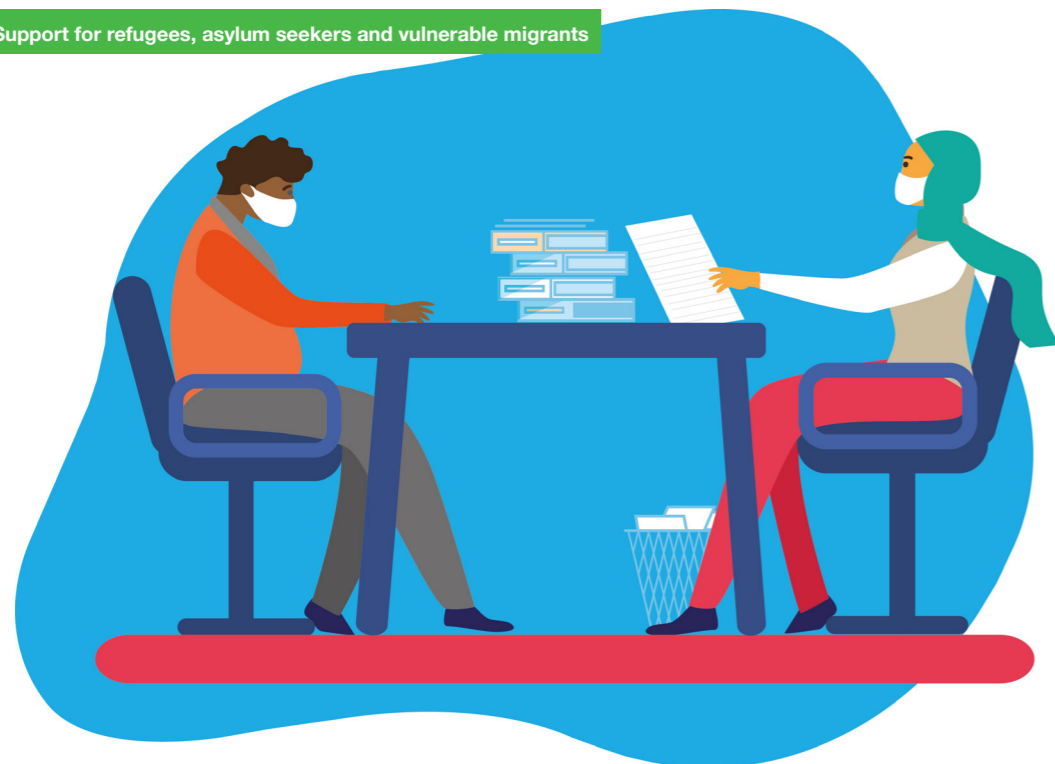
### Changing need

- Some organisations experienced lower numbers for their services as people were fearful or lost confidence in engaging with others outside of their homes.
- Leys CDI believe that the pandemic had an impact on the mental health of young people affecting their confidence to return to youth projects and Asylum Welcome saw a reduction in young people using their youth services as they could not provide their usual informal drop-in service due to COVID-19 restrictions.

## Changing need

- The need was still great across many organisations and groups but COVID-19 restrictions had negative impacts on ways of working. For Home-Start social distancing and limiting in person support resulted in booking systems, and smaller groups not always being able to accommodate those who wanted to attend in person although overall numbers were high over the course of the grant period. The Gatehouse continued face to work with smaller teams due to social distancing which they found impacted on ‘the loss of community spirit’ built up with larger groups. As restrictions eased they worked proactively to re-establish the volunteer teams and rebuild the community feel that everyone valued.
- Asylum Welcome saw the demand for their services rise. They managed the increase by using some of the funding to move to a larger office space to keep people safe, triaged clients to identify those needing in person or remote support and increased staffing to build resources and replace volunteers who were shielding.
- Organisations such as Volunteer Link Up, Refugee Resource, Oxfordshire Association for the Blind, Berinsfield Information and Volunteer Centre and Citizens Advice South and Vale, saw the same people use their services multiple times or the support provided was more intense due to the complexity of issues or the need to provide reassurance.

### Support for refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants



## Moving online and hybrid working

- During periods of lockdown many organisations offered online or phone support for clients and beneficiaries. Whilst it provided a way to stay in touch some people preferred face-to-face interaction and either declined support or waited until in person support could be provided.
- Those providing support for the under-fives age group and their parents/ guardians were a good snapshot of the benefits and challenges of online working with a number of observations mentioned in reports such as, “additional time was needed to build relationships online but it proved a bridge until in person interaction was possible” (Home-Start), in contrast some parents felt ‘Zoomed out’, finding it hard to participate or “craved person to person contact (The Mapletree).” Those caring for children also recognised that face to face interaction was especially important for their children to build social skills and learning.
- Language, culture or lack of IT skills or internet access was highlighted by Syrian Sisters as providing additional challenges for many they work with reinforcing the need for in person activities as soon as it was possible. These challenges across Oxfordshire also emphasised that the digital inclusion projects were very timely.
- Some services or support needed to be in person such as demonstrating equipment for sight loss at Oxfordshire Association for the Blind (OAB) and providing IT support through Digital Champions at Connect! OAB provided in person support through a booking system at their office when it was possible and Connect! offered clients the choice of volunteer support at home or in larger public spaces or offices with good ventilation to ensure they were comfortable managing the COVID-19 risk.
- Many staff were working from home. For some staff the burden of the pandemic and the complexity of client issues and the support needed provided an additional stress without the ability to discuss so readily with colleagues. Several organisations recognised that support was needed for frontline staff and volunteers to enable them to operate during COVID-19. The Archway Foundation, Refugee Resource and Home-Start offered different solutions initiating online supervision support for staff and peer support for volunteers with online volunteer training.

## Moving online and hybrid working

### Positively, there were many benefits to new ways of working:

- Online services broadened the reach and the range of beneficiaries, and increased accessibility for those with health concerns, caring and childcare responsibilities. It was also a way of providing a service and connection for young people and others who were not ready or interested in face-to-face contact even when in person was possible. This was noted by Leys CDI and the Archway Foundation.
- The Gatehouse (TG) and the Archway Foundation (AF), both provided different types of emotional/wellbeing and social support and found a mixture of remote and face-to-face (TG) and telephone conversations (AF) provided private spaces and allowed those they were assisting to share more deeply, enabling the organisations to understand the full extent of their needs.
- The pandemic encouraged organisations and groups to be flexible. Many organisations extended their working hours and organisations such as Home-Start (HS) and Berinsfield Information and Volunteer Centre (BIVC) delivered their services via doorstep outreach as well as support on the phone. HS noted they did this, “to build trust, encourage group attendance and counteract feelings of isolation and anxiety for the most vulnerable families.” And BIVC, “made extra calls if people were showing signs of struggling or loneliness.”
- Asylum Welcome enabled the best use of resources by triaging clients and splitting workloads between those who could be seen remotely and those who required face-to-face support. Refugee Resource (RR) and others also adopted this approach with RR noting that it was important to welcome the most vulnerable into their offices so they could receive emotional support and therapeutic services as well as practical advice.
- Volunteer Link Up found increased participation by having their Good Neighbour Scheme Network online and Home-Start began a new online Early Years Network (EYN) to link groups and charities providing support to children under five and their families. Both organisations were able to use the online sessions to share COVID-19 related and other learning, encourage creative problem solving and provide support on a number of topics such as outreach and volunteering. The EYN also used the collective learning and experiences of members to influence policy makers and donors.

- The Thomas Gifford Trust adapted face-to-face exercise classes to go online and keep people active in lockdown. Hybrid classes are now being offered.
- The Gatehouse found that remote working allowed their case work team the time and space to collaborate more effectively with other organisations.

## Other changes in delivery

- The pandemic also moved in person food services to delivering food, or using a combination of the two and initiated new food and essentials services (toiletries etc.) to increase the scope of those served by projects whilst complying with COVID-19 restrictions. As the pandemic progressed the need for food/essentials support increased with projects such as Rose Hill Junior Youth Club, The Gatehouse, Chinnor Rugby Football Club and Barton Community Larder, expanding their provision during intense periods.
- Over half the projects provided food. Some supplied food directly as above or by providing transport for shopping trips. The Volunteer Drivers Service also delivered food parcels for several foodbanks in the Cherwell area. Some projects distributed food vouchers or worked with food banks, provided food at social events and supported school children and their families during the school holidays emphasising how important this service was and still is throughout Oxfordshire.
- Many organisations had to stop, think and work differently. It created a sense of urgency and an opportunity and confidence which acted as a catalyst for change and encouraged quick decision making and innovation. In particular, collecting data, case studies and reporting impact were amongst the areas noted with digital and health work fast tracked to respond to the need brought about by the pandemic.
- Some groups and organisations adapted their projects to respond to the demand. Leys CDI started a Homework Club to support young people who were struggling with school work after long periods of home learning. Royal Volunteer Service applied to fund a village befriending scheme but COVID-19 meant that volunteers were unable to go into peoples homes resulting in a lack of trust. Later in the pandemic residents were eager to meet others in person to counteract loneliness so afternoon tea sessions were offered instead. Getting Oxfordshire Online originally repurposed secondhand devices but adapted to repairing and upgrading older devices increasing their

## Other changes in delivery

supply. Oxfordshire Crossroads planned to provide new tablets to carers and their families but extended their reach to care homes and critical care wards in hospitals where resident and patient opportunities to interact with family and friends was limited due to COVID-19 restrictions. The tablets provided a much needed tool for communication and entertainment.

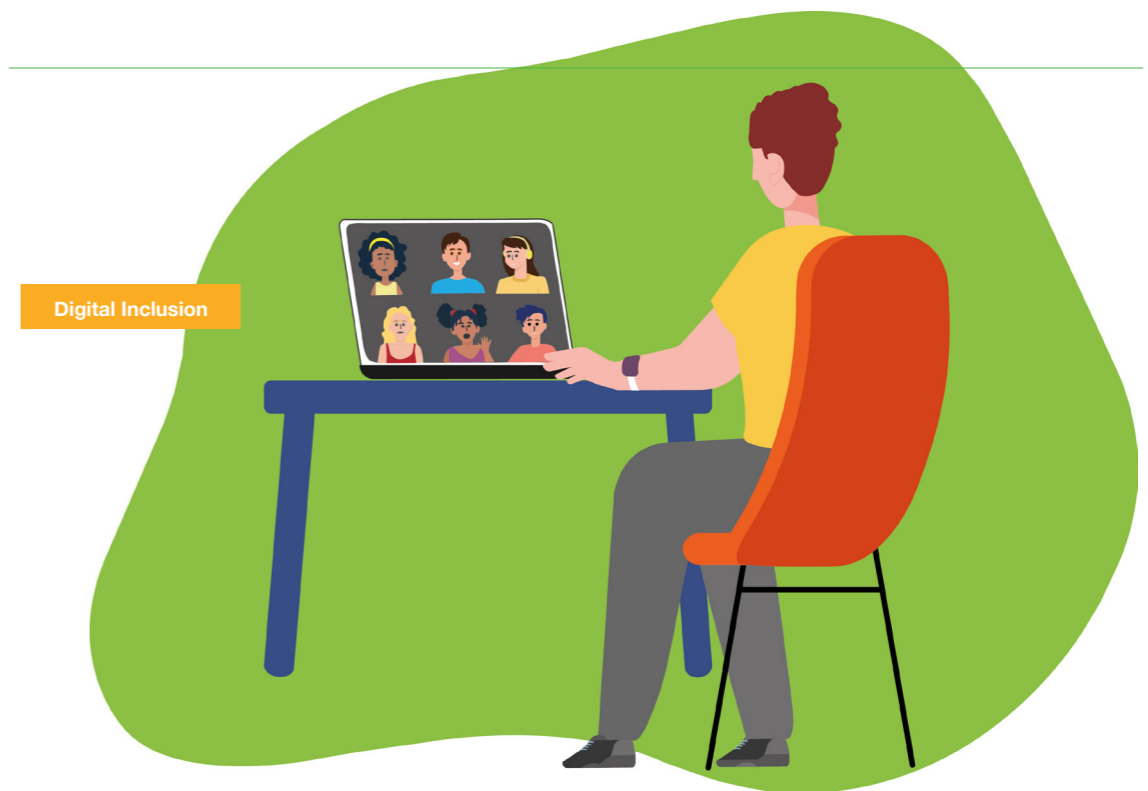
- All organisations and groups responded to COVID-19 restrictions and PPE requirements. Groups such as volunteer driver schemes adapted their practices when they were able to operate, putting the client in the back of the car and wearing full PPE. Others such as The Mapletree focused on small, local, COVID-19 safe groups to help with COVID-19 containment.

## Partnerships

Most organisations and groups worked in partnerships either formally or informally, before the funding period but the pandemic encouraged a wider range of organisations and groups to work together for referrals, to provide joint services or additional resources and expertise for holistic support for clients and beneficiaries.

### Benefits and learning:

- Collaborative working increased reach to a broader range of beneficiaries for most groups and organisations, avoiding duplication and providing new services or expertise to beneficiaries and clients improving overall outcomes.
- It also helped projects target hard to reach groups through the knowledge and connections of other organisations and groups. Working with the public sector (birth registrars) across Oxfordshire enabled Home-Start to reach families most in need, while at a local level The Mapletree developed working relationships with key individuals in the local community to provide insight and publicise under-fives sessions.
- Partnerships enabled grantees to gain a better understanding of the needs of communities. Working with schools and other youth organisations provided Leys CDI, research and knowledge to design new youth projects and outreach into new areas with specific interventions.
- There have been partnerships within the network such as Volunteer Driver Service sharing their knowledge about Facebook volunteer recruitment with Benson Volunteer Helpline. Asylum Welcome has worked with several other



groups/organisations in the network bringing Afghani refugee families to The Mapletree for under-fives sessions and working with Getting Oxfordshire Online to provide devices to their clients.

- Relationships with councils, public services and departments, housing associations and corporate organisations provided integrated working, information, referrals and support for many projects including Kennington Strollers, Barton Community Association, Berinsfield Information and Advice Centre and Citizens Advice South and Vale.
- Collaboration takes time. Getting Oxfordshire Online (GOO) learnt that some relationships with corporates require trust because they have specific security procedures to comply with before they will donate devices but relationship building and upskilling meant that GOO could deliver what was required.
- Oxfordshire Crossroads found it time consuming to link with the CDPO and other digital inclusion organisations as the projects were just getting off the ground and this was not costed into the budget, highlighting the need for funding to collaborate. However coordinating raised awareness of other organisations for future networking. This was true for other grantees who had less knowledge of others in the network before the funding.
- A key universal learning for Refugee Resource was the importance of clear partnership agreements outlining areas of responsibility and linked to a plan of action giving clarity to both partners and clients. Also having agreed standards for information sharing and client consent. FISH Volunteer Centre also found clarity of operations was needed when working informally with a COVID-19 response group in the same area, agreeing geographic areas and types of prescription pick-ups and deliveries cleared up earlier confusion.

## Recruitment of new roles and staff retainment

- Some organisations experienced challenges recruiting and retaining staff in original positions. It is difficult to ascertain whether recruitment was different during the pandemic or that it would take longer in normal times to recruit specialist roles. However, Citizens Advice South and Vale, noted that the quality of both the outgoing and incoming staff ensured continuity and a high standard of service to clients.

## Projects as catalysts

- Several organisations found food can be a powerful catalyst to highlight other needs in a community. Barton Community Centre started a café alongside their larder as a social meeting space to overcome loneliness and a place for residents to meet with other agencies in a non-threatening environment. Similarly Getting Oxfordshire Online found that food larders can be used as a venue to deliver IT support and training to those who may not enter formal training/education. The Thomas Gifford Trust created a new central hub in Charlbury for food to ensure the support is there when needed but it is also being used for new projects such as a learning café for primary school children.
- Food and socialising activities were largely attended by women so several projects recognized the need to develop new initiatives to support men's mental health through opportunities for socialising. A Men's Shed project is being developed by FISH and an Umbrella Club (lunch and conversation for men) at Barton Community Café. Leys CDI run a Music workshop for young people which they hope will be, "a starting point for setting up a young mens group later in the year."
- Work with refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants highlighted the challenges of accessing healthcare and fast tracked Asylum Welcome networking with doctors and involvement in research around access to healthcare. Home-Start also allied themselves with neuroscience research to highlight the importance of positive early childhood experiences in development.

# Outcomes and Impact

**The pandemic heightened the need for those who were already vulnerable and resulted in changing circumstances for many people, creating hardship, a loss of confidence and reduced health and wellbeing. It highlighted mental health challenges and those who were isolated in communities. The projects provided practical support to navigate the pandemic, reducing stress and providing much needed help when there was a lack of access to normal services, as well as providing assistance for existing issues.**

The impact was deepened as the organisations and groups provided 'a safety net', a friendly face or voice, and comfort and relief from loneliness either through direct contact or providing opportunities to socialise with others. The projects and their dedicated staff and volunteers showed that someone cared at a time when life was turned upside down.

The themes below came through in the project reports and testimonials from clients and beneficiaries, showing the immense positive impact on mental health, loneliness, stress and health and wellbeing alongside all of the practical benefits provided such as access to food, transport and the internet, healthcare, exercise, advice and social security benefits, legal support and activities for young and older people, refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants and families of the under fives. Support also enabled people to get back into work and access education and provided reciprocal benefits for those who volunteered for the projects.

On our website, you can also find more detailed case studies illustrating the impact of advice to refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants ([Refugee Resource](#)) and IT support ([Connect!](#)), support given to a disabled mother by [Home-Start](#), how food and other services gave families a lifeline at [Barton Community Association](#) and the story of a [Volunteer Link Up](#) befriender and the difference it made to both the volunteer and the client.

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# Improvements in loneliness, isolation and mental health

- **COVID-19 had an impact on loneliness, isolation and mental health**

with groups, organisations and charities providing more counselling and befriending services or intense support on these issues.

*“I was feeling really depressed before you rang but now I feel more positive about things.”* **Archway Foundation Friend**

*“I don’t know how I would have got through these past few months without L (staff member who calls them). She doesn’t judge me like other people do. I trust her and I can tell you, I don’t trust people. She has shown me respect and care and I’ve never had that before in my life.”*

**Archway Foundation Friend**

Oxfordshire Association for the Blind (OAB) found that their befriending service had very positive outcomes: 93% of those we surveyed felt that the service has made them feel less lonely and isolated and 93% of those surveyed said they felt an improvement in their mental health:

*“My telephone befriender is a lifeline, we have so much fun, and I really enjoy catching up, it’s particularly helpful as my family do not live locally. I look forward to the calls each week.”* **OAB befriending beneficiary**

- **Interaction with staff and volunteers** whether through befriending on the phone or in person, advice, caseworkers and support groups, tea parties, participating in group exercise, receiving food parcels, gardening support or a lift in volunteer transport, provided company and a lifeline for many people experiencing challenges. They were reassured that they were not forgotten, reducing isolation, improving mental health and helping people to feel more positive with ‘a better outlook for the future’.

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*“OAB have given me confidence and reassurance at a very difficult stage in my life and have given me optimism for the future. They have helped me realise that with perseverance and a good level of support, blindness need not be an obstacle to continuing a full and active life.”* **Oxfordshire Association for the Blind client**

*“Since being supported by the Gatehouse I do believe that not only my self-esteem has improved, my chances of employment have improved, my mental well-being has improved and my all round feeling of positivity during a pandemic living so far away from home while previously I was feeling completely isolated I now feel a part of a community.”*

**Gatehouse client**

*“We were often told by some clients how our calls and help was above and beyond and they would not have known what to do if we were not there. We received many thank you cards and letters.”* **Berinsfield Information and Volunteer Centre**

*“Where would I be without you. You were there for me when I most needed support and help, and you have continued to support me ever since. Thank you.”* **Mum supported by Barton Community Association**

- **Support enabled social connections** through practical support, activity sessions and outreach activities whether online or in person, providing much needed opportunities to meet with others, build new relationships or reconnect with old friends, creating a sense of community and improving mental wellbeing and countering isolation.

92% of Syrian Sisters members said that involvement with the group and gaining support, advice and practical help made a very big or big difference to their life in regards to meeting other people in Oxford and feeling better in themselves:

*“It is here, in this place, it means a lot. It means home. We don’t have a family or a sister here (in UK). This place we used to pray and meet on Friday. But now here we have this group through the group we feel like they are our family and sisters.”* **Syrian Sisters member**

*"I enjoyed the group it is really make different I learn a lot of stuff and information. I also I am less depressed. So nice to meet everyone here.*

*Thank you Nuha!" Syrian Sisters member*

A sense of community was also built by The Mapletree under fives group and the afternoon tea session for older people run by the Royal Voluntary Service in Banbury:

*"More than one parent has commented on how the Forest Hill group has removed barriers, reduced isolation and created a greater sense of community within the village." The Mapletree*

*"I cannot thank you enough for these lunches. I cannot imagine my week without them now. I have made some new friends too, and we shall be meeting up this Saturday!" Royal Voluntary Service tea party participant*

#### Community Food



- **Charities providing support to under-fives and their families**, gave advice and reassurance to new parents/care givers when health visitors were unavailable and to more established parents/caregivers to reduce worry and stress as everyone struggled to access other specialist support for their children. They created opportunities for socialisation for children and parents/caregivers to overcome isolation, develop babies social skills and improve everyone's mental and physical wellbeing.

*"The scary first few months have been a lot less scary because of the Maple Tree." Parent supported by The Mapletree*

*"It's so easy to become isolated when you have got a little one. The group has helped me to form new friendships and feel like a grown up again."*

*Chalgrove and Watlington First Steps family Hub parent*

*"I have enjoyed it so much... I've not left the house with my kids in 8 months. I nearly cancelled and I'm so grateful I didn't. I felt totally normal here and not judged. I just felt the same as everyone else. It's not just made me happy it's changed my life. Sometimes just getting dressed is hard but doing this made me love being a mum again." Home-Start parent*

*"The group has really helped S (child) get to know people outside of the family, which has helped with her social skills." Home-Start parent*

- **Youth activities enabled young people to reconnect** and begin to rebuild their confidence as face to face activities became possible.

85% of young people attending Ley CDI activities reported making new friends, 100% reported having fun and 71% said they had gained confidence:

*"After the pandemic CDI helped me to get connected with familiar faces again."*

*"I think CDI is a place where I feel relaxed and it helps me to meet new people."*

Rose Hill Junior Youth Club found the same:

*“One child has a difficult time at school but seems to thrive at our holiday sessions. They grow in confidence every time they come.”* **Rose Hill**

**Junior Youth Club**

- **Digital access** projects by Getting Oxfordshire Online, Oxfordshire Crossroads Connect! and Asylum Welcome enabled people to stay virtually connected, reducing isolation, increasing wellbeing and providing access to information.

*“The clients have expressed their gratitude for the support they have received from Connect! explaining that this has really enhanced their lives in many ways, specifically in feeling less isolated, gaining more confidence to try things for themselves on their devices, feeling safer and more informed using IT and generally improving their health and well being.”*

**Connect!**

*“This is a very generous donation by Oxfordshire Crossroads. Many of our residents use these tablets to connect with family members and friends. They also use them for research and entertainment.”* **The Meadows**

**Bursar**

*“Our donated laptop project has grown substantially. The service distributed 101 devices between May-October. This work helped people access important information/resources and stay in touch with friends and family – mitigating isolation and reducing exposure to the virus.”*

**Asylum Welcome**

- Oxfordshire Crossroads also provided new tablets to care homes and complex medical wards in hospitals providing residents and vulnerable patients new ways to connect and communicate with carers and nurses.

*“We mostly use our Amazon Fire tablets during one to ones with our residents... We have been able to use the tablets as a reminiscing tool for residents to look back on where they grew up and places they have lived/ worked. It has been really beneficial during the one to ones as something to focus on and talk about. Sometimes the residents may not want to or be able to communicate vocally and the tablets have provided us another way to communicate with these residents.”* **St John’s Care Home staff member and Oxfordshire Crossroads beneficiary**

Community/volunteer transport



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# Reduced stress

- **Volunteer transport helped alleviate the stress** of sometimes difficult medical and personal situations by ensuring clients had a reliable, accessible and cost effective, caring service with drivers acting as companions as well as drivers.

*“The experiences I have had with Benson volunteer drivers has been exceptional. They are always on time, or early. It is much less stressful to have someone to talk to on the journey, especially if the hospital appointment is for something you might be apprehensive about. Then to have them waiting for you, just a phone call away, to take you home. All in all, a wonderful service and could not be better. A big thank you.”* **Benson Volunteer Helpline user**

*“I have people contact me the day after or even the same day as a loved one has died to tell us what a difference we made to that person’s life. We took a husband in to see his wife for the one hour a day he was allowed, he went every other day or so, some days she didn’t recognise him or engage with him, she died after about 3 weeks. This chap calling was something I’ll never forget, thanking us for making the last times he spent with her possible, the call to us must have been one of the first he made.”* **Volunteer Driver Service**

*“After calling the client it appears Tim (the driver) went round the shop helping the client’s wife with the groceries as the husband (92) was poorly and stayed at home.”* **Volunteer Driver Service**

*“I wanted to send my heartfelt thanks for your support and for the excellent service you provide. My driver was so supportive, organised, on time, courteous and a really good driver. He made the whole event really enjoyable in spite of the hard work in the physio department! From the moment I made the first enquiry by email to the final arrangements by phone, the whole process was carried out with efficiency and care.”* **Volunteer Link Up client**

- **Food provision, other essentials** and birthday presents through door step deliveries, food banks and vouchers, larders and schools food projects ensured that those struggling economically or who were unable to shop (isolating or mobility issues) received good quality, free or low cost food alleviating financial strains and increasing nutrition with an example of the food improving academic performance. Volunteers and staff also provided friendship and reminder that someone cared in some cases acting as substitute families.

*‘I have a brilliant delivery driver who is so professional and courteous always making sure my bag of basic necessities delivered to me give or take five minutes at the same time every week. Then there is the person who has coordinated the whole process who personally messages me to find out if I’m okay speaks to me and encourages me and offered me support signposting me to different agencies.’* **The Gatehouse beneficiary**

*“Without the support of Barton Community Association, who were always just a phone call away, I don’t know how I would have coped in those early days. They took away a lot of the stress and most of the time we didn’t even need to ask for their help – they just turned up on the doorstep with everything we needed. We as a family will be forever grateful.”* **Barton Community Association beneficiary**

*“During the pandemic and the financial impact afterwards, its been incredibly difficult purchasing food for our family that’s not just filling but nutritious. I’ve felt terrible in the past when all I’ve been able to afford for my children is tins of beans. Having food support from the Rosehill Youth Club is like having the support others get from family. That someone in the community, who looks out for the health and wellbeing of your family. Even making my daughter a birthday cake and providing one for my son’s birthday. Delivering during periods of isolation. I just couldn’t have got through this year without it. The volunteers feel like friends and my family are much healthier thanks to the better diet. Previously my children struggled at school to concentrate and this year my daughter has been a different child.”* **Rosehill Junior Youth Club food bank beneficiary**

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- **Debt support and benefit advice reduced financial stresses** and enabled a way through difficult times.

*“I received a call from a client who was in a really bad place mentally as a result of his debt. He spoke to me in tears and said he was planning to harm himself as he could see no way out of his situation. I managed to calm him and we looked at his issues systematically. We discovered that he had numerous debts, but none were emergency debts and he was not going to be made homeless or have his possessions taken from him any time soon. Once he realised this, and once I had explained his rights to him regarding Bailiffs and Breathing Space, he was okay.”* **Citizens Advice South and Vale adviser**

- **Refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable migrants** were empowered to address practical and legal issues through advice and support giving them mental space to address deeper traumas.

*“Refugee Resource has helped me many times for different issues. Every time I have accessed the services I was able to get an appointment quickly. It has not always resolved my issues but I have always been supported and I am still supported which I am grateful for. Hence giving me peace of mind and respite on issues that I know not how to address.”*

*“Refugee Resource has been a life saver. It’s been here for me in rainy storm days.”*

**Refugee Resource clients**

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## Physical health and wellbeing

- **COVID-19 information and transport to vaccination centres enabled vulnerable people to keep themselves safe and healthy in the pandemic.**

*“We worked closely with health professionals and local refugee community organisations to disseminate information on COVID-19. This information reached thousands of people and helped people to get the vaccine and access crucial health support. This has helped to keep people safe and to improve outcomes.”* **Asylum Welcome**

- **Some volunteers filled the gap in support for those returning from hospital** providing shopping and prescriptions and, “being a point of contact in case of emergencies,...and being able to stop for a brief chat on the doorstep” Thomas Gifford Trust.

*“The support provided by Charlbury Community Centre with shopping and collecting prescriptions, has been an absolute live-saver for me. Having been involved in an accident, where I lost my arm I totally lost my independence and without support would have literally died of starvation. COVID-19 has made life even more difficult and the volunteers from the community centre have been a complete ‘godsent’.”* **Thomas Gifford Trust/Charlbury Community Centre**

- **Several groups and organisations** provided online and in person exercise opportunities for friendship and health benefits.

*“I have enjoyed the Kennington Strollers partly because I need to walk more, but due to pain in my back and legs I cannot walk in the manner I once did... these weekly walks have been friendly so I enjoy joining in both for the exercise and for the company. Many thanks to Rosemary... and thanks also to the volunteers who definitely added to the friendly atmosphere.”* **Kennington Stroller in her 80’s**

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- **Two organisations gave gardening support** providing new or enhanced outdoor spaces for families and individuals which created a greater sense of wellbeing and created intergenerational relationships.

*“Many clients who are isolated, vulnerable or have mobility issues were unable or unwilling to leave home for long periods and their gardens have become an important outside space. Clients reported that they were able to enjoy being at home and their mental health improved by having an accessible outside area.”* **Volunteer Link Up**

*“Our Veg Patch project, provided work for young people and encouraged interaction between youth and elderly people.”* **Thomas Gifford Trust**

- **Research and networking with healthcare professionals** opened up access to healthcare for refugees, vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers.

*“Our Service Manager is making great strides in working with health partners to undertake research and improve clients’ access to healthcare.”*  
**Asylum Welcome**

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## Access to education and employment

- **Reconditioned devices given to schools and schoolchildren** provided a mechanism for accessing online schooling and **employment opportunities for adults** creating multiple benefits.

*“I requested two devices to help young people that we support in school; one who is a Child We Care For and the other student is in receipt of Pupil Premium. These devices have been invaluable to support these young people, particularly when there are occasions due to COVID-19, that lessons are having to be provided remotely... they can now work from at home without any difficulties... access their education and [we are] able to support them to reach their full potential.”* **Didcot Girls School**

*“Thank you so much for the donation of five great quality Dell laptops... these will be a huge help in our support of Refugees and Asylum Seekers. These are life-changing for the recipients, providing a link to the outside world, letting children do homework and access online learning, helping adults access education and training (including our zoom support) and apply for work.”* **Asylum Welcome thank you to Getting Oxfordshire Online**

- **Leys CDI Homework Club** motivated young people to catch up/stay up to date on school work at a time when education was mostly online and isolating.

*“One of our students almost never did any online homework due to the fact that they were unmotivated to do it at home. Since coming to homework club they have completed all their online homework week in week out and have caught up with previous missed homework assignments as well. This increase in the amount of homework completed has led to the student doing much better in school, and developing good habits, which can be useful in the future.”* **Leys CDI Peer tutor**

# Volunteer benefit

- **Many of the projects were about creating support within a community** for a community through the facilitation and guidance of the groups and organisations.

*“Volunteer Link Up’s services enable a community to support itself. It matches residents with residents through matching volunteers with clients. Most volunteers live in the same town or locality as the clients they support.” **Volunteer Link Up***

- **Volunteering had a positive impact on volunteers with mental health issues** (Barton Community Association) whilst other volunteers also benefited from their interaction through new friendships, reduced isolation, feeling useful (after a period of unemployment) and improved skills.

*“I had become a prisoner in my own home and was reluctant to go out anywhere, mainly because of the pandemic. When I heard about the work of the BCA I decided to give it a go and see if it would help me – and it did! I still don’t manage to help every week because I still suffer days when I don’t want to visit the outside world, but they never judge me and always welcome me when I do make it.” **Barton Community Association volunteer***

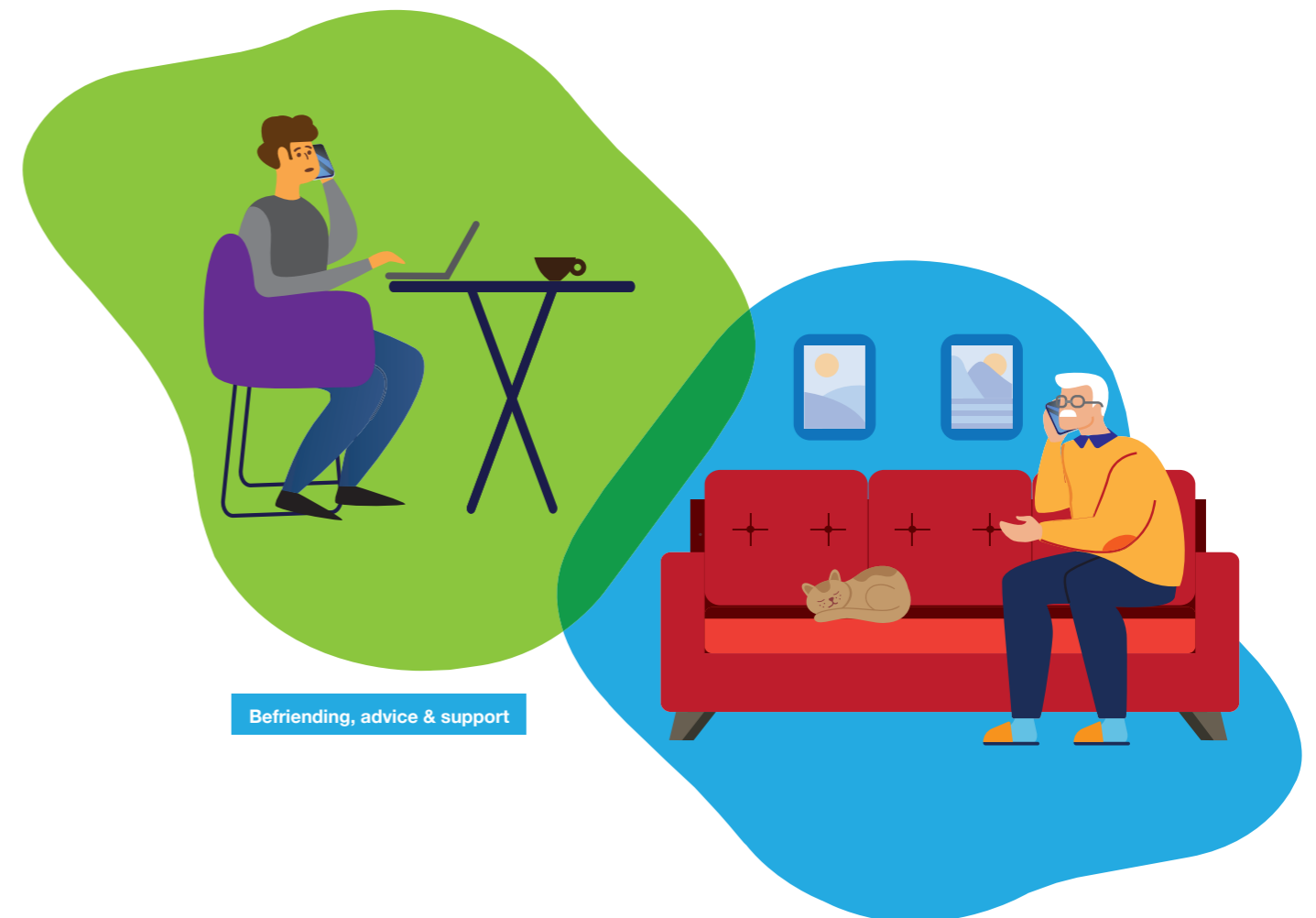
Rosalind loves working with the Home-Start team and finds the experience ‘brilliant’. She enjoys the training sessions and being able to meet up with fellow volunteers. She says that being a volunteer has encouraged her to continue her professional development by attending OXPIP lectures, and she also recently did a refresher baby sign and sing course. She said, *“The best thing about being a volunteer is feeling that you’re able to help someone. Having brought up my children without family support nearby I was well aware of how lonely and hard that could be.” **Home-Start Volunteer***

*“Thank you very much for all the jobs you have given me this year – I’ve really felt useful again after losing my job 2 years ago.” **Volunteer Link Up volunteer***

*“Most of VLU’s befrienders visit clients weekly, offering companionship and conversation. Several volunteers also provide help with admin or shopping. Our befrienders are matched with clients for the long term, meaning that unless circumstances change, they continue meeting with the client for as long as they want to. This means that the volunteer and client build a long term and mutually beneficial relationship. Befriending reduces isolation for both the client and the volunteer.” **Volunteer Link Up***

- **Sometimes clients and beneficiaries become volunteers and paid members** of staff such as at Getting Oxfordshire Online.

*“At the SOFEA hub the project has enabled us to employ a young man, who had been excluded from school and gone through the education programme, to wipe the machines. Our intention is to enable him to complete an IT apprenticeship.” **Getting Oxfordshire Online***



# Key themes to take forward from grantees and OCVA/CFO

**The outcomes and impact shared above show the need to continue support to these groups, charities and organisations and those like them throughout Oxfordshire.**

Several emerging themes came from grantee conversations, the network meeting, grantee reports and CFO and OCVA learning from managing the fund. They provide a set of priorities to be addressed by the Voluntary Community Sector, public agencies and donors to ensure a sustainable future.



## Fundraising

- Funding is key to sustainability for most organisations and groups but it has become increasingly difficult for them to balance the time needed to research and apply for funds with the need to deliver, especially when groups are operated by volunteers or do not have dedicated fundraisers. Fundraising needs to be simplified.
- Diversification of funding is necessary to ensure sustainability which is time consuming. A mix of donors could include corporates, foundations, councils, direct giving, schools, high net worth individuals, contributions from beneficiaries etc. Some charities such as Oxfordshire Association for the Blind have invested in fundraising and communications, to enable core projects to be fully or largely funded, seek more multi-year funding, increase unrestricted funding and raise their online presence. These are areas that are important to many charities, organisations and groups.
- Building on existing projects shows prior experience and success to donors but sometimes there is pressure to design new projects or extend successful projects creating need for greater capacity.
- Staff as well as volunteers are needed for pivotal roles to ensure commitment, smooth running of operations or bring specialist skills. Many organisations and charities used the funding for staff roles highlighting the need for core and staff funding.

### What's needed:

- Longer term funding – groups and organisations need funding beyond a year so that they are able to plan for the future and provide consistent services and support. Funding is needed for existing as well as new projects.
- Core/unrestricted costs – funding core costs and not just projects is vital to give stability to staff, volunteers and projects. Funds for resourcing staff and volunteers is difficult to find and sometimes key staff roles are needed rather than relying on delivery by volunteers.
- Organisations/groups have a lot of informal working relationships as well as formal partnerships. It is important to recognise this in grant applications and provide more funding opportunities for joint working remembering that it takes time to build relationships and create collaborative working models.
- Simplify grant application forms and processes. Have a short bullet point summary at the start of guidelines outlining all of the definite requirements
  - eligibility criteria, how much money is available/maximum grant application,

what is included/excluded, track history, reporting requirements etc. This is especially important for online applications which are gradually completed and can mask a new restriction at the very end.

- There can be a lot of demand on creating new policies, procedures to accompany grant applications so again this needs to be simplified especially for smaller grants.
- Simplify the need to prove impact in grant applications and donor reporting, recognising that true impact can take years to see and evidence. Many organisations/groups struggle to collect data and testimonials/case studies so other evidence could be considered i.e. social media posts/photos.

## Volunteers

- Volunteers sustain communities and have been crucial to the running of most if not all grantee projects, they can make projects financially viable as well as bringing additional skills and experience. Many projects have been challenged by losing volunteers of all ages and some have struggled to replace them – older volunteers have been lost due to vulnerability and anxiety of interactions after COVID-19 and younger volunteers who helped during lockdowns have work and family commitments. Volunteer recruitment and methods of volunteering need to be rethought and made more flexible to encourage more volunteers. Also a diversity in volunteering is needed whether it's age, sex, ethnicity, ability etc.
- The role of volunteers – especially when there is an overlap with statutory health services needs to be redefined to ensure volunteers are not misused and are protected from being viewed as a free workforce. One organisation asked, “who should stand in the gap that volunteers filled during Covid.”

### Volunteering: key points

- The point above raises questions about the role of volunteers i.e. they are not there to fill gaps in services, so how can their support be linked with statutory services as well as more robust preventative healthcare?
- There needs to be new thinking on how to create a volunteering legacy in communities across Oxfordshire by making volunteering flexible (time, level of responsibility), appealing to all ages including those who are younger (e.g. diversity of roles, a gateway to training, qualification) and open to everyone with support for those who may experience barriers (language/culture, ability etc.).

## Grants Plus approach

- Many grantees found benefits to receiving grants plus support. For some, the one to one sessions gave a safe space to discuss and reflect on challenges and wins and the mix of small, new and established grantees provided an opportunity to learn from others. Having a dedicated CDPO role embedded within a community development charity ensured there was time to explore and tailor support and training according to the needs of grantees and encourage grantees to try new approaches such as collecting case studies and testimonials as evidence of impact to be used in a myriad of ways. The CDPO also discussed project changes to ensure projects responded to need.

### Key learning from the approach:

- Be prepared to be flexible – projects can't always achieve what they set out to, especially in a crisis like COVID-19, so funders and projects need to stay focused on meeting core community needs.
- Some grantees found reporting challenging so reporting requirements need to be simple and related to the size of the grant.
- Funding is great but support and help is good too and this project has enabled us to deliver both hand-in-hand. This could be replicated by other donors or adapted across the county by providing more localised support and coordination of local organisations and groups via a hub and spoke approach.



# Next steps

CFO, OCVA and key partners will take forward areas highlighted under the key themes identified from the grantees mentioned above. They will advocate or initiate change where viable and link to core infrastructure work, which benefits the voluntary sector in the county.

## Actions include:

- **Funding:** OCVA and CFO will lead on improving funding routes, accessibility and long term funding through networks such as Oxfordshire Stronger Communities Alliance and the Voluntary Community Sector Coalition. Core funding and flexibility will be advocated for through the county council's VCS Strategy.
- **Grants Plus approach:** the benefits of a Grants Plus approach has broad benefits which helps to nurture the VCS sector. This approach will be advocated for at an early stage as other funding rounds appear on the horizon.
- **Volunteering:** the sector and the county rely on formal and informal volunteering. OCVA and CFO will shape volunteer-led strategy for the county to help support, nurture and build easy pathways into volunteering while highlighting the two-way relationship with volunteering and the service delivery.
- **Partnerships:** working together is clearly important for numerous operational and impactful reasons. However, partnership working takes time and this should be supported through better and inclusive networks and facilitation of collaboration talks around pressing issues such as the rise in the cost of living.

# Conclusion

The work of the funded groups and organisations has provided more than just services and support; the work has also been a lifeline, a friend, a sense of family to both those who were already vulnerable but also families and individuals experiencing new hardships and wellbeing challenges as an impact of COVID-19. Staff and volunteers working on the projects have improved peoples feelings of isolation though personal relationships and support and providing ways to connect with others. They have helped to reduce anxiety and stress by providing advice and giving practical help or dependable volunteer transport and improved physical health through food, exercise and access to healthcare, and supported personal development by enabling young people and adults to access schooling/learning, employment and early years socialisation opportunities. This work is vital and continued support to the VCS sector and its infrastructure is clearly needed.

It is with thanks to the county council (and the district councils and city council) for working collaboratively with the VCS sector in order to use the COVID-19 funds wisely and appropriately through the county's infrastructure organisations. This not only enabled us to reach a broader number of community groups and organisations with funding but also enabled us to offer support to them and the wider sector over the year as part of the Grant Plus approach.

Also, a big thank you to the 25 organisations and groups who received the grant funding, and their dedicated staff and volunteers who worked tirelessly to support and care for people in their communities across Oxfordshire in a challenging year.

*"What we are talking about is people helping people, in particular those who care enough to step outside of their own lives and be willing to "walk" alongside others, either literally or metaphorically.*

*People will always sustain their communities because their reward is the feeling that if we stand together, we will never feel alone."*

**Rosemary Aldgate, Kennington Strollers**



### **Community First Oxfordshire**

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Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action

### **Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action**

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