

The Heyford Park Community Development Project 2018 – present



The project

In 2018, Community First Oxfordshire (CFO), Dorchester Living, and Cherwell District Council came together to create the Heyford Park Community Development Project. Building on research undertaken by CFO on best practice in community development on new housing developments, the project centres on the deployment of a locally based community development worker.



Supporting the community garden



HEYFORD PARK FACT BOX

- 5 miles from Bicester in north Oxfordshire
- Adjacent to the former RAF Upper Heyford
- A long-established, deeply rooted community
- 1000+ new homes to be built across the next decade



Tom McCulloch from CFO sets out what the project is all about

“Lesley brought Heyford and Heyford Park community together with her wonderful weekly lunches. I really enjoyed the get togethers!”

Gill Boss, local church.

The challenge

People have lived at Heyford for hundreds of years. The building of RAF Upper Heyford in the early 20th century established close connections first to the RAF and then to the US Air Force. The base was closed in 1994 but a local Veteran's Association remains. Dorchester Group acquired the Heyford Park site in 2009, including custodianship of the former base, with plans to build 1000+ homes.

Today Heyford Park therefore combines a deeply rooted community with a unique historical identity and a large, incoming population from multiple other places, both nearby and more distant. **The key challenge was to bring all the different parts of the community together, working with residents to develop a vibrant, resilient and self-sustaining community.**



AIMS

- To support a strong sense of local identity and social cohesion
- To support community groups and activities to meet needs and enhance the daily lives of residents
- To help the community adapt to the changing requirements of Heyford Park's expanding population

“The community development worker has used her skills to develop strong networks. I have seen increased opportunities for residents of all ages and a joined-up community feel. The community know how to get involved in projects as well as sharing information, support and guidance.”

Jon Wild, Community Development Manager, Cherwell District Council.

The approach

Start with what's there, not with what is thought to be lacking

CFO follows the principles and techniques of asset-based community development. When we offer support in a community, we don't start with what might not be there. We follow a bottom-up approach, recognising and working with the existing and unique 'assets' of individuals and communities to help strengthen local life, things **like skills, knowledge, capacity, resources, experience or just enthusiasm.**



A tasty result from a community cooking class!



Bringing people together is what the project is all about

'I feel about Heyford Park as though I have come home because of all the support and help available from people like you who care. Your support for the Veterans Group and others I am involved in has been exceptional.'

Dave Riley, resident.

The project on the ground

Getting started – watching and listening

At the outset, the CFO community worker spoke to a range of groups and organisations, set up drop-in surgeries in the community centre, and held ‘getting to know the community’ events. People told us what was working well and not so well locally, while we used these face-to-face meetings (along with social media and a community survey) to introduce the project and its aims.

This intensive work at the outset was all-important, allowing us to meet people from across the community and get to know Heyford Park. Importantly, it also gave us a sense of how we could help – not to impose our ideas, but how best to deploy our resources to help volunteers achieve what they wished to achieve.

Many of the project successes can be traced back to the relationships nurtured in these initial months of the project.



Sharon Keen: a volunteer’s view of the project



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Openness
Honesty
Trust
Friendliness
Imagination
Empathy



KEY OBSERVATIONS

1. **The need to get beyond the usual suspects** – some people were much more involved than others in community activity
2. **Bringing the community together** – there was feeling of distance between existing and newer residents
3. **Living on a building site** – was a source of common frustration

The project on the ground

Brokering success relationship by relationship

Our work programme was built on strategies to address the main observations during project set-up. In practice there was much overlap. Work on one theme had a corresponding, positive impact on the others. For example, more community events to bring people together instantly sparked conversation, ideas and enthusiasm, and led to new volunteer-led initiatives.



‘As the project grew, we set up other initiatives and projects, sometimes one-off or short-lived, but that is the nature of community work guided by what the community wants rather than what you want. We have had Pop Up Art clubs, computer and literacy sessions and cooking classes.’

Lesley Montague,
CFO community
development worker.



Steve Cook from Heyford Park Parish Council – a great supporter of the project

The project on the ground

KEY OBSERVATIONS

1

The need to get beyond the usual suspects

In the first year, we were able to help the Youth Group re-establish itself after a hiatus when it nearly folded and set up a Lunch Club (a partnership with the food charity SOFEA). The Lunch Club administration was then handed over to community volunteers in a demonstration of best practice in community development – make yourself redundant! The Lunch Club spun off into other community initiatives, involving the Veteran’s Association and church. These roots then deepened and spread, also enabled by the seed corn funding we were able to offer community groups, including for the Scouts and Community Garden.

2

Bringing the community together

The combination of pastoral support and support for community initiatives combined very powerfully during the pandemic. The project supported local volunteers to deliver food during lockdown, playing a vital role in supporting isolated and more vulnerable residents, particularly those now unable to attend social catch ups such as the Lunch Club.

Pandemic response activity evolved into the setting up of Food Pantry, with new volunteers being supported to take on this much needed facility. At the same time, the project helped and advised the community garden, which is now growing fruit and vegetables for the pantry.

In parallel, the flourishing of new and ongoing community activity was further encouraged and deepened by the many community events which we organised. There is no substitute for social events in terms of getting to know one another, and these triggered all kinds of new relationships. Importantly, they played a vital role in bringing the older and newer parts of Heyford Park together.

3

Living on a building site

Residents often expressed frustration with the upheaval of ongoing building work. It was clear that many of these frustrations could be overcome by a better communication and feedback loop. Given the project links both to Dorchester and the community, the project was in a unique position to feed information and observations back and fore.

The project on the ground

SUCCESS IN NUMBERS

Drop in resident 'surgeries' held	Weekly 100 + contacts
New residents involved in volunteering	20+
New groups and initiatives supported	6+
Liaison meetings with Dorchester Living	Quarterly
Organisations given (ongoing) support	13
Community social events organised	8 300+ attendees
Partnerships and agency cross-referral initiatives	3
Annual resident surveys	2
Community Chest funding awarded to local groups	10 groups £2000+



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT LESSONS

- Work with the skills of people in the community
- Don't rush
- Don't take the lead in setting up community initiatives and then expect someone else to take it on
- Take time to explore and connect
- Go with what is there and always expect change in community leaders

'The project has assisted the Scout Group on numerous occasions to help us deliver community and skills-based programmes. Importantly, with the recent pandemic she has supported us with the community grant to purchase PPE provisions.'

Edward Peacock, Scout Group.