

PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

4 June 2026

Community Capacity Grants Programme

Report by Corporate Director of Adult Social Care

RECOMMENDATION

1. **The Committee is RECOMMENDED to**
 - i. Note the contribution the community capacity grants programme plays in delivering the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Council's vision for Adult Social Care in Oxfordshire.
 - ii. Note the support provided to people through the programme and the positive change it has made - on people who benefited from the support provided, the volunteers and voluntary sector capacity created in Oxfordshire.

Executive Summary

2. Oxfordshire County Council's Age Well Team commissions a range of services and programmes to support people to live independently for as long as possible, in line with the Health and Wellbeing Strategy priorities, Oxfordshire County Council's Strategic Plan and Adult Social Care's Oxfordshire Way vision.
3. Launched in September 2022, the Community Capacity Grants Programme provides direct support to grass roots organisations in their own local areas, responding to local challenges and building on their strengths. These local organisations support people who may have some difficulties to help them continue to live as independently as possible in their own homes in their own communities. From 2022 to 2025, the programme has supported 275 projects and over 30,500 people. The 2025-26 programme is currently underway.
4. This document builds upon the summary of preventive support in Oxfordshire presented to the Committee on 18th September 2025 and offers further details regarding the Community Capacity Grants Programme.

Background

5. The Age Well priorities in the [Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2024-2030](#) focus on two main areas:

- (a) Supporting older residents to remain independent and healthy, for longer, while ensuring they are always treated with dignity and are fully valued.
 - (b) Fostering strong social relationships and building capacity within communities to reduce levels of isolation and loneliness.
6. This is in line with the Council's [Strategic Plan 2025 to 2028](#) that sets our ambition for shaping strong and connected communities, healthy places to live, and a thriving local economy that benefits everyone.
 7. The Care Act 2014 gives local authorities a duty to promote individual wellbeing when carrying out its functions under the Act. This is sometimes referred to as 'the wellbeing principle' because it is a guiding principle that puts individual wellbeing at the heart of care and support responsibilities.
 8. The wellbeing principle is also linked to the Care Act's prevention duty which mandates local authorities to work in partnership with other local organisations, communities, and people themselves to prevent, reduce and delay the onset or escalation of needs for care and support.
 9. In line with the Care Act, we see prevention as an ongoing consideration and not a single activity or intervention. Oxfordshire County Council's strategic vision for Adult Social Care, the [Oxfordshire Way](#), follows the same ethos and focuses on working in partnership with people, their families and the Council's health and voluntary sector partners to understand what matters to them and how the Council can support them to help them live independently in their communities.
 10. There are many ways in which local authorities can achieve the aims of promoting wellbeing and reducing dependency. In Oxfordshire, there is a long history of strong partnership working across Adult Social Care, Public Health, the NHS and voluntary sector partners, supporting people in various ways, whether this is reablement support following a hospital discharge, exercise classes to prevent falls, supporting carers in their caring role, supporting voluntary and community sector organisations to develop initiatives local to people, and many more.
 11. Since 2022, the Council has run the Community Capacity Grants Programme. The programme supports Oxfordshire's voluntary and community sector to help people remain independent and involved in their local communities. Aligned with the Health and Wellbeing Board strategy, the programme supports people to age well, but is open to all Oxfordshire residents, particularly those who may be experiencing inequality and exclusion.

Community Capacity Grants Programme

12. The Community Capacity Grants Programme was launched in 2022 to build on and further strengthen grass roots organisations in their communities, especially where there is evidence of gaps or insufficient development of local resources. The overall objective of the programme is to ensure people have

access to support and things to do in their communities to help them live independently and stay well.

13. Specifically, the programme aims to help build thriving and resilient communities by
 - Supporting schemes/projects that fill gaps and therefore increase the options available to people, and to referring community connectors, social prescribers and local area coordinators,
 - Being flexible to support people and communities in the way that is needed in that area. This can be digital exclusion in one area, inter-generational projects in another,
 - Focusing on physical and mental health, by supporting people to connect with nature and supporting existing local capacity,
 - Creating environmental, economic and social benefit,
 - Supporting grassroot organisations to develop programmes to support people who may find it hard to access support.
14. To avoid duplication with other funding routes – such as the Well Together Programme delivered through the Oxfordshire Place Inequalities Funding which focuses on the 10 most disadvantaged wards - the Programme focuses on disadvantaged communities outside these wards.

Programme Administration

15. The Community Capacity Grants Programme has two schemes:
 - **Connected Communities Fund** (up to £5k) are administered by Oxfordshire Community and Voluntary Action (OCVA) in conjunction with Community First Oxfordshire (CFO),
 - **Larger grants** (£5k - £20k) administered by Oxfordshire Community Foundation (OCF).
16. The Council made a strategic decision for voluntary sector partners to administer the grants. This approach offers a range of strategic, operational, and community-level advantages including
 - Stronger reach into communities given their closer relationships with grassroot organisations,
 - More proportionate and accessible processes,
 - Their ability to provide development support, and not just funding,
 - Greater flexibility and faster decision making,
 - Opportunities to utilise local insight and intelligence,
 - Reducing duplication, and
 - Reducing administrative burden on the Council.
17. The Programme launches every autumn with a communications campaign featuring press releases and posts on online platforms of the Council, OCF, OCVA, and CFO. Updates are sent via newsletters and mailing lists. Organisations and groups are encouraged to join the grant administrators' mailing lists for timely news and funding details.

18. When applications open, potential applicants receive comprehensive guidance materials, including FAQs, a sample completed application form, and a budget template to help them prepare their submissions. There are also online or in-person drop-in sessions, and advice and support both online and by phone.

Grant Allocation

19. All applicants need to complete an application form. **For the connected communities fund**, applicants are asked to fill a simple application form explaining the project, why this is needed and how it meets the grant criteria – please see appendix 1 for 25/6. The application is then reviewed by an in-house advisory group of OCVA and CFO staff that discuss and decide on grant allocation using local knowledge and previous grant allocations. This programme remains open until the fund has been fully allocated.
20. **For the larger grants**, a more thorough application process is followed. An OCF grant assessor evaluates the application and scores out of 15 against the grant criteria. This is then reviewed by another OCF member of staff. Once all applications are scored, a panel meets to discuss the evaluated scores starting with the projects with the highest scoring, working down the list until all the funding is used.
21. In its first year, the Programme focussed on supporting grassroots organisations in the 10 most deprived areas (based on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2019) and rural areas in line with the Council's then priorities. From 2023/24 onwards, the focus shifted to projects outside of the 10 most deprived wards and villages. This was in response to the Integrated Care Board Well Together programme which provides a similar model of infrastructure support and grants in Oxfordshire's most deprived communities to address health inequalities in those areas.

Summary of 2024/2025 programme

22. In 2024/25, the total budget of the Community Capacity Grants was £621,600 (£525,000 allocated for the grants and £96,600 for the administration of the grants).

The **Connected Communities Fund** of £183,750 supported 73 groups which delivered over 2,000 sessions supporting more than 1,500 people.

Large Grants fund of £341,250 supported 23 community groups. A further 7 groups were awarded £70,700 match funding from OCF donors. In total, the funding supported 6,000 people.

23. In 2024/25, the Programme continued to support organisations outside of the 10 deprived wards, which received targeted funding under the Well Together Programme. Table below provides the geographical breakdown of grants awarded:

Area	Connected Communities Fund		Large Grants	
	Funded Projects	%	Funded Projects	%
City	19	26%	7	23%
South	13	18%	5	17%
Vale	10	14%	4	13%
Cherwell	14	19%	1	3%
West	17	23%	8	27%
County Wide	0	0%	5	17%
Total	73	100%	30	100%

24. All participants were asked *how they feel attending this activity/group and if it has made a difference in their life and their connections with others in the community*, to assess the impact of the activities across all the groups consistently. Out of 1,518 respondents:

- 88% said it made a positive difference
- 10% said it made a slight difference
- 2% said it had made no difference

Summary of 2025/2026 programme

25. In 2025/26, the total budget was £902,680 (£774,490 was allocated to the grants and £129,190 for the administration of the grants). The Fund this year was larger due to an additional £250,000 investment from Oxfordshire County Council Public Health Service.

The **Connected Communities Fund** of £192,937 supported 86 groups.

Large Grants fund of £520,000 supported 38 projects. Additionally, OCF are working with some of their donors to fund some of the projects that were not awarded funding.¹

26. The grants programme maintained its focus on communities beyond the 10 most deprived wards, as these areas continued to benefit from the Well Together Programme. In 2025/26, additional emphasis was placed on supporting individuals residing in isolated villages with limited community assets or those facing barriers to accessing such resources.

27. The table below presents a detailed geographical distribution of grants awarded. We monitor funding distribution at District Council level as follows:

Area	Connected Communities Fund		Large Grants	
	Funded Projects	%	Funded Projects	%
City	16	17%	12	32%
South	9	10%	6	15%
Vale	11	13%	9	24%
Cherwell	28	34%	5	13%

¹ These projects are being implemented; therefore the total number of beneficiaries are not yet known.

West	22	26%	3	8%
County Wide	0	0%	3	8%
Total	86	100%	38	100%

Impact on Wellbeing and Social Care Needs

28. The impact of prevention approaches cannot always be proven through a single causal measure but through triangulating evidence – data from activities, lived experience and research evidence.
29. When the Programme first started, the *Warwick Edinburgh Mental Health Wellbeing Scale* was used to measure impact. However, this was found to be time consuming for the groups receiving grants, disproportionate to the level of funding and inappropriate for small organisations with limited capacity for data collection and reporting and often reliant on volunteers to operate. Working closely with the grant administrators, we shifted our focus to collecting demographic data including two questions on **beneficiaries' caring responsibilities** and **whether they lived alone**, alongside the Stories of Difference.
30. In their feedback, people who benefited from supported activity consistently mention the importance of having safe, welcoming spaces in their communities which make them feel less lonely and more connected. As social connectedness is known to be linked with wellbeing, grants support programmes that aim to tackle isolation directly, such as coffee mornings and lunch clubs, or as part of another activity such as a cooking class, gardening club, crafting, music, drama, exercise and cultural sessions. In addition to social activities that improve mental health and physical wellbeing, projects focus on confidence, such as older widowed men learning to cook fresh meals together.
31. The impact of the programme on volunteers' wellbeing has also started to be seen– they highlight the 'sense of purpose' volunteering brings, and the positive impact of these programmes on their wellbeing as well as participants.
32. A system impact which may not be immediately visible is the connections made through the programme. Many projects made links with local colleges, health services, care homes and other community groups to expand their reach and use resources effectively. These partnerships play a vital role in supporting the sustainability of the activities and long-term impact.
33. Below are a few examples of the difference the programme makes:

*A drama group received £3,000 from the Connected Communities Fund to expand its drama sessions for adults aged 18+ who are neurodivergent or have learning disabilities. The funding has enabled 60 participants - including those previously on a waiting list - to join the sessions.
"Our sessions help build confidence, spark friendships and bring lots of fun".*

A cooking and wellness centre received £19,866, to support their joint working with local GP practices to deliver social prescribing activities for older widowed men, a group particularly vulnerable to loneliness. Participants learn to cook fresh meals, grown their confidence in the kitchen, and, most importantly, built new connections that have enhanced their overall wellbeing.

A lunch club received £3,000 from the Connected Communities Fund to support an Over 60's lunch club at the community centre. The funding has enabled 32 participants to attend the weekly sessions.

"When the wife died, they came knocking on the door and told me to come round here.... It's somewhere different, I don't go to the pub, I don't go shopping... I come down here. People you get to know each week and stops me being on my own".

A befriending service that enables a carer to have a break received £8,920 from the Large Grants. Carers get a regular 2-3 hour break from their 24-hour caring role.

"I had been very stressed with my wife's dementia. We don't go out as it is too difficult with her behaviour and incontinence... I now go out shopping and sometime play snooker with my friends. It is such a relief to have those 3 hours each week. My wife is ok with the volunteer. The volunteer has a good chat with me too. I feel a bit better now"

Review of Community Capacity Grants

34. In June 2025, the Council carried out a review of the Community Capacity Grants with the grant Administrators, OCVA, OCF and CFO. The review identified the following key points:

- The Programme is popular among community groups and is always oversubscribed.
- The "Grants Plus" approach, which includes capacity building and support beyond just funding, proved to be a key driver for success.
- The *Minimis Subsidy Grant process* that was initially advised to be used by OCC Procurement and Legal Services proved to be complicated for small community organisations to follow. A simplified approach was then adopted to ensure accountability for the Council and reduce administrative burden from smaller groups.
- Groups initially had to use the funding within the year of allocation. This was changed to allow the funding to be spent over 2 years to ensure flexibility and help with planning and recruitment.

35. The key strength of the grants programme was its ability to adapt and adjust processes in response to the feedback. This was achieved through effective partnership with OCVA, OCF and CFO and the joint commitment to support people and communities. The trusted relationship allowed a real-time learning opportunity and ability to modify and simplify, including data collection and grant application processes. This flexibility and responsiveness enabled the programme to engage a broader range of groups, including those with no prior experience of local authority funding.
36. Groups state that receiving Community Capacity grants has enhanced their capability to obtain and use further resources. This improvement comes from the ‘backing’ of the Council and grant administrators, as well as the increased stability enabling them to pursue additional funding options.
37. The learning from this programme will continue in 2026/27 and used in the planning of future grants programmes.

Challenges

38. There is a limit to how many projects can be funded within the programme. However, partners have been proactive in directing unsuccessful applications to other funding available. Some of the larger grants that were not eligible for this fund were supported by OCF’s private donors.
39. The future of the grants programme has to be kept under review. Although there is evidence of impact in project reporting and in some of the testimonies set out above, the Council cannot definitively link this investment to the management of demand on adult social care. The Council needs to consider the wider evidence of impact on communities, the resilience of local groups and the benefits to individual beneficiaries, against the wider pressures facing adult social care.
40. There are other similar grants programmes as well as a range of preventative initiatives. The Council is developing a prevention strategy and approaches to evaluation and evidence of impact. This work will consider the value of grants programmes and these other forms of prevention in the context of achieving best value for the Oxfordshire pound.
41. Another challenge relates to recruiting and retaining volunteers. Oxfordshire has a long tradition of volunteering – in June 2022, Oxfordshire County Council’s Resident Survey showed that 40% of respondents reported giving unpaid help to groups, clubs or organisations in the last 12 months². However, where a lot of organisations depend on volunteers, it is hard to ensure that they will be able to recruit and retain them.

² Please see [HPS Community Activation Datapack 2023](#) for details

Planning for 2026/27

42. The Council's strategic vision, priorities, and statutory responsibilities remain unchanged in 2026/27. The funding from both Adult Social Care and Public Health has been approved as part of the Council's budget.
43. The Council will continue to work with grant administrators and previous grant recipients to further develop how to evaluate the grants programme. The Council will also continue working with OCC Procurement and Legal Teams to find simplified solutions to the procurement process to reduce unnecessary administrative burden on the grant administrators and grassroot organisations who bring added social value by grant fund matching, being local experts in this field and fall under the Council's "Partners of Choice" ethos.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

44. Adult Social Care's priorities are shaped by the Council's corporate vision and priorities,
with particular focus on
 - Tackling inequalities - working with partners to address inequalities focussing supporting on those in greatest need, embedding and implementing our digital inclusion strategy
 - Prioritising the health and wellbeing of Oxfordshire residents: working with partners to implement our health and wellbeing strategy prioritising preventative initiatives, and
 - Supporting carers and the social care system: deliver seamless services, explore new ways to provide services promoting self-directed support and increasing choice.

Financial Implications

45. This is a report for information only. There are no direct financial implications in the body of this paper.

Comments checked by:
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Legal Implications

46. The Care Act 2014 specifies that the general duty of a local authority when performing its functions in respect of an individual is to 'promote that individual's well-being' (S1(1)). This incorporates a responsibility to provide

services, facilities or resources which will contribute towards the prevention, or delay the development, of needs for care and / or support (S2).

47. These responsibilities are clarified in the Care and Support Statutory Guidance,

“The core purpose of adult care and support is to help people to achieve the outcomes that matter to them in their life.... Underpinning all of [the] individual ‘care and support functions’ (that is, any process, activity or broader responsibility that the local authority performs) is the need to ensure that doing so focuses on the needs and goals of the person concerned.” (para 1.1)

48. This report outlines some of the measures being used across Oxfordshire to meet the authority’s statutory responsibilities towards its residents.
49. The arrangements with the two grant administration bodies were set up as service contracts with each administration body providing grant distribution services for an administrative fee (“Grant Administration Contracts”). The two bodies hold the grants on trust for the Council and distribute the grants on behalf of the Council.
50. The Grant Administration Contracts contain provisions ensuring that the grants which are distributed comply with subsidy control law pursuant to the Subsidy Control Act 2022.

Comments checked by: Janice White – Principal Solicitor, ASC, SEND and Education and Jonathan Pool – Solicitor (Contracts).

Equality & Inclusion Implications

51. Equity in experiences and outcomes is a key priority for Adult Social Care arising from the Council’s statutory duties under Care Act 2014 and CQC Assurance Framework.
52. Equality and inclusion are key pillars of the Council’s preventative approach and are supported by activities covered in this report.

Risk Management

53. The Adult Social Care Directorate Leadership Team has oversight of the risks and maintains a risk register and reports to Senior Leadership Team and Informal Cabinet through monthly updates.

NAME Karen Fuller, Corporate Director of Adult Social Care

Background papers: Nil

Annex: Community Capacity Grant Criteria Specification 2025/26

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Annex 1: Community Capacity Grant Criteria Specification 2025/26

Overall Outcomes

In support of the council's vision "to support the people of Oxfordshire to live well in their community, remaining fit and healthy for as long as possible: to build community resilience and increase independence", the community capacity grant will prioritise:

- Activities that support the wellbeing of the whole community to stay well, live independently, increases physical activity, reduces individual isolation and loneliness promoting emotional resilience.
- Activities that address inequalities and improve quality of life.
- Activities that act sooner to promote increased mental health, leisure and physical activities to address preventable conditions and reduce demand on services.
- Activities that are aligned to the Oxfordshire Way and NHS social prescribing and are neighbourhood-led.
- Activities that get the best from collective resources empowering people to forge their own networks and structures.
- Activities that create self-sustaining enterprises targeted at diverse communities.
- Activities that support use of open green spaces to support the wellbeing of whole communities.

We would seek to:

- Support schemes/projects that fill gaps and therefore increase the options available to community connectors, social prescribers and integrated neighbourhood teams.
- Support schemes where this input adds value to existing capacity, increasing volunteering, collaborative working and opportunities for mutual aid.
- Support schemes that are innovative: e.g. help mitigate digital exclusion; work across different generations; aspiration building; connectivity to nature; unlock value in our use of space and place etc.
- Support schemes that work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit often linked to local businesses Corporate Social Responsibility Policies.
- Support schemes that focus on unpaid carers.
- Support schemes that support underserved groups that find it hard to find support through traditional services.
- Support schemes that help build thriving and resilient communities.

We intend to be openminded while retaining our focus on specific populations and propose an investment of £525k in 24-25 to support community capacity development, allocated across district council geography with a focus on experiences of inequalities and excluded groups. The grants awarded will be able to be used over two financial years to enable interventions which build sustainability.

The grant will be assigned against the following themes:

- delivering cultural assets
- support increased physical activity

- developing community assets
- mental wellbeing

Target Populations

- Oxfordshire residents
- for vulnerable adults and those experiencing inequality and exclusion, including underserved groups that find it hard to find support through traditional services.
- The target beneficiaries must be over 18. For intergenerational schemes, it is acceptable for under-18s to be involved but the target beneficiaries to report on must still be over 18.
- Priority weighting will be given to schemes addressing rural isolation

This list is not exhaustive, but examples of beneficiaries include older people, people with mental/physical health conditions and disabilities, those on low incomes, people experiencing homelessness, minoritised ethnic groups, asylum seekers or recent migrants, and people with a nomadic lifestyle such as Gypsy, Traveller, and Roma. The Community Capacity Grants will continue to focus on issues of rural isolation as a priority and have a broad spread of groups funded across the county.