

OXFORDSHIRE HEALTH & WELLBEING BOARD

26 JUNE 2025

DEVELOPMENT OF HEALTH AND INEQUALITIES RESEARCH & PARTNERSHIPS IN OXFORDSHIRE

Report by Director of Public Health and Communities

RECOMMENDATION

The Health and Wellbeing Board is **RECOMMENDED**:

- a) To **NOTE** content of paper and **ADVISE** where OCC, the Oxfordshire Community Research Network and the Local Policy Lab can support the work of the Health and Wellbeing Board and vice versa.

Executive Summary

1. This paper updates the Health and Wellbeing Board on progress in developing a place-based approach to research in Oxfordshire. It summarises:
 - a. the forthcoming research strategy for Oxfordshire County Council (OCC),
 - b. current work of the Oxfordshire Community Research Network (OCRN), and
 - c. developing partnerships between local councils and the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University.

Background

3. The HWB was last updated in March 2024 where we highlighted how, at times of resource constraint, the use of research and evidence becomes increasingly important to prioritise scarce funds. The aim of our work is to use and produce high-quality research to unpick why different approaches work for different populations and in different settings, ensuring that local government can make better use of limited resources to deliver improved health outcomes for everyone in Oxfordshire.

Development of OCC Research Strategy

4. Since our last update, the OCC Head of Research has been recruited as has a Senior Social Care Research Lead and Local Authority Research Practitioner. Both the Social Care Research Lead and Local Authority Research Practitioner are funded through external grants from the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR).
5. Together, they have engaged staff in OCC as well as stakeholders across Oxfordshire to develop an OCC research strategy with the vision to **collaboratively carry out and promote use of high quality, people-centred research to make Oxfordshire a greener, fairer and healthier county.**

6. The strategy will be published in Summer / Autumn 2025, and includes the following areas of focus (figure 1):
- **Collaborate** - increase research collaboration and partnerships in Oxfordshire by working with communities and partner organisations
 - **Embed** – develop capacity and capability in OCC to use and conduct high quality research
 - **Enable** - create the necessary enabling environment, culture and resources for active research to take place and support people working in OCC for better programme delivery
 - **Support** - prioritise and recognise the value of evidence and research by different directorates and officers of the council
 - **Improve** – improve the lives of people in Oxfordshire and reduce inequalities through high quality research

The strategy will have an accompanying delivery plan that will run over 5 years from 2025 to 2030. It will align with the Health and Wellbeing Board Strategy as well as other related strategies such as the OCC data strategy.



Figure 1. Five pronged elements of OCC research strategy

7. As an example of a successful applied research partnership, the OCC Social Care Research Lead has worked with academics from Oxford Brookes University and the University of Oxford to develop a research programme focused on children's and adults' social care in Oxfordshire.
- a. One study has explored the rise in children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and its connection to adversities using historical datasets from school census and children's social care data. The findings can support how the council is planning its SEND and preventative services to support children most in need.

- b. A second study is supporting to shape the design and location of Family Hubs (a single place for a range of support services and advice for children, young people and families in Oxfordshire). The research identified the main presenting needs of children referred to social care and highlighted key geographical areas with high referrals. This is supporting decisions on the placement of Family Hubs and resource prioritisation and can provide the council with an opportunity to address the main needs identified, ensuring effective targeting of prevention resources in high-need areas as well as engaging key stakeholders to consider service delivery.

Oxfordshire Community Research Network

- 8. Oxfordshire's communities and residents are critical to the development and delivery of health and inequalities research in Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire Community Research Network (OCRN) was launched in March 2023 and is made up of local community and volunteer groups, as well as council representatives and public involvement leads from across the universities and hospital trusts. The OCRN has three key objectives: delivering community-led research; supporting research prioritisation; and coordinating public and community involvement in research.
 - a. A recent OCRN evaluation found that the network has brought diverse organisations together around the shared purpose to improve wellbeing and reduce health inequalities through research and that it has successfully developed trust between members and established guiding principles for how it works. Challenges remain around historical and current power imbalances between community members and statutory organisations and universities.
 - b. To help the OCRN grow and meet its objectives, the network is recruiting a Community Research Lead to help with network management and an Advocacy and Communication Officer to help facilitate communication among members and network expansion. A community participatory research training offer is being developed along with a flexible funding pot for community groups to use to lead research projects. These activities are being funded by OCC and the University of Oxford and led through community members where possible.
 - c. Recently OCRN members partnered with Dr Joanna Crocker, University of Oxford to review the scientific literature on how to best develop partnerships between community, policy and academic organisations to address health inequalities (funded by the Oxford Policy Engagement Network). Findings from this work have shaped OCRN priorities and are being written up for academic publication with OCRN members as co-authors and key contributors.
 - d. OCRN membership continues to grow. It meets quarterly with ongoing information sharing through a monthly newsletter.

The Local Policy Lab

- 9. Oxford Brookes University and the University of Oxford continue to work closely with local communities and councils to support wellbeing and tackle inequalities in Oxfordshire.
 - c. OCC, the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University are in the middle on the second round of their Local Policy Lab. The Local Policy Lab

began in 2024 and supports graduate students to spend up to 12 weeks tackling policy-relevant research questions based in or with local government (OCC or district councils). Last year, 19 graduate students participated in 9 research projects. Their work contributed to improving needs assessments, evaluating services, and understanding best practices.

- d. This year 14 students have enrolled and are working on 6 projects linked to the county's Marmot priorities. In parallel, the University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University are recruiting three Chief Scientific Advisors (CSAs), one covering each of the three Marmot priorities. These CSAs will support Policy Lab Fellows as well as provide a central point of focus for developing longer term applied research partnerships.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

- 10. This work is consistent with a range of OCC corporate priorities and the aims of the Health and Wellbeing Strategy, including improving health and wellbeing, and tackling inequalities.

Financial Implications

- 11. Progressing the plans in this report will include applying for external research funding – leveraging some of the £40bn+ invested in research in the UK each year. OCC will also continue to invest in its own research ambitions through funding the Head of Research, and working with local universities to fund the OCRN and Local Policy Lab.

Legal Implications

- 12. N/A

Staff Implications

- 13. Implementation of OCC research strategy will involve the development of training opportunities for staff, councillors, and residents, and – dependent on external research funding, the creation of new posts in local government, communities and universities.

Equality & Inclusion Implications

- 14. Equality and inclusion is incorporated throughout this work and forms a core part of the development and delivery of this programme of work.

Sustainability Implications

- 15. This work can support the county's wider sustainability agenda by using research to understand how we can best work to adapt and mitigate the most harmful implications of climate change..

Risk Management

13. The Oxfordshire Community Research Network is currently funded to next financial year by OCC and University of Oxford and without ongoing investment or successfully applying for external funding applications there is a reputational risk for OCC and reduce trust from community groups in research and academics.
14. There is a risk that research insights do not directly impact local decision making and improve health outcomes. This is mitigated by working across OCC and with communities to ensure that research is both policy relevant and matters to people in Oxfordshire.
15. Research funding applications are very competitive and have no guarantee of success. Closer partnership working between communities, councils, academics and NHS trusts will ensure that funding applications have the best possible chance of success, learning from the expertise available in the county.

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June 2025