

# Our members in 2020:

Report of a survey of  
Oxford Civic Society members

## Foreword

Oxford Civic Society undertakes periodic surveys of its members. This survey was considered especially necessary as personal contact with members had been lost as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. This resulted in a national lockdown from March 2020 which lasted for several months and continuing constraints still preclude us from meetings of any sort.

We undertook the member survey in August / September 2020 to gauge how well the Society is meeting the expectations of its members, to better understand the issues of concern to members and to identify additional or alternative activities. The survey looked in particular at the activities of the Programme Group and Communications Group. The survey instrument is set out in Appendix 1.

This was our first survey done online using 'Survey Monkey,' managed by Civic Voice. We also sent a postal survey to the small number of members who are not online. A good overall response rate was achieved with 206 respondents to the core survey questions, more than a quarter of our total membership. This is a higher response rate than we have achieved before and for a survey of its kind, the results are regarded as highly robust.

The results of the survey are described in this report. Sections 1 and 2 set out the lessons learned and recommendations, including an assessment of the relevance and effectiveness of the Society. The survey also allows us to assess the sustainability of the Society – a key feature of the Society's planning for future years – described in section 3. The recommendations and conclusions will be used to inform the preparation of the Society's plan and budget for 2021 (and in outline, 2022 and 2023).

The survey does not enable us to assess the Society's efficiency and this remains to be done. An additional survey of the various government and non-government bodies with whom the Society works would also be helpful in further evaluating our effectiveness.

The survey was administered overall by the Society's Communications Group, coordinated by Hilary Bradley and with significant support from Professor Margaret Maden (Vice President). The principal contributors were of course the members who responded and we are very grateful to them.

Ian Green  
Chairman, Oxford Civic Society  
October 2020

# 1. Lessons learned

## 1.1 OCS relevance

The 2020 Member Survey indicates that our activities, and by extension our underpinning Aims and Values, are relevant to the issues facing the city as perceived by members. Asked what 'other' civic issues we should tackle, respondents mainly mentioned issues we do in fact cover through our working groups. The biggest single issue that concerns members is traffic and transport, with many pleas for measures to tame traffic and enhance public transport and provision for cyclists and pedestrians.

Asked how the Society should change, some members said we need to be more consultative. However, the positioning of the Society is a problem for some, with criticism that we are too close to local authorities – we need to challenge more. Diversity is also a weak point: the Society and its activities do not reflect the diversity of the city's residents and workers.

## 1.2 Membership

Personal contact is clearly the most effective way of spreading the word about OCS and encouraging non-members to join. Pre-pandemic, the talks and debates have also been important catalysts for membership recruitment.

Overall, members join because they have a general interest in Oxford's heritage and future, rather than strong interests in particular aspects. The programme of walks, talks and visits is highly valued by our members and appears to be a key attraction.

OCS tends to keep members for a long time: 30% of those responding have been members for 16 or more years. This degree of loyalty is heartening and should encourage us to believe that we're largely on the right path.

Our members are predominantly over 65 with 17% of respondents in the 40 - 65 age range. Not surprisingly the Society's members are mainly retired but 21% of respondents are still employed in some way.

65% of respondents belong to a residents' association or neighbourhood group which is perhaps higher than expected but may reflect their willingness to be involved in their city.

### *Active membership*

At least two-thirds of the membership takes part in one or more of the activities we offer. The talks are very popular with active respondents, closely followed by the walks and visits. The debates (new in 2019) were also welcomed while litter-picking with Oxclean was popular with many respondents to this survey.

Of those not participating in the Society's activities, inconvenient venues and times were cited as the main reasons. A small minority of our members said they were too old or disabled to take part in our activities.

## 1.3 Programme activities

Asked about preference for talks venues, the most interesting result is that 36% of respondents have no preference. This suggests that it's not a big issue for us. Members largely prefer talks starting at 7.30 to 8 pm. There is little interest in weekend meetings. Asked how the programme of walks, talks and visits could be improved most respondents confirmed that the programme is first rate - all credit is due to our Programme Group. A number of specific requests offer ideas and insights for programme activities.

## 1.4 Communications

*Visions* is very well regarded and the e-bulletins are also valued. The main OCS website is performing well but other OCS websites are not performing as well as we would like. Despite having good twitter accounts, we have not led our members to them; indeed, it appears that many of our members are unaware of the extent of our online presence.

Asked how communications can be improved, over half the responses expressed satisfaction with what we provide. The Communications Group should be congratulated. A small proportion appealed for more frequent e-bulletins and to keep print versions.

Asked how well we have informed members about major issues, we score well on providing at least adequate information over the entire range of issues suggested in the survey. Approximately one third of respondents considered themselves well informed on environmental issues (including climate change and zero emissions), city centre strategies, county council transport planning and Green Belt policy. This is a considerable achievement but is it good enough? Approximately one third said they were not well informed on tourism management and for about one fifth of the respondents we had not provided enough information about the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan and individual planning applications (comments and objections).

# 2 Recommendations

## 2.1 Relevance

- To be relevant to the interests of our members, we do not need to significantly change but we do need to: (i) strengthen our activities so that members feel well informed rather than adequately informed; (ii) consider how to consult members more and (iii) consider the Society's role as a 'critical friend' to the local authorities and other public and private bodies we work with. As one respondent put it – are we too much of a friend and not enough of a critic?
- Our activities need to address issues of concern or interest to diverse communities in Oxford.
- We need a more diverse membership including membership of our working groups. The Society and its activities should better reflect the diversity of the city's residents and workers.

## 2.2 Effectiveness

### Membership (general)

- Post-COVID pandemic we need to consider making our talks / debates more social occasions – we have non-members attending and we need to encourage them to join over a cup of tea / glass of wine!
- We need to encourage our members to tell non-members about the Society – we could consider incentives for recruiting new members and recruitment campaigns.
- Continued delivery of an interesting programme of walks, talks and visits is essential. We might also consider whether we could offer a more extensive programme.
- We should consider how to capture non-members in Zoom talks (and how to charge them?).
- The Programme needs to include planning and architecture topics and topics of general interest about the city.
- We must find ways of working with younger people: (i) youth – as a contributor to improving services for youth in the city; (ii) by recruiting younger, active, members.
- With 21% of members still in work of some kind, can we utilise this by getting these members to help us to extend our reach into businesses?
- We also have businesses as corporate members – should we attempt to recruit their (younger) staff as members (discounted membership fees)?
- Similarly, 74% are retired. We should consider recruiting members from pensioners' societies (for example, the Association of Oxford University Pensioners).
- We could make a special effort to cater for our elderly and disabled members and even consider recruiting new members from retirement accommodation and sheltered housing.

### Active membership

- We need to encourage more members to take part in our working groups.
- OCS could forge stronger links to residents' associations and neighbourhood groups. With the links we could: (i) increase membership; (ii) learn more about local issues across the city; and (iii) provide information and support to the residents' associations and neighbourhood groups.

### Programme

- Venues for talks – we should not over-think this, but might re-invigorate our search for accessible, convenient and more comfortable venues with catering options for enhanced social events. In the meantime, Magdalen College auditorium has a slight edge over Rewley House.
- To implement a 'diversity outreach' we could hold meetings in different parts of the city with topics relevant to the locality.
- Online talks should not be disregarded (currently we have no alternative) as they can be used to disseminate our work more widely. This would of even greater benefit if we used them as a recruitment tool.
- Timing of talks: continue with 7.30pm - 8pm.

## Communications

- Perhaps *Visions* could encourage more member contributions, and also guest contributors.
- The main website might be even better if more Executive Committee members and working group members were willing to add / edit material.
- We need to draw attention to our other websites – as the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan is finalised and the devolution debate picks up speed the Oxfordshire Futures website will attract attention.
- To attract a younger membership, we'll need to adapt our online communications.

## 3 Sustainability: concluding remarks

This section considers what we can learn from the survey about the sustainability of OCS and its activities. This assessment focuses on the likelihood that our activities will be maintained over 5 - 10 years.

The survey results are encouraging – there is clearly demand for an organisation like OCS and for its activities. There is demand for the walks, talks and visits despite the proliferation of organisations that also provide these. Judged by the appreciation of the issues we pursue there is also demand for the activities of our working groups.

OCS is alone in being a civic organisation with an overall view of the way in which the city is being managed and developed. Looking ahead in the short and medium terms there are significant reasons to think that the demand for an organisation like OCS will increase.

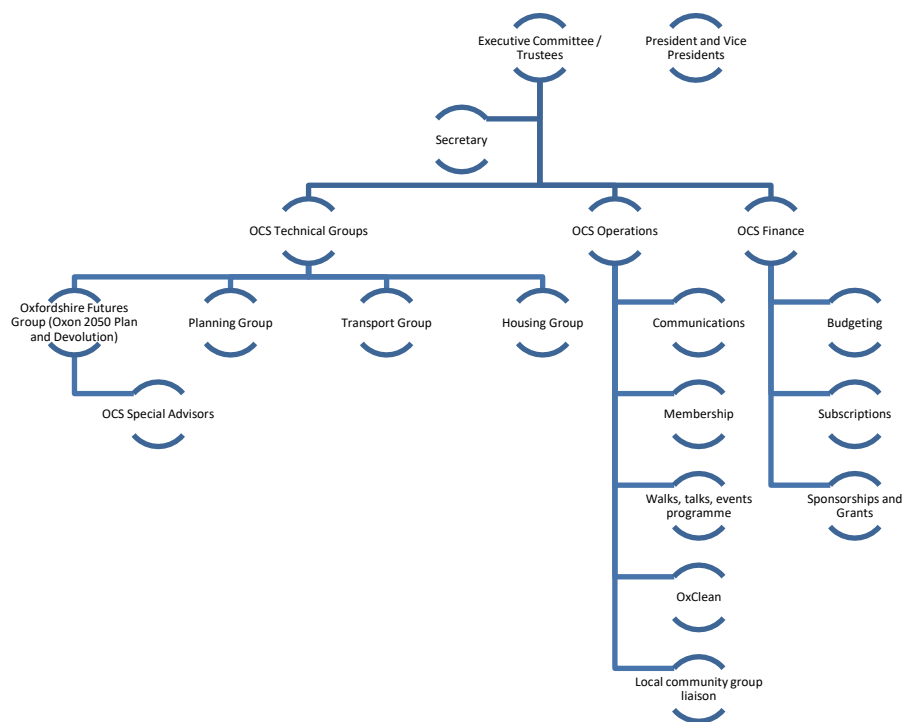
- There will be significant debate about the governance of Oxford and its region following the Devolution White Paper expected in October 2020.
- Development planning for the city and its region is taking place during a whole host of challenges: COVID-19, Brexit, the introduction of innovation in joint District planning, major changes in the planning system and national government plans for the Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford Arc. Public consultation on these issues varies but is generally weak and, on some issues, non-existent. We are in a position to argue for better consultation with communities.
- Efforts to ensure inclusivity in the city and its region is needed even more than before, especially as COVID-19 has an inequitable impact on employment, in a context already known to be inequitable. OCS is well placed to contribute, especially through its role in the Oxford Strategic Partnership.
- We should ensure that our activities contribute to natural resource management, pollution, biodiversity and greenhouse gas emissions. Close attention also needs to be paid to social sustainability (including the contribution our activities make to issues of concern to diverse communities).
- Climate change has not gone away while COVID-19 is in the headlines and we are well placed to work with formal and informal environmental bodies.

On the downside, our financial resources may diminish: (i) the increase in OCS subscriptions has come at a time when there is much financial uncertainty in many households; and (ii) our aim of supplementing our income with sponsorships and grants will be more of a challenge as demand for this has increased significantly.

To adequately meet the increased challenges the Society needs to recruit more members and, critically, more volunteers to join our working groups and to provide essential support roles. We need to provide enough personnel to lead and support all the components of OCS shown in the figure below. The key weakness of our organisation (apart from inadequate funding) is the lack of administrative support for the groups and shortage of members of groups who can be active between meetings, as well as attending meetings.

To ensure sustainability we need risk mitigation measures, along with practical assessments of cost recovery mechanisms and resources for operations and special projects.

Figure 1: Draft organisation of OCS 2021 – will the Society be adequately staffed throughout?



## Appendix 1. OCS member survey 2020

*Oxford Civic Society would like to know your views on how well the Society is meeting your expectations. Obviously the coronavirus pandemic has curtailed our normal activities though the Society continues to provide talks (online) and is working behind the scenes as usual on key issues.*

*Your answers will help us to assess our effectiveness and priorities. We will also think about any pandemic-related changes needed after the current lockdown ends.*

*A full report on the findings will be made available to members.*

*The survey should take less than 15 minutes to complete.*

*Please return by [date].*

### **1 How did you first learn about the Society?**

- through a talk /debate
- from an OCS leaflet
- via a personal contact
- through the press/ radio/ social media
- other
- can't recall

### **2 Why did you decide to join the Society? Tick up to 3 important factors for you.**

- general interest in Oxford's heritage and future
- specific interest in planning/architecture/buildings
- to learn more about Oxford
- to enjoy the programme of walks, talks and visits
- to become actively involved in shaping the city's future
- to meet like-minded people



**3 Which of the Society's activities have you taken part in during the past 18 months?**

- talks
- debates
- walks and visits
- working groups / committees (see also Q8)
- litter-picking with OxClean
- none of the above

**4 If 'none' please indicate the main reason.**

- times are inconvenient
- activities do not interest me
- venues inconvenient
- other (please specify) .....

**5 Talks are usually held at Madgalen College, Rewley House or the Town Hall, and recently, online. Please indicate your preference.**

- Magdalen College
- Rewley House
- Town Hall
- online
- no preference

**6 Talks normally start at 7.30 – 8pm, weekdays. Would you prefer talks:**

- starting at 7.30 – 8pm
- starting at 6pm
- at weekends
- no preference

**7 How could we improve our programme of walks, talks and visits?**

.....  
.....

**8 Have you been involved in any way in the Executive Committee or any its Working Groups? Tick all that apply.**

- Executive Committee
- Planning Group
- Transport Group
- Programme Group
- Housing Policy Group
- Communications Group
- Oxfordshire Futures Group
- OxClean
- None of the above

*NB:If you would like to know more about our working groups with a view to taking part please contact us at [info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk](mailto:info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk)*

**9 Please indicate your views of *Visions*; tick all that apply.**

- too long
- about right length
- too short
- readable, easy to understand
- too technical
- informative
- not very informative
- I read it cover to cover
- I read it selectively

I read the headlines only

**10 We provide four websites with full details of our work and three Twitter accounts with up to the minute news; please tick all you have visited in the past year.**

main website – [www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk](http://www.oxcivicsoc.org.uk)

Oxfordshire Futures website – [www.oxfordfutures.org.uk](http://www.oxfordfutures.org.uk)

OxClean website – [www.oxclean.org.uk](http://www.oxclean.org.uk)

Walks in Oxford website - [www.oxfordwalks.org.uk](http://www.oxfordwalks.org.uk)

Twitter account - twitter.com/oxcivicsoc

OxClean twitter account - twitter.com/ox\_clean

Oxfordshire Futures twitter account – twitter.com/oxfordshirefutures

none of the above

**11 Which of our communications do you most value? Tick one or two**

e-bulletins

Visions

websites

twitter feeds

personal contact at talks, visits, walks

all / most of them

**12 Are you a regular user of any of the following?**

Instagram

Twitter

Facebook

Next Door

none of the above

**13 Please tell us how we could improve our communication with you.**

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.....

**14 The Society is currently engaged in the following major issues among others.**

**How well have we informed you about them?** Please rate your answers 1 – 3;

1 is 'not well informed', 2 is 'adequate' and 3 'well informed'.

	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
Environmental issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Zero Emission Zone plans /Climate change	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Conservation Areas (protection)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
City centre strategy/ management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
County Council Local Transport & Connectivity Plan 5	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Local Plans (City and Districts)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Oxfordshire 2050 Plan (formerly the Joint Spatial Plan)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tourism management	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Oxford – Cambridge Expressway	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Green Belt policy/ environmental issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Individual planning applications (comments and objections)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Affordable housing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**15 Are there other civic issues that you think the Society should seek to influence?**

.....  
.....

**16 Are you a member of:**

- a local residents' association
- a neighbourhood group
- neither

**17 Please tell us something about yourself. How long have you been a member of the Society?**

- under 2 years
- 2 – 5 years
- 6 – 15 years
- 16 or more years

**18 Please tell us about your age group.**

- under 40
- 40 – 65
- over 65

**19 What is your employment status?**

- Full time
- Part time
- Retired
- Other (please specify) .....

**20 If you could change one thing about Oxford, what would it be?**

.....  
.....

**21 If you could change one thing about Oxford Civic Society, what would it be?**

.....  
.....

*Thank you very much for your help.*