

The Society in the time of coronavirus

Annual Review 2020



Magdalen Bridge in March 2020 as we have never seen it before. The country was put under a first lockdown on 23 March to slow the spread of the coronavirus. The University of Oxford came to world attention for its work on a vaccine which was approved for use in the UK in December.

As we vaccinate our way out of the crisis there is hope of a return to something like normality in 2021. But some things have changed beyond repair – for example the retail sector – and we now need to plan for a very different future.

Photo courtesy of Peter West

2020 did not turn out as planned. By anybody.

The year was defined by the Covid-19 pandemic which led to worldwide economic and social disruption. Our Oxford experience was no different. Although parts of our local economy are robust and weathered the year well, other parts of the economy suffered greatly, leading to hardship for many households – and a heart-warming response from many individuals and communities. But other, major challenges such as climate change did not go away. The City and County Councils continued to lay out ambitious plans and we continued to contribute to their thinking. Despite all the disruption, 2020 saw **'business as usual'** for much of our work as we transferred our meetings and discussions to online platforms. Only our programme of walks and visits had to be cancelled.

We continued to implement our four aims, responding vigorously to the special demands of the year.

Aim 1 - Influence the development of Oxford as a city where people enjoy living, working and visiting

The **Oxfordshire Futures Group** (OFG) monitored progress with the Economic Recovery Plan for Oxfordshire, developed in response to the pandemic. The Plan includes measures to support Oxfordshire's economy through a three-year period of recovery.

Key points identified for us include: continuing support to the Oxford **city centre** recovery, including participation in the City Centre Task

Force, support to the **City Centre Vision and Action Plan** and re-thinking **tourism management**. Our approach anticipates that the recovery will be a green recovery.

The OFG studied earlier attempts at **devolution in Oxfordshire** and held discussions with local politicians on experience elsewhere. This work is to ensure our readiness for an informed debate on devolution when the delayed White Paper is issued in 2021.

As will be seen in the reports of the Planning, Housing and Transport Groups, we maintained our focus on **strategic spatial, infrastructure and transport planning** in the Oxford city-region (and in the Oxford – Cambridge Arc) and on key development sites within the city. These included the **City Centre West End**, where we continued to call for a Master Plan of the area. At both strategic and local levels, we responded to national and local consultations.

The **Planning Group** continued to monitor and comment on key planning applications and commented on an increasing number of potential applications, influencing designs before formal applications were made.

The **Transport Group** tackled transport challenges at both strategic and local levels, including joining the lively debate on Connect Oxford and the introduction of bus gates and workplace parking levies, low traffic neighbourhoods and the introduction of a Zero (or should it be Low) Emissions Zone.



New student accommodation on St Cross Road

Photo courtesy of Clive Booth

Aim 2 - Inform members and others about Oxford ... with constructive ... proposals for its further improvement

The **Communications Group** and **Programme Group** are the main actors here. Although our programme of walks and visits had to be abandoned, our **programme of talks** expanded and reached more members and others than before the pandemic. Many of our talks are now online on YouTube, often attracting large audiences.

We also managed the production of two '**OCS Lockdown films**' which took advantage of the quiet streets to explore aspects of the city difficult to see otherwise. The Communications Group also undertook a **survey exploring members' views** of the Society at work. This has been immensely useful in planning our future work and we are very grateful to the many members who responded. Meanwhile our **four websites** go from strength to strength.

Aim 3 - Co-operate with Oxford's residents' associations ... to develop ... community-led solutions to shared problems

As yet we do not have a Group which focuses on this but to prepare the way our Vice-Presidents met to explore how best we can meet this aim. In the meantime, we continued to support the **Oxford Strategic Partnership** (as a member of its Steering Group). In 2020, this Partnership focused attention on the need to improve inclusivity in our region and published a summary report *Oxford Inclusive Economy Initiative*.

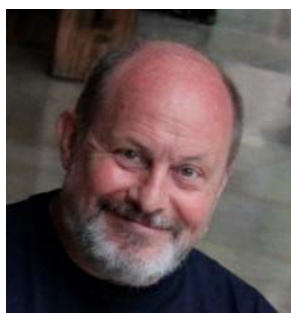
OxClean remains our greatest community project and we held a very successful Spring Clean before the first lockdown.

Aim 4 - Learn from other cities ... where creative strategies might be helpful to Oxford

The OFG, the Planning, Transport and Housing Groups all make reference to European and worldwide relevant experience. In addition, we learn from elsewhere in the UK, helped by our work with five other civic societies to investigate how growth is managed in 12 historic towns around the country.

I would like to pay tribute to all our activists who have helped keep up our work in very challenging times and to thank all our members for their continuing loyalty. We look forward to seeing you in 2021!

Ian Green, Chairman



The Planning Group met online to keep up its usual oversight of all planning applications and responded to some major consultations. Gillian Coates reports on a busy year's work.

The team's lively meetings provide the opportunity for us to drill down into issues that are of vital importance to the city's future. We examined **492 planning applications** and submitted comments on 167 of them, about 10% of the total submitted to the Council. We also had many **pre-application** meetings with developers, as the march to provide new housing gathers pace, and established regular meetings with the two universities.

The **Green Belt** is under pressure and we worked hard to ensure that planned developments are appropriate. Major developments on the north and north east side of the city all suffer from one or more problems ranging from inadequate transport connectivity to lack of community infrastructure, not to mention the prevailing problem of 'affordable' housing in Oxford. In a recent article in *Visions* (March 2021) Peter Thompson, a member of the Group, writes, "first time buyers would need an income of £70,000 to get on the housing ladder". This is an unachievable ambition for many of our key workers such as the very NHS staff we have lauded throughout this pandemic.

Within the city we offered advice on the redevelopment of the **Clive Booth Village** (Oxford Brookes) and the **Clarendon Centre**. It is encouraging that our views are well received by the developers and have influenced their thoughts and, frequently, their designs.

We spent considerable time assessing two **Government White Papers** - *Planning for the Future* and *Permitted Development Rights*. In both cases we submitted our objections to these ill-conceived proposals that do nothing to support our communities. We held an online discussion with members on the former of these documents.

As the new Group Co-ordinator, I am especially grateful to Jim Girling who has taken on the role of Pre-Consultation Meeting Co-ordinator and also to the other members who contribute so much to our activities and outcomes. We are a Group of 13 but we are by no means unlucky!

Taking our message to the streets

The lockdown restrictions limited some of our activities but also gave us new opportunities.

The Communications team runs four **websites**, publishes the newsletter, *Visions*, and other documents, liaises with **the press** and looks for opportunities to **promote** the Society's work.

Covid restrictions led to silent streets in spring and allowed us to do two 'Lockdown **films**', both on our main website.

In December we took advantage of an empty **shop unit on High Street** to mount a display of the Society's work. This should help to raise our profile among people who live and work here. We also had good **press coverage** this year.



Transport: the need for an overall plan

Andrew Pritchard reports on the Transport Group's active year.

Covid-19 brought government funds for local councils through the **Emergency Active Travel Fund**. Oxfordshire received much of the funds asked for, but we have not found that they made **cycling** much easier and indeed in at least one case, more dangerous.

Part of the programme envisaged installation of **bus gates** to limit traffic through central Oxford and we commented that data needed to be collected before and after their installation to assess their value. Additional bus gates were proposed by other organisations and the implementation has been delayed.

We commented on a consultation on a pilot 'Red' **Zero Emission Zone**, comprising a small number of streets in central Oxford that do not have through traffic, together with a much wider 'Green' Zone, which would effectively stop all but electric vehicles, and others with permits, from driving through the centre. We have urged that measures such as the ZEZ, bus gates and others such as Low Traffic Neighbourhoods need to be considered as part of an **overall transport plan** for central Oxford and the surrounding area, not on a one-by-one basis.

We were pleased to meet the County's traffic modelling team, but were not convinced that their detailed work takes sufficient account of human behaviour factors.

Other significant events included withdrawal of the Oxford Bus Company's trial **Pick-Me-Up service** due to poor load factors during much of the day. Works to improve the **Botley Road** started and are proceeding slowly. We have still not seen the full version of the **Oxford Rail Corridor Study Phase 1** but are looking forward to meeting Network Rail representatives shortly.

The virus seems to have increased the number of bodies concerned with transport matters who often produce long reports by consultants – one member of the Group counted 34! We are trying to work out where we should concentrate our lobbying efforts.



Metro trains can be designed to take bikes

Photo courtesy of Maryland Dept of Transportation

Oxfordshire Futures

The Oxfordshire Futures Group has contributed to the strategic planning of the city region, as Ian Green reports.

No matter what the trajectory of the Oxfordshire economic recovery, we must ensure that economic activities, homes and growth are well planned. With this in mind the Group focused attention on progress with the **Oxfordshire 2050 joint spatial plan** and associated planning for industry, transport and infrastructure.

Working with the Transport Group our focus has been on establishing the concept of an **Oxford metro** in central Oxfordshire – a concept which could form a practical basis for the spatial plan. Use of the metro concept depends very much on its inclusion as a basic premise in the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan being prepared by the County Council during the course of the year.

We also looked at the methods being used and the scope of the **Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy (OXIS)** update. The original OXIS included: transport; education; health and adult social care; emergency services; utilities; waste; flood defences and drainage; green infrastructure. The update is intended to refresh and re-prioritise infrastructure schemes to 2040.

We are particularly interested in how infrastructure investment will be prioritised. Clear assessments of other policies and strategies will be vital, not least their spatial implications.

There is also the tricky problem of assessing a realistic **post-pandemic recovery rate** (and sector composition) for the Oxfordshire economy. Bringing the components together will

be a very difficult task.

Currently there are no clear signs that the components of Oxfordshire's development planning are being sufficiently integrated with the prioritisation of infrastructure investment. This has been the focus of the Group's lobbying throughout the year.

Talks: reaching new audiences

Ian Salusbury reports on how the pandemic changed the nature of our members' programme.

The restrictions forced the cancellation of the 11 walks and visits we had planned. After three traditional lecture room-based talks in the first three months, we shifted to giving talks online, via Zoom.

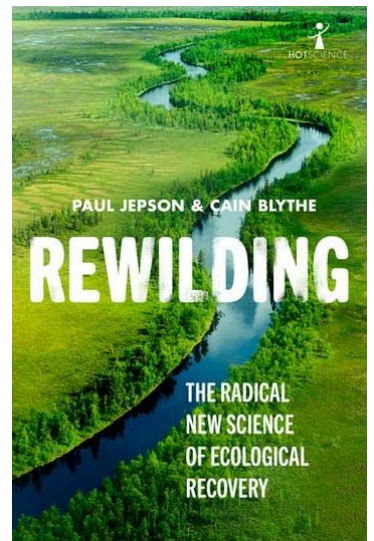
Our first such talk took place in May and we held six in total on a wide range of subjects from zero-carbon homes to liveable streets and the story of local politician, Olive Gibbs. Growing familiarity with the technology meant that our final talk of 2020 on the history of Oxfordshire's railways was a 'sell-out' having exceeded our 100-user Zoom licence (since increased!).

Although we have missed assembling for normal talks, our enforced move online provided new opportunities. It opened up new audiences, attracting attendees from as far away as the USA. And it enabled us to provide access to talks for those not able to attend

on the day: the recording of each talk is now accessible via our YouTube channel, with the most popular talk (on rewilding) already having achieved over 600 views.

We look forward to the possibility of resuming in-person talks in 2021 and to re-scheduling our various visits.

But we are also faced with the challenge of whether we can maintain some access for our new online audience.



Money matters in 2020

2020 was a year like no other, as Richard Dodd, Honorary Treasurer, explains.

The impact of coronavirus and a £20,000 legacy (which is ring-fenced) resulted in an exceptional set of figures for 2020. Visits and walks were curtailed early in the year while the programme of talks was run online. The AGM was also held online and the annual President's Reception regrettably had to be cancelled. Opportunities for project work were limited during the year, significantly reducing our expenditure.

It is anticipated that the legacy will be spent in 2021 to encourage walking in Oxford, in accordance with the donor's wishes.

As a result **expenditure** was significantly lower than in 2019 while membership **income** was broadly similar resulting in a net surplus of £1,146, excluding the legacy. Our financial support for both **OxClean** and **Blue Plaques** continued, but at reduced levels commensurate with activities they were able to undertake.

In order to ensure that our range of activities can be sustained, we increased the membership fees payable in 2021. **We would like to thank all members for their continued support.**

Income	Expenditure
Income - £31,247 (£17,525 in 2019)	Expenditure - £10,102 (£22,411 in 2019)
- Subscriptions £8,527	- Newsletter £3,694
- Walks/visits £288	- Walks/visits £184
- Gift Aid £1,149	- Talks £2,219
- Room booking refunds £1,000	- Website £710
- Legacy £20,000	- OxClean £216
- Other £283	- Blue Plaques £377
Assets £51,480 (£30,334 in 2019)	- Donations and subs £525
	- Special Projects £1,113
	- Other £1,064
Surplus £21,146* (Deficit of £4,886 in 2019)	
*including legacy	

Assets and reserves policy

In order to better protect our financial assets the majority of the funds were transferred from the CCLA Interest Fund for Charities to our Lloyds Bank current account early in the year. Our policy is to hold in reserve sufficient to cover our liabilities and enable us to take professional advice on planning and other issues as needs arise.

The full accounts are on the website, or please contact me for a copy: treasurer@oxcivicsoc.org.uk

How the public benefit

As a charity we are obliged to show how the public benefit from our work. We hope that this review has given an insight into all the activities and campaigns that are improving the quality of life for people who live and work in Oxford.

OCS is a registered charity number 1116739

Housing policy

Peter Thompson writes about the Group's work.

The lack of **affordable housing** is at the top of the list of criticisms levelled at Oxford. Apart from the serious social consequences there are significant economic effects, such as difficulty in recruitment to public-sector posts and unsustainable levels of commuting from the more-affordable hinterland. Issues of city housing are thus inextricably entwined with those of development planning, transport, public health and national policy.

The Group has disseminated relevant information and engaged with consultation exercises when opportunities have arisen. The most significant of these was the **Government White Paper Planning for the Future** which set out to radically transform the planning system, ostensibly to facilitate the delivery of 300,000 new homes per year. The vague rhetoric and absence of practical detail precluded general enthusiasm and engendered considerable hostility.

To widen the debate on housing we joined a newly-formed group, the **Oxfordshire Land and Housing Network**, coordinated by the Oxford Community Land Trust. We need more such allies to get housing justice in our city.

OxClean triumph!

The annual Spring Clean was held in early March, just before the country was placed in lockdown.

With over 90 groups and more than 1,000 people taking part, our 13th annual Spring Clean was an astonishing success. The volunteers came from many different groups and did a marvellous job of litter picking in streets, parks, allotments, verges ...

Plans for the rest of the year had to be put on hold owing to the Covid restrictions but we hope to pick up where we left off in 2021.



About us / contacts

OCS is a society for people who care about Oxford, want to enjoy it more fully and help shape its future.

Our aim is an ever-improving quality of life in Oxford by working to influence planning, transport, the environment and community issues. New members are always welcome.

We are run by an Executive Committee whose members are elected at the AGM. See the website for the full list of members.

President: Sir Clive Booth

Chairman: Ian Green

Vice Chair: Gillian Coates

Hon Secretary: Vernon Porter

Hon Treasurer: Richard Dodd

Oxford Civic Society

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