

Striving for a better city region

Annual Review 2023



OXFORD
CIVIC SOCIETY
AN INDEPENDENT VOICE FOR OXFORD
SINCE 1969

Our aims

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

Aim 2: Engage members and others about the Oxford city-region... with constructive ... proposals for its further improvement.

Aim 3: Co-operate with residents associations and other civic societies ... to develop community-led solutions to shared problems, including engaging with our diverse communities.

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

Blue plaques

We are proud to support the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board which this year placed six new plaques celebrating seven extraordinary people. Read more in the March 2024 issue of Visions.



Of communities and strategies

Our Chairman, Ian Green, sums up the year

Our Society continued to be dedicated to the improvement of Oxford as a wonderful city in which to live, work, study and relax. Appreciating our past, enjoying the present and pursuing a vision for the future are at the heart of what we have been doing for 54 years and 2023 was no exception.

We continued to influence policymakers in the development of the Oxford city-region. In particular we have drawn attention to the need to pick up where the abandoned Oxfordshire 2050 Plan left off. We offered constructive proposals on ways in which housing and employment growth can be addressed on a countywide basis.

More locally we made progress in ways to co-operate with the city-region's residents associations to identify community-led solutions to shared problems. We suggested alternative approaches to traffic management and to monitoring experimental traffic orders. We also continued to learn from other cities, in both the UK and abroad, where creative strategies can be helpful to our region.

Our 16th annual OxClean Spring Clean in March once again brought us into direct contact with many hundreds of groups and individuals. Their sterling work helped to spread the message that the care of our planet starts in our own neighbourhoods.


Our programme of talks and guided tours was as varied, stimulating and popular as ever, with numbers of attendees starting to return to pre-pandemic levels.

As a voluntary organisation, everything we achieve is down to our membership – individuals, families, corporate members and associated residents' and interest groups. Some 70 very active members work in our technical and other groups to achieve the Society's aims and we owe them a great debt of

gratitude for their commitment and expertise. Inevitably there are changes in personnel over each year and I'd like to make special mention of some.

We were deeply saddened by the death of Tony Joyce, the longest-serving Chairman in the history of the Society, steering us for a decade from 2000 – 2010. Tony steadily reinforced our reputation and influence with local government and many of the institutions which make Oxford what it is. He exerted his influence and leadership by quiet, considered force of argument, persistence and determination.

Sir Clive Booth stood down as our President. We benefited greatly from Clive's six-year presidency which was characterised by his kindness, courtesy, sense of humour, fun, dynamism and determination. One of Clive's most memorable contributions was his leading our 50th anniversary celebrations with three very well-attended public debates in the Town Hall.

 At a Special Meeting in June **Sir Tim Stevenson** was elected to serve as the 7th President of the Society. Tim studied law here at Worcester College and was a barrister before beginning a 25-year career in industry. Appointed Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire in 2008, he retired from this position in 2021. A former chair of governors at Oxford Brookes University, Tim has also been a member of the council of Modern Art Oxford and President of Oxfordshire Community Foundation* since 2008. We welcome Tim and look forward to working with him.

My thanks go to all the members of the Society. Your continuing support is invaluable.

Ian Green

*The Oxfordshire Community Foundation distributes between £1 million and £2 million in grants every year to charities across Oxfordshire.



Sir Clive Booth



Sir Tim Stevenson



The Oxpens site is one of the biggest developments in the city. It will provide homes (half of them 'affordable'), jobs and public open space, some of it next to the river. We have been involved in all stages of the consultation.



Major developments

We remained engaged with the major developers in the city facilitated by pre-application meetings. We gave our views on Oxpens, the Ellison Institute, Beaver House, Blackbird Leys and we intend to make further progress with Redevco concerning the exciting development at Templars Square.

Where are the new homes?

Gillian Coates sums up the Planning Group's work

Reflecting on 2023, what stands out is the tension between the economic well-being of the city and an urgent need to provide affordable homes for workers. Numerous major developments are chasing the opportunities to build or convert properties for research institutions and innovation centres. Buildings or sites that might have potential for living accommodation (Odeon, Debenhams, Oxenford) are going over to offices, labs, hotels and student accommodation. This is a trend that must be seriously addressed – more jobs in the city will require more workers to fill them. Increasing the number of people who live and work in the city will reduce traffic, benefit small local businesses and would sit well with the Council's transport plans. It's not rocket science.

We noted a modest 4.5% increase in applications submitted in 2023: a total of 1139 (compared to 1087 in 2022). We scrutinised a significant number of these and submitted comments on 90, compared to 56 in 2022. Approvals increased by 2.5%, 981 in 2023 (940 in 2022) and refusals increased by 19%, (168 compared to 141 in 2022).

We are curious to assess our influence and impact on the outcomes of planning applications and in 2024 we will begin to gather the relevant data. This should provide some interesting insights and perhaps confirm the vital role we play in the planning of the city.

During the year we have developed a close working relationship with the new Head of Planning and members will recall his candid talk at Rewley House.

We were sad to record the death of Tony Joyce, a long-serving member of the Planning Group who, even when his health was deteriorating, could always be relied upon to make considered, relevant and frequently humorous contributions to our meetings.

Transport woes and opportunities

Andrew Pritchard reports on the Transport Group

The rebuilding of the Botley Road railway bridge and the road beneath it has had wide impacts on Oxford's traffic. In regular meetings with Network Rail, their representatives have often been unwilling or unable to discuss key aspects of the work, including timescales for the various stages of the project.

We strongly pressed the developers of the Oxpens site for a direct road to Osney Mead to link the two planned developments with the city, but so far without success. We do not believe that the proposed (and funded) pedestrian/cycle bridge is a substitute.

We took part in an LEP meeting on tourism and met Experience Oxfordshire to press for better management of tourist coaches, but with no success so far.

Coventry City Council is working with local partners on a novel Very Light Rail (VLR) system. It promises to reduce the cost and disruption of installing track. After discussions with them, we began exploring how it might be applied in the Oxford city region.

We joined *Oxfordshire for Buses* (O4B), a new organisation feeding information into the bus service improvement plan. With a wider view of bus services we hope to put forward issues from our members.

In touch and in the public eye

Thelma Martin on the Communications Team

We continued to keep our aims, initiatives and events in the public eye through our four websites and X account (formerly Twitter) and to inform members through our newsletter, *Visions*. Success in placing letters and articles in the press was patchy, but in celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Park and Ride the major role played by our Society was acknowledged.



The introduction of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, mainly in East Oxford, was the hot topic in the media. We regretted that much of the discussion was one-sided and some of it ill-informed.



We moved the High Street window display to a shopfront in Broad Street, where footfall is greater. The Oxclean and Christmas windows in particular attracted favourable comment.

The infrastructure we need to plan includes everything from rail lines to cycle paths, water supplies to homes, factories, offices, drainage, flood prevention ... A piecemeal approach to planning cannot be effective.



OxClean Spring Clean works so well because it's fun! This group bagged a huge haul on Horspath Road.

Taking a broader look

Ian Green on the Oxfordshire Futures Group

We have drawn attention to the need to pick up where the abandoned Oxfordshire 2050 Plan left off. We suggested that the proposed Future Oxfordshire Partnership Planning Advisory Group should focus on re-establishment of countywide spatial development planning – providing a foundation for good quality long-term growth in the county to 2050 and beyond. The PAG could consider how a spatial development plan oriented to 2050 and beyond would enable integrated infrastructure planning linked to the distribution of employment and housing growth across the county. This, surely, is highly compelling.

We also suggest that a high-powered group of economic, social and environmental development planners drawn from local universities, business and others could support the PAG. Our own Oxfordshire Futures Group offered to meet the Planning Advisory Group to discuss this further.

More than a spring clean

Rosanne Bostock reports on OxClean's work

Our 16th annual Spring Clean ran over two week-ends again and 78 groups and 24 individuals signed up to do a two-hour litter-pick. Our thanks to everyone who helped to run the event or took part.

Over the years we have seen an improvement as we progressively pick up less litter, but there are still some 'litter hotspots' which we have to tackle every year.

Our Headington depot holds back a number of litter pickers, hi-vis vests and sacks so that people can register for 'anytime litter-picks'.

We continued to support litter-picking through the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, and encouraged schools to appoint dedicated teachers to organise it.

Towards a more equal city

Gillian Coates on the Community Impact Group

We continued our work with the Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership. Members of the Society's Impact Group participated in the work of three of the working groups and a further member sat on the Steering Group. Much work has been undertaken by OIEP, primarily focusing on the Charter. This is designed to encourage organisations across Oxfordshire to sign up to a new Charter to make the county's economy fairer for everyone. We see this initiative as an opportunity for the Society to engage with residents' associations and community groups, to reach those parts of the city where we have no representation and few members.

Enjoying our city: talks and tours

Ian Salusbury sums up for the Programme Group

Our programme covered a broad range of topics, but we aimed to provide more talks aligned with the Society's key areas of interest. So we featured talks on the planning process (David Butler, head of planning at Oxford City Council), management of the city centre (Diana Fawcett, also of the City Council) and transport issues (Nigel Fulford, on railway developments).

We arranged 11 talks and 11 visits during 2023. Turn-outs for the talks in early 2023 were still depressed by the after-effects of the pandemic but returned to more normal levels by the year end. Total attendance at the talks was around 450. We strove to appeal to as many as possible by varying our start times for talks and by holding some visits on weekends.

Almost all of our visits sold out. We offered a wide choice of venues ranging from Headington Hill Hall to Oxfam's warehouse in Bicester, from Rousham House and gardens to the libraries of St John's College.

The city of Oxford is the second most unequal place in the UK in terms of income, housing affordability and life expectancy. Education attainment is below average. We regard this as unacceptable and are working with OIEP to create a more equal city.



A visit to Oxford Brookes' Clive Booth Student Village which is being completely rebuilt.



With thanks to our members and others for the use of their photos: Roger Grosvenor, Stephanie Jenkins and Ian Salusbury

Income - £16,797
(£18,679 in 2022)

- Subscriptions/donations
£11,174
- Visits/walks £2,031
- Gift Aid £1,639
- Investment income £1,954

Expenditure - £12,700
(£11,542 in 2022)

- Newsletter £3,633
- Visits/walks £728
- Talks £3,015
- IT/website £2,280
- OxClean £704
- Blue Plaques £585
- Donations and subscriptions
£25
- Projects £793
- Other £ 937

Surplus £ 4,097
(£7,137 in 2022)

General Fund Assets
£47,532
(£43,435 in 2022)

Restricted Fund Assets
£17,500
(£17,500 in 2022)

Reserves policy

We hold sufficient to cover our liabilities and to enable us to take professional advice on planning or other issues as needs arise.

Public benefit

We hope this review has given an insight into how our work is helping to improve Oxford for everyone.

Registered charity no. 1116739

Our finances in 2023

Our Hon Treasurer, Richard Dodd, sums up

A slight drop in membership subscriptions in 2023 was offset by the significantly higher interest earned from reserves held in our CCLA account.

We ran an extensive programme of visits, walks and talks throughout 2023. Expenditure on the free of charge talks was similar to 2022, resulting in a net cost of the overall programme of £1,712.

Expenditure of the remaining £17,500 of the legacy received in 2020 awaits the conclusion of local authority consultation processes on the proposed siting of benches. A further legacy of £8,000 is expected to be received in 2024.

We held back our membership of Civic Voice while seeking reassurances on their financial affairs. Consideration will be given to renewing our membership in 2024.

Recurring items of expenditure, including our support for Blue Plaques, OxClean and our administrative costs, were broadly in line with 2022, resulting in a year end surplus of £4,097.

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

We'd like to thank all our members for their loyal support.

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

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

President: Sir Tim Stevenson (from June 2023)

Chairman: Ian Green Vice Chair: Gillian Coates

Hon Secretary: Vernon Porter Hon Treasurer: Richard Dodd

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