Oxfordshire
Community
Foundation

Journal of a Pandemic Year

"Another plague year would reconcile all these differences; a close conversing with death would scum off the gall from our tempers, remove the animosities among us, and bring us to see with differing eyes than those which we looked on things with before."

Daniel Defoe, *Journal of the Plague Year*

Introduction

March 2020 was a confusing time when people across the world had to adapt rapidly to the frightening prospect of a global pandemic.

At OCF we were humbled to see communities responding immediately, from the most local street level in neighbourhoods across Oxfordshire, to a UK-wide appeal from the National Emergencies Trust (NET) that has distributed over £68 million via our national network of community foundations.

Thanks to the trust placed in us by our donors – in particular The Indigo Trust locally, and the NET, Co-Op and DCMS nationally – OCF was in a strong position to rapidly open the Coronavirus Community Resilience Fund, which has been the bedrock of our activity since then.

This report covers OCF's pandemic response from March 2020 to April 2021.*

Our first priority was to get money to the grassroots fast. We dubbed this phase **"Respond Better"**, and it was enabled by phenomenal community organising by the thousands of ordinary people who stepped up to volunteer. It would also not have been possible without the dedicated, expert, adaptable local charitable sector, made up of hundreds of small charitable organisations with which we already had strong networks.

However, very early on in the crisis, OCF started to think about long-term recovery and legacy, and committed to a series of more substantial grant investments to help communities **Recover Stronger**. These priority projects continue, and we hope that, alongside our other long-term initiatives, they will form the foundations for communities to build back better.

The effects of the pandemic are emphatically not over. Here we look at what we have learnt during this pandemic year, and reflect on our priorities moving forward, as we understand more about the fallout of COVID-19.

Adrian Sell, Chief Executive
adrian@oxfordshire.org

"It was crucial for us to give to OCF, within the first month of the crisis, because speed was going to be critical. We had total confidence that by giving the money to OCF, it would go where it was most needed."

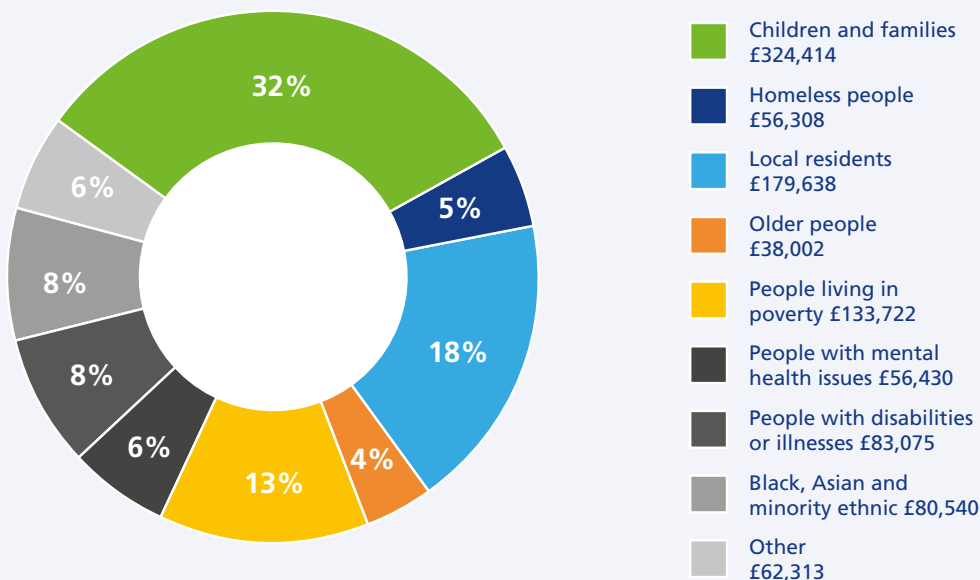Fran and Will Perrin, The Indigo Trust

£1,014,469
in COVID-19 grants distributed between March 2020 and April 2021

277
COVID-19 grants awarded so far, reaching around 138,000 beneficiaries

*Other grant-making during this time, such as the Step Change Fund and other donor-advised funds, is covered in our Annual Summary, and will also be explored in our wider annual impact report later in 2021.

Grant amounts by beneficiary type

- **Children and families** £324,414
- **Homeless people** £56,308
- **Local residents** £179,638
- **Older people** £38,002
- **People living in poverty** £133,722
- **People with mental health issues** £56,430
- **People with disabilities or illnesses** £83,075
- **Black, Asian and minority ethnic** £80,540
- **Other** £62,313

Chart values: 32%, 5%, 18%, 4%, 13%, 6%, 8%, 8%, 6%

Grant applicants select a primary beneficiary - the type they consider most important for their work. These categories may overlap but each grant has just one primary beneficiary type.

What we have funded

60 projects to distribute food and supplies

55 grants to move services online

35 organisations needing funding for core costs just to keep going

31 projects to support vulnerable families

30 grants that supported new volunteers

19 grants to supply PPE or make activities COVID secure

16 mental health or domestic abuse counselling projects

15 initiatives to get disadvantaged people online

12 projects promoting physical activity

Some grants had more than one outcome.

Banbury Mosque food distribution

Active Oxfordshire Bikes for Key Workers

Be Free YC laptop delivery to young carers

Responding better

OCF's initial response was to focus on some key priorities:

- **Food distribution** was urgently needed because people were vulnerable or shielding, and there were food shortages because of panic buying. Our grants supported low-income families, many of which found themselves seeking out this support for the first time as they were affected by redundancy and furlough.

- **Charity capacity** became an immediate and pressing need at a time when fundraising events had to be cancelled and income dried up overnight. Our grants helped organisations to move vital services online, or simply funded core costs to ensure that critical local organisations could continue to provide advice and support when it was most needed.

In the first two weeks of the pandemic OCF pumped out over £100,000 in **emergency grants** to groups at the frontline of the crisis. Many projects funded were new initiatives that had sprung up in response to the pandemic – armies of volunteers supporting people in their neighbourhoods. It was therefore important to offer funding to new organisations, some with little track record – placing trust in local communities to understand the needs and respond in their own way, with few strings attached.

OCF's **strategic initiatives** also adapted to the immediate needs of their beneficiaries – and the pandemic only served to justify the importance we had placed on these partnerships. For example:

- **Oxfordshire Homeless Movement** supported the Everyone In initiative, coordinating groups of volunteers and fielding requests for resources to equip newly furnished rooms in emergency accommodation.

- **Age Friendly Banbury** was a key stakeholder in a new 'Connect' project helping older, isolated people to get online during lockdown and beyond.

- **Growing Minds** adapted its early years offering to bring phone and doorstep support to disadvantaged families isolated at home during lockdown.

> *"One family wrote to us sharing: 'You have saved me so much. Things have been so difficult for me and my family since my hours were reduced to six a week. Just to see the happiness again on my kid's face. You are angels.'"*
> OX4 Free Food Crew

> *"What OCF's grant enabled us to do was to stop worrying about money and think 'okay, what is the immediate community need?'"*
> Sara Fernandez, Oxford Hub

COVID-19 timeline

March
- First UK deaths; WHO identifies COVID-19 as a global pandemic
- National Emergencies Trust Coronavirus Appeal launched
- OCF launches the Community Resilience Fund (CRF)
- Public spaces closed and furlough scheme announced
- Lockdown 1 announced, including school closures
- Government announces 'Everyone In' directive to bring rough sleepers inside

April
- Prime Minister Boris Johnson admitted to intensive care
- OCF makes £200k in grants in first month of CRF
- Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine trials underway, with an OCF staff member taking part!

As the pandemic progressed, we started to see some major themes emerging:

Health

Aside from the clear public health crisis of the pandemic itself, much of the work we funded throughout the year dealt with the knock-on effects of lockdown. It helped people of all ages cope with mental health problems, and the isolation of living with a disability or existing serious illness; and it brought to safety women experiencing increased domestic violence.

"The grant helped us to safely see many complex at-risk young people, who were struggling with suicidal thoughts to crippling anxiety at the uncertainty of life changing as we all knew it."
Abingdon Bridge

Total grant amounts by theme

- 11%
- 41%
- 32%
- 16%
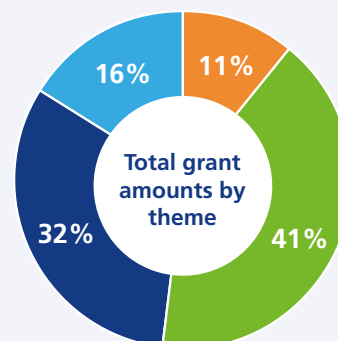
- Stronger communities £106,574
- Economy £416,984
- Health £327,586
- Education £163,324

Economy

The effect of restrictions and lockdowns on employment and financial wellbeing was sudden and for some catastrophic. As well as keeping people stocked with basic food and provisions, our funding prevented homelessness via debt and benefits advice; ensured continued employment for people working for social enterprises; and provided wrap-around support for people who had been brought in from the streets as part of the Everyone In initiative.

"The team were able to check in with vulnerable local people as they came for food, monitoring and supporting their wellbeing, and signposting them to specialist services as relevant."
Aldates Community Transformation Initiatives

Education

School closures felt disastrous for anyone with children, but some families were left completely unequipped to home-school, in terms of space, equipment or literacy levels. Our funding helped children from low-income families who risked falling behind, providing everything from laptops, to tailored doorstep support, to access to sport and the arts.

"Our letter writing project meant volunteers could keep in touch with the children they had been supporting. It revitalised the art of letter writing and children who received their very own letters felt very special, and learned how to write in return."
Assisted Reading for Children (ARCh)

May
- UK death toll becomes the highest in Europe and second highest in the world
- Final clap for carers

June
- Schools start to reopen and lockdown 1 starts to ease
- Runnymede Trust conducts research suggesting that BME groups are at greater COVID risk due to socio-economic factors
- OCF closes Community Resilience Fund for the first time since March

July
- Coronavirus restrictions eased as hospitality industry opens up
- OCF awards three major Recover Stronger grants

In the summer of 2020, we closed our more responsive emergency grants to ensure that we could continue to support the local charitable sector in tackling the longer-term fall-out of the virus, and be prepared for a second wave.
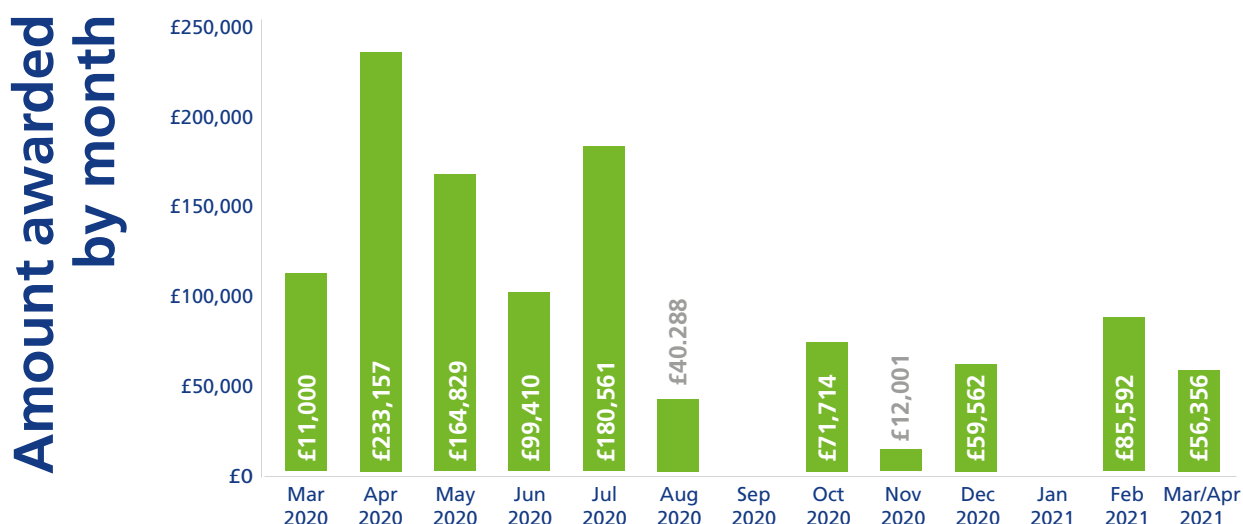
This proved to be astute, and along with further backing from our national and local funders, enabled us to offer support during the second wave. As lockdown 3 began in early 2021, funding focused on providing support to a range of communities struggling with the continued impact of the pandemic, lockdown and associated educational, social and economic challenges.

> *"K has Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and sadly it has had a huge impact on her mental health and her outlook on life. But then she found CTC and has blossomed. K has joined the vast majority of online sessions, building confidence and developing a strong voice."*
> Cherwell Theatre Company

> *"The child now has a reasonably sized screen to spend her school day actively taking part in school lessons without having to share the screen with her sisters. It also meant that they were able to keep in contact with their friends and ease the isolation of being a young carer at home 24/7 with the person they care for."*
> Be Free Young Carers

Amount awarded by month

Month	Amount
Mar 2020	£11,000
Apr 2020	£233,157
May 2020	£164,829
Jun 2020	£99,410
Jul 2020	£180,561
Aug 2020	£40,288
Sep 2020	
Oct 2020	£71,714
Nov 2020	£12,001
Dec 2020	£59,562
Jan 2021	
Feb 2021	£85,592
Mar/Apr 2021	£56,356

> ℹ **A full list of COVID-19 grants made can be found at www.oxfordshire.org/coronavirus**

August
- Eat out to help out scheme introduced
- OHM partners collaborate to provide 124 rooms of interim housing for former rough sleepers
- OCF's COVID-19 small grants open

September
- 'Rule of six' introduced
- Total OCF COVID grants reach £585k
- Zoom share price up 611% from the beginning of the year
- OCF publishes research suggesting that nearly 10,000 school pupils in the county cannot get online

October
- Local tiers system introduced
- Lockdown 2 announced, but schools kept open
- OCF awards £58k in small COVID recovery grants

Recovering stronger

Early on in the pandemic, OCF's Board was keen to start using the funds with which we had been entrusted to support communities' recovery from COVID-19.

This resulted in three large-scale, strategic grants being made in July 2020 with the objective of building a strong legacy from the response so far. This funding sought to ensure that alongside immediate relief, OCF was leading the way in generating longer-term change to the community sector, by proactively supporting innovation and collaboration.

SOFEA's Community Larders were never more needed than during lockdown. The larders are food membership schemes focused on areas of deprivation, allowing people to collect a week's worth of shopping at a fraction of the price, using supermarket surplus. At the start of the pandemic SOFEA rapidly implemented 23 new emergency larders distributing free food, and with the support of OCF's £50,000 grant they are now rolling out the full membership scheme in these locations, with a view to expanding to 50 larders across the county. This will mean the support for low-income families is sustainable, and will come with wrap-around benefits such as a stay and play, cookery lessons, benefits advice and referrals.

"Since the new year, we have continued to grow membership by 2.0% each week (an average of 16 new members each week). The total provision amounts to around 11 tonnes of food each week."
James Plunket, SOFEA

Oxford Hub kicked off their Oxford Together volunteering initiative in the city two weeks before the first lockdown. A system of street champions was established, connecting up mutual aid initiatives, doorstep supplies and a phone befriending service; this has since fielded over 10,000 requests for support and mobilised over 1,200 volunteers. Using an OCF grant of £44,700, they have consolidated their Phone Links programme – onboarding new volunteers and enabling over 200 friendships. They are also developing the digital matching system, to last beyond the pandemic as a city-wide good neighbour scheme.

"Across the city, action of all kinds was springing up and partnerships forming. We are proud to be part of this wider ecosystem, all contributing different parts of the jigsaw to build a better Oxford."
Sara Fernandez, Oxford Hub

Asylum Welcome has been working with asylum seekers and refugees from Eritrea, Syria, Sudan, Iran and many other countries before and during the pandemic. While COVID has hit all of us in different ways, it has hit those already most marginalised and with the weakest family and community support structures hardest. Their project, seeded with a £50,000 grant from OCF, is focused on building up the informal support groups that already exist within migrant communities, but that struggle from a chronic lack of capacity. The charity has so far supported over 20 of these emerging groups to enhance their capability through funding, advocacy advice, skills and training, and peer support.

"These community organisations are the real front line on the human front. They give people a chance to meet, fulfil some gaps left in their lives, share, help each other and seek to better themselves."
Mark Goldring, Asylum Welcome

November
- Unemployment in Oxfordshire increases by 2.5 times
- OCF estimates that 76,000 jobs across the county will be at risk after furlough ends
- Oxford/Astra Zeneca vaccine proven to be 75% effective

December
- Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine approved by UK regulator and first vaccines administered
- New restrictions introduced in the South East in response to the Alpha (Kent) variant

January
- Lockdown 3 announced and schools closed
- New round of funding in response to lockdown 3 is overwhelmed with applications
- UK death toll exceeds 100,000 milestone

Further recovery and legacy investments were later made for three key projects:

BAME infrastructure group

A growing body of data shows that people who are Black, Asian and from minority ethnic (BAME) groups have been disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. BAME-led organisations are playing a pivotal role in ensuring that vital emergency funds reach those from these hard-hit communities. OCF has supported a diverse group of Oxfordshire community leaders to apply for funding from UK Community Foundations (matched by OCF and private donors) to establish a formal, proactive forum of representatives from various minority ethnic civil society groups in the county.

Oxfordshire All In (OAI)

OAI is a collective of volunteers who created open platforms and mechanisms to support collaboration and engagement during lockdown 1. Their work brought together individuals, communities, voluntary organisations, public bodies, businesses and partnerships across Oxfordshire, facilitating greater collaboration and preventing duplication. They published COVID-19 resources for anyone wanting to help their community, including a map of both newly formed neighbourhood support groups, and established charities. A grant of £20,000 is enabling them to continue to provide these services as well as ensure their long-term sustainability.

Getting Oxfordshire Online

The pandemic has made it obvious that digital access is now a need not a luxury. Being unable to get online means schoolchildren are disadvantaged, older people are more isolated, and many cannot access essentials such as benefits or appointments. In January, thanks to seed funding from Our Common Good and matched by OCF, we appointed a project manager for our Getting Oxfordshire Online initiative to address lack of access to devices and data, and support people with the training they need.

SOFEA community larders deliveries

Oxford Hub Phone Links service

Asylum Welcome refugee community organisation

February
- Further fundraising push solicits £65k in new donations to OCF's Community Resilience Fund
- UK hits target of 15 million first-dose COVID-19 vaccinations to top four priority groups

March
- Schools reopen
- OCF's £1 million COVID grants milestone reached on the anniversary of the first lockdown
- Rule of six returns

April
- OCF's CEO makes a personal commitment to ensuring diverse voices are heard in the local charity sector
- India added to UK red list as Delta variant spreads and third wave begins…

What now?

The pandemic is a call to action to prioritise community. We have always known that communities have boundless compassion, dedication and competence within the people that make them up. But communities are not just places or people – they are crucial bonds of social connection and shared resolve.

As we realise we are in the grips of a third wave, with so much uncertainty about the immediate and long-term future, we firmly believe that we must keep our heads. The following priorities will stand us in good stead for the challenges to follow:
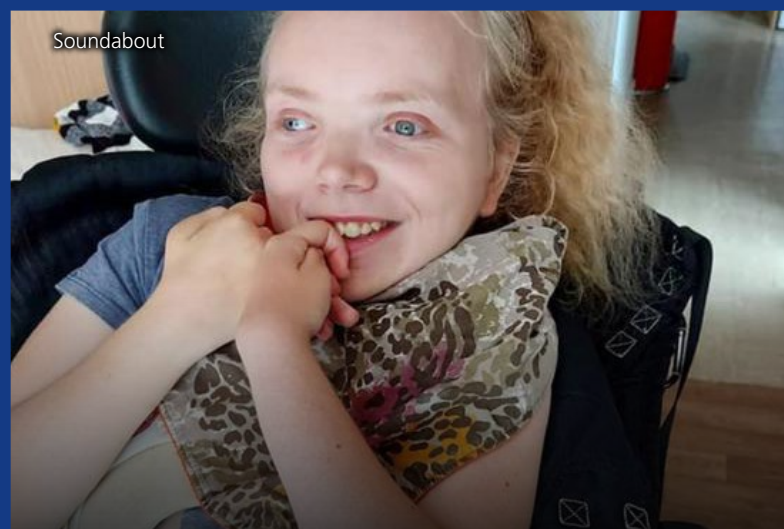
Spotlighting inequality

The pandemic has widened inequality, most severely affecting those who were already disadvantaged or excluded. We need to make the case for and invest in socio-economic, educational, climate and racial justice. We cannot ignore issues that should be everyone's responsibility to tackle.

Increasing funding

There is huge wealth in Oxfordshire and an untapped desire to support good local causes. We must do more to bring funds to communities from philanthropists, high net worth individuals, companies, statutory partners, fundraising appeals and others with the means to offer support.

"The challenge for the coming year will be to find funding for running costs, rent for the office and salaries for our paid part-time office organisers. There are many available sources for project-based grants, but our local councils will not give money to keep the service running."

Didcot Volunteer Drivers

Support for the Sick Newborn and their Parents (SSNAP)

South Oxford Adventure Playground

Cornhill Companions

Soundabout

Devolving power

Those delivering vital work to communities need us to trust them and provide them with a service: to support their infrastructure and core costs over time. This should mean changing the way we distribute funding in future, giving power to and building resilience in local communities.

Building partnerships

Much of the urgent work during the pandemic broke down barriers or competitive elements between organisations and sectors. This created positive collaboration that enabled innovative solutions to be trialled. It is only through partnership that long-term systems change will be possible to tackle the root causes of the big social problems affecting Oxfordshire (and the wider world).

"The pandemic has brought out new sides to people: kindness, determination and action. The resilience and ability to adapt shown by everyone I work with is just astounding. We haven't once taken our foot off the pedal, despite personal struggles and challenges."

Charlie Drummond, Helen and Douglas House

Conclusion

The summer is here; but the pandemic is not over.

There is so much more work to do to help our communities recover stronger, and so much more investment needed build the sustainability of community groups who have done such fantastic work throughout COVID-19, and continue to do so.

With the right focus and support, our communities have the potential to become cohesive organisms that ensure no-one is hidden, forgotten or left behind. Strength, bondedness and resilience is what will enable all of us to thrive, whatever the immediate and long-term future holds.

Can you help?

If you would like to help us build resilience for our communities over the long term, please do consider donating to the Community Resilience Fund at www.oxfordshire.org/coronavirus

Rose Hill Junior Youth Club

Hinksey Sculling School

Oxfordshire
Community
Foundation