Oxfordshire Connects

Report on the community tech needs of Oxfordshire's social action groups.

Introduction

Oxfordshire has a rich network of organisations committed to building a sustainable, fairer, and healthier county; these projects are working collectively in areas such as waste reduction, community transport, food inequality, community housing, sustainable energy, biodiversity, land ownership, and social justice.[1]

In our tech-centric world, access to data, along with access to the right tools, skills, and capacity to analyse that data, is crucial for any organisation to achieve its mission. However, data isn't equally accessible to all, and most of the best-known tech tools are profit-based platforms designed for the needs of profit-making businesses. Though some of these tools can be beneficial for social action groups, they may also be prohibitively expensive, inappropriate for their needs, or in conflict with their values.

But there are many examples of alternative, community-led tech solutions being developed. These solutions are open-source and encourage collective activity. They are informed by local needs and focus on the core problems that social action groups are working to address.

Over the past year, the Oxfordshire Connects project has been exploring ways to develop and improve the community tech that is available to Oxfordshire's social action organisations in order to help them achieve their missions.

Overview

Oxfordshire Connects is led by Digital Commons Cooperative (DCC) and Community Action Groups Oxfordshire (CAG). It evolved out of the Owned by Oxford community wealth building pilot, which highlighted some of the tech challenges grassroots-led enterprises face

[1] These organisations and projects are referred to as "social action groups" throughout this report.

in Oxford. We wanted to find out more as well as broaden the project scope to include county-wide infrastructure and social action organisations. You can find out more about the project delivery partners and Owned by Oxford at the end of this report.

Between April and October 2023, Oxfordshire Connects facilitated one-to-one discussions, online meetings, and invited written contributions around data sharing, digital mapping, and tech services for Oxfordshire projects that focus on one or more of the following social action areas:

- Social, economic, and food justice.
- Community land, housing, and assets.
- Regenerative agriculture.
- Environment and sustainability.

23 individuals, with connections to 11 Oxfordshire social action groups and an additional eight infrastructure or national organisations, took part. They told us about the tech they currently use, how they access, store, and use data, and the tech challenges and gaps they would like to see addressed.

There were four broad themes that threaded through the feedback:

1. **Capacity**
   Without proper resourcing, social action groups won't have the internal capacity to properly review, design, test, and implement the community tech needed to help achieve their missions. This is particularly the case for Oxfordshire's smaller, grassroots, and Black and Minoritised community-led organisations.

2. **Tech confidence**
   Groups lack knowledge, expertise, and confidence in tech. They need hands-on support and training in order to better understand and take advantage of tech solutions.

3. **Sharing data, tools, and platforms**
   The social action sectors across Oxfordshire could be more effective and efficient if there were shared databases, tech tools, and platforms. This requires resourcing for both research and longer term management and stewarding.

4. **Improved access to information**
   Groups want up-to-date and accurate information that is really, really quick and easy to access, ideally in one place. They want easy-to-use tools to search and analyse, as well as to be able to update entries and upload new data to shared databases.

Each of these themes generated ideas to explore further. Oxfordshire Connects was intended as a pilot, exploratory project, so we were clear from the outset that we wouldn't have the capacity to deliver on all the ideas our research generated. Working closely with a small number of partners, we identified some priority areas for development by the DCC tech team. Along with DCC, CAG, and Owned by Oxford, the core participants are listed below.

Oxford Mutual Aid is a grassroots community support group and action network focussed on food justice and redistribution.

Good Food Oxfordshire is a network of organisations working towards a fairer, healthier, and more sustainable food system for Oxfordshire.

Collaborative Housing Hub (CoHo Hub) provides advice and support so people across the Thames Valley can plan, fund, and build their own homes or work in partnership to do so.

Who Owns Oxford was set up by a group of Oxford citizens who believe that more transparency on land ownership leads to better decisions on how land could be used across the county.

This report describes the findings from the initial research, the exploratory tech development that came out of it, and makes proposals for further funded work on community tech.

We hope that it will be a useful resource for social action groups in Oxfordshire, providing an introduction to some available tech solutions, giving context, and signposting to possible resources, as well as helping to make the case for funding.

The report is also intended as a starting point for partnerships or infrastructure organisations interested in taking any of the proposals forward.

About Community Tech

Our project was informed by Power To Change's work on community tech. Here's their definition:

> *The term community tech means any hardware or software that delivers benefit to a community group, and which that community group has the authority to influence or control.*
>
> *A community group may create a piece of technology for their own use or use by other groups, or to be governed or adapted by other groups.*
>
> *This means community groups obtain influence or control over these technologies either because they created them, or have some ownership rights or other governance powers over them.*

This is explored in more detail in their 2022 report, "The Case for Community Tech".[2]

[2] Coldicutt R, Dent, A (2022), "The Case for Community tech". London: Promising Trouble https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/PTC_3912_Community_Tech_Report_FINAL-1.pdf accessed Dec 2023

Examples of community tech

There are many great examples of community tech out there. Some are focused on the needs of a particular community; others are tools for wider movements to use. The following tools and platforms were included as examples in the Oxfordshire Connects discussions and may be useful for Oxfordshire's social action groups to explore.

Open Food Network is a community supported software connecting producers, food hubs, and customers online to build a resilient local food economy.

Karrot is a participatory community development platform from Korea offering a range of services, including buying and selling goods, community group information, and job listings.
Beabee is an open source platform for community journalism.

Freegle is a platform supporting the free reuse community.

Hull Food Exchange Platform is a platform to reduce food waste and simplify community access to fresh food.

VIVE is Transition Together's online communications space for the UK 'Transition Network' and others working for community-led change to share ideas and mutual support.

Priority Places for Food Index provides data on food insecurity risk in the UK, identifying areas vulnerable to the cost of living increases and with poor access to cheap, healthy, and sustainable food.

Falmouth Food Co-op is a collective shopping platform for farmers to sell directly as well as to provide surplus that they can't sell to people in food insecurity.

OxFarmtoFork is a short food supply chain initiative set up by Good Food Oxfordshire.

Hylo is a web and mobile app that combines group management, messaging, and collaboration, all in one place.

OpenStreetMap is a free, open geographic database updated and maintained by a community of volunteers via open collaboration.

Oxfordshire Insight provides information and evidence about Oxfordshire and the people who live in it to support the development of local services.

This is not an exhaustive list and it is worth checking out some of the links in the resources section below for more ideas.

Initial findings

- ## Capacity, tech confidence, and inclusion

As elsewhere, social action organisations in Oxfordshire are fully focussed on the activities directly related to their mission. The projects and individuals that we engaged with are all

working at full capacity, generally under-resourced, and have little slack in the system for exploring tech solutions.

Tech confidence, or the lack of it, is a big challenge. People leading social action groups don't necessarily have a good understanding of tech, what tools are available, and how to use them. Our project discussions highlighted the disconnect between more tech-savvy individuals and others. For some, the lack of a shared language and understanding of technology created barriers to involvement in the initial discussions, with people describing a lack of confidence to express themselves and uncertainty around the "right" terminology to use.

Oxfordshire Connects evolved out of the Owned by Oxford project, so we were starting from a strong network of trusting relationships. We also had a specific fund to pay for people's time, and we offered one-to-one discussions and training to support participation from grass-roots organisations and activists.

We promoted the potential benefits of engaging with the project:

- finding out about useful digital tools and training in using them;
- access to relevant, new, or previously inaccessible data;
- increased visibility for group activity;
- a better understanding of tech needs; and
- a report to secure resources to fund them.

However, though some of the grassroots Owned by Oxford partners did feed into the initial consultations, none of them have been able to commit to further engagement. On reflection, the possible benefits from our short-term, exploratory pilot may not be sufficient to justify involvement by grassroots activists and smaller social action groups. These groups often rely on voluntary time from already overcommitted individuals. For them to consider redirecting some of that time to first of all thinking about new tech; secondly, to feedback on tech development; and finally, to get others in their groups on board and trained up, it would take far more resourcing than our project has been able to offer. Even the larger organisations have found it a challenge to create the capacity for the right person to be involved.

These two issues, tech confidence and the capacity to engage, are reflected in the demographics of the organisations that have been most involved in Oxfordshire Connects. Each of the groups is either an online project, already using some form of community tech, or has already identified the need for better tech solutions to achieve their mission.

Alongside paying community activists for their time as "expert consultants," the Owned by Oxford project had community advocate roles to build relationships and spend time "going to" the community groups rather than expecting them to join our meetings and events. This capacity hasn't been available to the Oxfordshire Connects project and would be something to consider in any future work to make sure that smaller, grassroots groups, particularly those led by Black and Minoritised communities, are able to participate equally.

The tech currently in use

Most of the organisations we spoke to use a combination of free or low-cost commercial products and services to curate their own, bespoke tech systems. Some of this is planned, but often systems evolve over time in a more ad hoc fashion.

The most popular tools mentioned were Google Workspace applications such as Gmail, Drive, and Google Docs, as well as Google Maps for mapping and logistics.

Zoom tends to be the first option for video calls and workshop delivery, though some use Google Meet and others use Microsoft tools and Teams. A number use Slack for internal communications and Google Groups for external community communications.

There was some trialling of Airtable, a spreadsheet-database hybrid enabling teams to manage workflows that provided better database and CRM solutions than Google. CAG have developed a CRM for the Owned by Oxford project based on an Airtable template designed for the not-for-profit sector by The Good Ship project.

For work and project management, CoHo Hub found Basecamp useful but have had to stop due to cost, and others have tried the free version of Asana.

Websites are built in weebly, Wix, and Wordpress, and Who Owns Oxford also use Carto, a platform enabling organisations to use and analyse spatial data.

Some of the social action groups have developed quite complex tech systems, usually relying on input from one or more “tech-savvy” individuals, either in voluntary or paid roles.

Having people on the team with tech confidence has allowed some groups to test out potentially useful features of different, free tools and then link them together without the expense of subscriptions. The downside of this is that, as the free software available hasn’t been designed with social action in mind, the tools can be a compromise – only just doing the job that’s needed, and sometimes using unstable workarounds.

Also, reliance on individual knowledge can be risky. If and when the “tech-savvy” people move on, who is going to make sure the systems are maintained and keep flowing? Having processes written down such as a “how to” guide to ensure a smooth handover is really important but challenging to achieve for organisations with low tech confidence. What is missing and needed is bespoke training in how to use each system.

Access to data

Much of the data held or curated by groups is made publicly available by them through online directories and maps searchable by theme and location. Examples include CAG’s database of funders that anyone can access, Good Food Oxfordshire’s local supplier information, and Who Owns Oxford’s view of Oxfordshire showing the large estates with ownership information.

Groups also gather data that they would like to make more accessible and that could be of shared use to other groups across Oxfordshire. For example:

Good Food Oxfordshire

- numbers experiencing food insecurity and using services
- community-growing sites, currently linked to the national Good to Grow database
- types and volumes of food produced

CoHo Hub

- strategic site allocations for new developments
- groups interested in developing collaborative forms of housing

Oxford Mutual Aid

- referrals received from other organisations and local authorities
- data about operations and the changing level of need
- feedback from recipients

The major challenges groups experience are ensuring that their data sources are kept up-to-date and having people with the time, interest, and training to analyse and update them. Groups also find that they don't have the level of in-house tech expertise needed to navigate many of the external data sets that are available.

There are existing data sets that groups would like to see combined, ideally mapped, and easily accessible on one platform. These include:

- Local authority asset registries
- Registries of long-term empty properties
- Development sites with community housing allocations
- Confederation of Cooperative Housing Members Directory
- Co-op Directory at Co-operatives UK
- UK Cohousing Network Directory
- Community Land Trusts Directory

As well as having better access to this data, groups want to have easy-to-use tools to search and analyse, as well as to be able to update entries and upload new data to the sets.

Mapping land and property use and ownership

Oxfordshire has a number of online mapping projects. Some have been developed in partnership with the county, city, or district councils and some are social action group-led. The ones highlighted in our discussions included:

- Oxfordshire CAG's map of members
- Low Carbon Hub's map of member groups
- Good Food Oxfordshire's map of Oxfordshire food projects
- Owned by Oxford's map of the solidarity economy in Oxford, showing grass-roots enterprises and support organisations
- Oxfordshire Treescape's opportunity map of places where treescape projects could be established

- Who Owns Oxford's map of land ownership across Oxfordshire by category and/or owner

As with the data sets referred to above, groups are interested in exploring how to get these maps available in one place, particularly for the layers of information about land and property use and ownership.

Publicly sharing data about ownership isn't straightforward, and it can be difficult to navigate the legal issues around privacy and data protection. Also, there is a lack of transparency in the UK around property and assets, a culture of secrecy, meaning that information about ownership and current uses for buildings and land can be hard to obtain.

In Oxfordshire, land and property are very expensive, which makes it even harder for social action groups to find sites and buildings for their work. Groups can see real benefit in being able to see information about ownership, underused land, and empty properties together to find sites for their projects – whether for collaborative housing, food growing, renewable energy, or mixed use opportunities.

The inflated property market also means that community buildings and assets are often at risk of development. Communities can apply to register Assets of Community Value with the local council using a formal process. This gives some protection towards keeping properties for community use[3], and those approved are mapped by the Plunkett Foundation on the Keep It in the Community Map. But there are likely to be many more community buildings and areas of land that are not formally registered, as well as those that could be described as "assets that should belong to the community." If citizens and local groups were able to upload suggestions for potential Assets of Community Value registrations to the map, informed by their own local knowledge, this would create a much richer picture of possibilities.

Discussions around how to use local knowledge and citizen research to enrich the information publicly available about land and buildings generated a number of useful examples of how this could work in practice:

> Using a citizen research approach to mapping empty properties in an area through volunteers walking the streets and recording property-use in real time to provide an accurate and up to date picture. Or, using a similar process to audit economic activity, observe whether commercial premises - those registered as paying business rates - are operating or shut down.
>
> For CoHoHub, identifying plots for possible collaborative housing schemes in rural areas is challenging. One idea was to collaborate with rural parish council stewards, who may see a need for affordable housing in their parish and will usually have a good idea of local land property ownership.
>
> Citizen mapping could support a partnership looking to establish a community-owned music and arts venue in Oxford. Volunteers with local knowledge could identify

[3] https://mycommunity.org.uk/community-assets-and-ownership

potential sites, including existing buildings currently being used as venues, such as community centres and social clubs. We know that these types of community venues are often at risk of development, so they could then be registered as assets of community value.

The Good Food Oxford OxFarmtoFork project creates short local supply chains and now has nine Oxford Colleges buying local agro-ecological[4] produce from Oxfordshire farmers on a weekly basis. But a limiting factor for growth for this project is the amount of produce available. Volunteers identifying suitable pockets of land that could be accessed for peri-urban farming[5] to increase growing capacity would help address this.

This is all data that could potentially be added as new layers to a central site, perhaps the Who Owns Oxford or Owned by Oxford maps, and would support social action groups with campaigning and lobbying as well as identifying opportunities for community use.

There were questions over the longer term stewardship of the data and maps highlighting the benefits of pooling resources and hosting where possible. But it was acknowledged that this work would need resourcing.

Service signposting and coordination between organisations

Groups would like to develop better joined-up and shared systems to coordinate work across the social action sectors in Oxfordshire.

Groups feedback that service signposting systems are inconsistent, and information is often out of date. The main directory sites available are the County Council's Family Information Service and Live Well Oxfordshire, but these require providers to update their entries and the data is unreliable. Groups have set up their own ad hoc directories in order to signpost their users or members because they feel more confident that the data is reliable.

There are several local infrastructure bodies for community groups and businesses in Oxfordshire, each with their own directories, forums for communication, and event calendars. This can be confusing to navigate, as there is often duplication and it is hard to keep the entries up to date. Events may clash, even when they are of interest to the same audiences, because there isn't an easy way to coordinate across the sectors.

Some of the membership organisations have tried platforms such as Basecamp and Open Food Network, but find it challenging to get members and paid staff to fully engage with new software, even when it might be advantageous to their work. If there are too many steps to get to a point where the benefits are apparent, then the software fails.

Groups are interested in the idea of finding out more about some of the tech platforms available with the possibility of sharing the costs to enable groups with different but aligned

[4] Agroecology promotes farmer and community-led practices that mitigate climate change and work with wildlife.
[5] Peri-urban agriculture is generally defined as agriculture undertaken in places on the fringes of urban areas

purposes to connect. They are also interested in helping with establishing and collaborating on shared databases with agreed data standards.

This research was beyond the scope of the Oxfordshire Connects project. So we commissioned a short briefing paper on signposting services and data standards to act as a starting point for any organisation or partnership interested in developing this work further. The paper is attached as an appendix at the end of this report.

Our tech development work

Improving access to land data for Oxfordshire groups

Given the consultation findings, the decision was taken to focus the project tech development time on scoping and developing the mapping of information about Oxfordshire land and property. The work was undertaken keeping in mind that end users want to be able to find up-to-date and accurate information really, really quickly and easily.

The aspiration is to have rich information, publicly available, about who owns land and property in Oxfordshire, what it's used for, and where the opportunities are for new activities all easily accessible to search for on one map. Also, communities will be able to upload, update, and manage their own data in this shared resource.

DCC has a mapping tool called LandExplorer, which helps people and organisations access information on land, including classification, usage, ownership, and more. This enables community activists and groups to access GIS[6] capabilities without needing specialist skills and to create collaborative maps supporting the design of land-based projects.

The DCC tech team has been exploring ways to improve Land Explorer's functionality and accessibility to meet the proposals from the Oxfordshire Connects consultation, including:

- Implementing a live update system to gain up-to-date data from the Land Registry for land ownership in Oxford and across the UK.
- Making it possible to select a parcel of land and then identify all the other land owned by that landlord to track ownership and opportunities for campaigning.
- Improving collaborative mapping features so that multiple people can work on the same maps at the same time.
- Designing better ways to gather data about potential assets of community value as well as sites and buildings that could be used for community activity or for growing.
- Adding a number of additional datasets, including ways to indicate unregistered land.
- Looking at how the more detailed Oxfordshire land use data from Who Owns Oxford could be incorporated or merged with the data currently available on Land Explorer.
- Developing the description boxes, including images and better formatting, to improve and increase the story telling and knowledge-sharing capacity of Land Explorer.

[6] A geographic information system (GIS) consists of integrated computer hardware and software that store, manage, analyse, edit, output, and visualise geographic data

Some of this work is still in an early stage and could not be completed within this budget. However, thanks in part to this project, and Digital Commons' pilot project Data for Housing Justice some further funding has now been raised to continue that work and to further the development of Land Explorer as a tool for those working on Housing Justice issues across the country as well as in Oxfordshire.

Mapping social action and community assets

DCC also has a mapping tool called Mykomaps, which is used to map the solidarity, social, and cooperative economies to increase visibility and opportunities for collaboration and collective changemaking. Citizens can produce user-friendly maps of their local area and keep these maps and the associated databases updated and live.

For Oxfordshire Connects, the DCC tech team has improved the functionality of the Owned by Oxford map and the pathway for communities to be able to upload, update, and manage data directly.

DCC has already been able to use some of what has been learnt from the project and explored the possibilities for expanding the mapping of assets of community value. In collaboration with Shared Assets this work has now received some funding and is underway. For details can be found here.

Proposals for further development

As well as being a useful resource for social action groups in Oxfordshire, this report puts forward some proposals for interested partnerships or infrastructure organisations to take forward.

1. **Capacity**
   Without proper resourcing, social action groups won't have the internal capacity to properly review, design, test, and implement the community tech needed to help achieve their missions. This is particularly the case for Oxfordshire's smaller, grassroots, and Black and Minoritised community-led organisations.

   Community Tech projects should not go forward until they have both funding in place to pay for the time of those community activists and a community advocate (at equivalent rates to other team members). Targeted Funds need to be created to fund this aspect of community tech development as well as funders recognising the importance of this aspect of the work.

2. **Tech confidence**
   Groups lack knowledge, expertise, and confidence in tech. They need hands-on support and training in order to better understand and take advantage of tech solutions.

   This could be addressed by the development of a Community Tech Outreach project to support Oxfordshire's social action groups. A team of tech savvy individuals, each

partnered with a group, to work directly on exploring needs, testing out options, and offering training to increase confidence and capacity.

3. **Sharing tools and platforms**
   The social action sectors across Oxfordshire could be more effective and efficient if there were shared databases, tech tools, and platforms. This requires resourcing for both research and longer term management and stewarding.

   See conclusions of focused research paper in appendix.

4. **Improved access to information**
   Groups want up-to-date and accurate information that is really, really quick and easy to access, ideally in one place. They want easy-to-use tools to search and analyse, as well as to be able to update entries and upload new data to shared databases.

   Develop an accessible, directory and map of Oxfordshire land and property data as a collective resource for citizens that integrates publicly available datasets and citizens research.The aspiration is to have rich information, publicly available, about who owns land and property in Oxfordshire, what it's used for, and where the opportunities are for new activities, all easily accessible to search for on one map. Also, communities will be able to upload, update, and manage their own data in this shared resource.

5. **Community Assets**
   As mentioned earlier in the report, one outcome of this project is the genesis of a project focusing on the data and digital mapping needed to support the saving and taking into community ownership of local assets. We recommend that the Oxfordshire Connect participants with an interest in identifying and protecting assets of community value participate in this new project.

About the Oxfordshire Connects project and report

Research approach

This report has been written based on qualitative research with Oxfordshire social action and infrastructure organisations conducted by CAG Oxfordshire and Digital Commons Cooperative from March 2023 to February 2024.

The research included discussions, workshops, and written submissions involving 23 individuals, with connections to 11 Oxfordshire social action groups and an additional eight infrastructure or national organisations; a desk review of some of the literature; and some initial exploratory tech development based on the initial research findings.

Unfunded groups and individuals were offered consultancy payments for their time to address barriers to participation.

The Oxfordshire Connects delivery partners

Digital Commons Cooperative

Digital Commons Cooperative (DCC) develops community tech that helps social movements defend the planet and re-generate the economy we need for a fairer world.

It develops data mapping and sharing tools that people can use to build projects and commons together, so that their data can produce genuine value for their communities.

Although DCC has members across the country and clients around the world, it has strong roots in Oxfordshire.

Community Action Groups Oxfordshire

Community Action Groups Oxfordshire (CAG) is a network of over 100 community action groups working across Oxfordshire to make it a safer, fairer, greener, more sustainable place to live, work and visit.

Our member groups work in their local communities organising events and projects to take action on issues including waste, transport, food, energy, biodiversity and social justice.

Owned by Oxford

Owned by Oxford (ObO) is working to build a community-led economy in our City. We are a partnership of grass roots community enterprises and infrastructure projects working with larger anchor institutions, to test out and innovate new ideas. We want to create a fairer, more inclusive economy in Oxford, that puts people, planet and wellbeing before profit.

CAG and the Solidarity Economy Association (SEA) were two of the founding members of Owned by Oxford. DCC was co-founded by SEA . One aspect of the ObO project was to develop mapping and directory tools to help the project plan and track its activities and to share information about its participants etc. This mapping project is ongoing and is now managed by DCC and CAG on behalf of ObO.

Credits

The Oxfordshire Connects project was led by CAG Oxfordshire in partnership with Digital Commons Co-operative (DCC).

This report was authored by Anna Thorne (CAG) and Colm Massey (DCC).

The report on signposting systems was authored by Janie Bickerseth.

We'd like to thank the following individuals and organisations for participating in the project:

Katherine Chesson and Anaïs Bozetine from CAG Oxfordshire; Jade Spencer from Oxford Mutual Aid; Nicole Shodunke from Transition Lighthouse; Jacqui Gitau from African Families

in the UK; Fiona Steel from Good Food Oxfordshire; Fiona Brown from Collaborative Housing Hub Thames Valley; Fred Thomas; Charlie Fisher from Transition by Design; Kate Swade and Lynne Davis from DCC; Alice Hemming from Cooperative Futures; Andy Edwards from Makespace; and the Who Owns Oxford team.

Useful links and resources

These links are in addition to those threaded through the report:

CAST helps charities and social impact organisations to make the fullest use of digital technology, in order to be as responsive and resilient as possible.

Catalyst is a network providing free services to grow digital skills, confidence, and connections.

Community Tech Network a website connecting and supporting projects funded under the Power to Change Community Tech programme

Multitudes are community tech stewards undertaking work to develop community technology programmes that seek to redress the lack of access to infrastructure and information in excluded communities.

My Society helps people be active citizens with technology, research and data that individuals, journalists, and civil society can use, openly and for free.

Promising Trouble is a social enterprise whose work puts community power at the heart of technology and innovation.

The Open Coop is a collaborative collective building the tools, technologies and protocols of a collaborative, regenerative economy.

Appendix 1

Briefing Paper: Services Signposting Systems for Oxfordshire

Authored by Janie Bickersteth February 2024

Introduction

Over the past year, the Oxfordshire Connects project has been exploring ways to develop and improve the community tech that is available to Oxfordshire's social action organisations in order to help them to achieve their missions.

During the project consultation discussions, the poor quality of service signposting systems for Oxfordshire's social action groups was identified as a common problem, particularly around data being out of date or hard to maintain.

Local authorities, health organisations, and the voluntary sector (VCO) all hold directories for relevant locally available services. Accurate and reliable information is imperative for organisations to achieve their missions; however, data provision and updating is inconsistent across the various directories, leading to confusion and a loss of confidence in the signposting services available. Resources are wasted as different organisations are duplicating work through designing and maintaining their own in-house directories.

This briefing paper offers a light-touch review of some of the signposting options currently available as well as learning from other areas and developments that might help improve the service for the county. Aimed at Oxfordshire's social action groups and their networks, it is intended as a starting point for any organisation or partnership interested in developing this work further.

Research approach

Our research started with the question: "what online tech solutions are available for Oxfordshire providers to improve signposting to services and support?"

Our hypothesis was that if data about support services could be shared consistently, and updated effectively, Oxfordshire's social action groups could confidently access information and better signpost users to the right support at the same time as reducing their workload.

I used desk-based, leveraging online searches, literature reviews and direct conversations with those working in the feld. With multiple directories and areas of support to consider, for the purposes of comparison, this briefing paper focuses on food-related issues and signposting directories.

Oxfordshire's food related services and signposting

Given the Universal Declaration that 'everyone should be able to access food for themselves and for their families', one would expect any local authority to reflect this in its support for its

residents. In addition the local authority has a statutory obligation under the Care Act of 2015 to provide information and advice on health and care.

Online searches for 'Food' services in Oxfordshire primarily lead to Oxfordshire County Council's Family Information Service (OFIS) and Good Food Oxfordshire's (GFO) Community Food Services map. Other sources include Live Well Oxfordshire (LWO), Community Action Groups Oxfordshire (CAG), and Oxford City Council.

There are smaller organisations which provide limited signposting to services e.g. Oxford Mutual Aid (OMA), provides a downloadable PDF; Oxford Community Emergency Foodbank (CEF) provides information on how to get a referral for food provision; and Oxford Food Hub, a food redistribution service which signposts individuals to the GFO community food map.

I looked at four of the Oxfordshire sites in more detail to compare their pros and cons.

1. Oxfordshire County Council's Family Information Service

   An online directory providing information on childcare, activities and services for children, young people and families in Oxfordshire.

   Pros:

- Standard format for FIS websites, in line with other local authorities, fulfilling statutory obligation to its residents.
- Breadth of information.

   Cons:

- Challenges with search functionality.
  A search for '*Food for my family*' in response to '*what are you looking for today?*' results in 49 results of links to childminders. However, if I use popular jargon and search *'surplus food*', the results take me to 12 sites providing community fridges and larders. There is no signposting to key providers in the borough such as Oxford Mutual Aid or Community Action Groups, both very good sources of information on this subject.
- Outdated entries, reliance on service providers for updates.
  A search *'horticulture courses for young people*' brought up 5 results, all of which had not been updated since 2020
- A dense website lacking standardisation.
  The service provider provides the web content, resulting in inconsistent entries - some very long and some too brief to be useful.
- Limited user engagement.
  Poor interface with no graphics and limited pictures.

2. Live Well Oxfordshire

   A directory developed by Oxfordshire County Council in partnership with Age UK Oxfordshire and Affinity Works, designed to bring together information about groups and organisations offering services for adults with a variety of needs.

   Pros:

- In recognition of the basic human right to food, the No. 1 headline is about accessing food.
- Engaging interface with lots of graphics.

Cons:

- Challenges with search functionality.
  A search '*Food for my family*' brought up over 600 results, but even after this had been reduced to 27 by filtering by postcode, 19 of these entries had nothing to do with food.
- Filtering issues and complex search processes.
  A search for *'horticulture courses for young people'*, came up with 1727 results, and even after some further filtering to 15 entries, nothing relevant emerged.
- Outdated entries, reliance on service providers for updates.
- Lacking in quality control for inputs from service providers

3. Good Food Oxfordshire's (GFO) Community Food Services map

   A VCO-led map of services providing free or low-cost food in Oxford and other food related projects.

Pros:

- A valuable resource for Oxfordshire.
- Functional search options.
- Well referenced by other organisations.
- Often no.1 item on search engines.

Cons:

- Some functionality issues around map and postcode searches.
- Limited search options.
- Enhanced functionality could be achieved with entry count per category.
- No information about what the map is for or why it was created.

4. Community Action Groups Oxfordshire members directory

   A VCO-led database and map with three search functions for CAG's membership of projects acting on issues including waste, transport, food, energy, biodiversity and social justice.

Pros:

- Simple, user-friendly interface.
- Minimal input required by service providers.

Cons:

- Some concerns about entry validity and contact information.
- Lacks quality control measures.
  For example: no contact information other than a Facebook page (see Cholsey's Tomorrow)

Examples from outside Oxfordshire

I also looked at two different examples of platforms external to Oxfordshire as part of this research. Though neither of these tech solutions may be appropriate to adopt in Oxfordshire, there is useful learning to draw from each for any developments in our county.

1. Lambeth Larder is a social enterprise, based in south London, that helps connect local people in financial need to emergency food and other services like advice, debt, and mental health support. It has a user-friendly, place-based database of services with excellent graphics and headlines and meticulous research. However, this requires continuous updating with all data inputs undertaken by Lambeth Larder. There is duplication with the information found on Lambeth Family Services website and a standardisation and sharing of data across LA and VCO would be beneficial.

2. OnePlanet.com is a global system, connecting the dots across different organisations and their action plans. It does not, at this time, provide capabilities for sharing of service provision. The focus is on health, climate and equity. Research revealed that this would not be a tech solution for service providers; it maps actions and outcomes, enabling organisations to merge and support each other's action plans.

Using data standards to improve service provision signposting

Through investigating the four Oxfordshire service provider websites, there would definitely be some advantage in adopting an open data approach to local service information, creating a new shared directory with standardised data points. I looked at two platforms in relation to this.

OpenReferralUK (ORUK) - develops data standards and open source tools that make it easier to share, find and use information about health, human, and social services. 'A standard establishes a consistent way of publishing and describing information. This means people can get the information they need more quickly and easily, and helps to create joined up local communities and services.' ORUK provides a way for a city's local authority, voluntary sector, and private partners to collaborate on a shared information repository - an open source platform.

OpenActive - is an example of sourcing all information on 'getting active' in one place. OpenActive helps data providers to standardise their data and puts their information in one place, making each individual organisation's reach much greater.

Both platforms provide a standardisation of data services which would be beneficial for Oxfordshire service provision. ORUK focuses on signposting support services, a similar remit to Oxfordshire Family Services, whilst OpenActive focuses on promoting 'getting active', a similar remit to Live Well Oxfordshire.

ORUK

ORUK is of particular interest as it has been endorsed by the UK government so is likely to be rolled out across multiple UK local authorities. Open, shareable data in a common format will improve the quality of service provision over time.

ORUK aims to establish resource directory information as a public good, freely available to all. This requires a different approach to data collection - it is not simply about data interoperability but a willingness to embrace the concept of open source data, where anyone has unrestricted access to that data. Open source data aligns with community driven development, it encourages collaboration and a shared sense of purpose, which will align well with not for profit service providers.

There are case studies on the early adopters of ORUK on the website here. Some worth highlighting that are most relevant to this report include:

Buckinghamshire Family Services has embraced the ORUK platform. The case study of the project on the ORUK website is here. It is streamlining categories and implementing filters to enhance user navigation with the aim of giving residents easy access to tailored advice. The overarching goal is to encourage all service providers in Buckinghamshire to adhere to the ORUK data standard. This alignment would simplify the sharing of products across various interfaces and improve overall data maintenance efficiency.
Observation: while the Buckinghamshire Family Services interface bears a strong resemblance to Oxfordshire Family Services, an in-depth exploration of the back end would be needed to grasp the nuanced impact of data standardisation on service optimization.

LOOP (Leeds Open Online Platform) is a partnership between Doing Good Leeds, a website to help Leeds third sector organisations access information, advice, and support, the City Council Digital Partnerships Team, and Forum Central, the collective voice for the health and care third sector in Leeds. They are using ORUK to make LOOP a single source of accurate, up to date and trusted information about health, care and wellbeing that can be shared with directories, websites and applications across Leeds. Currently sites are providing similar but inconsistent information. Examples of current directories are the Voluntary Action Leeds directory of voluntary, community and social enterprises, the Leeds Directory, a local authority directory supporting residents to live well by connecting them to checked and vetted local services and tradespeople as well as local activities and events.

As the LOOP case study illustrates, this is an essential step in the right direction for open, accessible data sharing, that will lead to better quality information for everyone: "We had multiple directories and everyone had a different way of describing the same information – it was impossible to exchange data or collaboratively work with it."
"We could see the benefits: it would be easier to build directories, design new features, aggregate key data and reduce duplication"

ORUK has been adopted by 13 organisations- mostly local authorities - with another 16 considering or in process, though it is unclear who those 16 are. It is early days for this tech solution but, having been endorsed by the Government, it could be expected that this will be

widely taken up and applied to local government service directories such Family Information Services.

Without further investigation, this research cannot delve into the mechanics or cost implications of adopting this system, but it appears that ORUK is developing a methodology for standardising data, which reduces the need for constant updating, sharing responsibility across multiple groups, and it has been adopted by some of Oxfordshire's geographical neighbours.

Conclusions and proposals

There is a clear need for a more systematic and standardised approach to data collection and dissemination for Oxfordshire.

Like other local authorities, Oxfordshire County Council faces challenges in presenting an enormous quantity of information effectively. Oxfordshire's VCOs deal with a smaller remit but lack synchronisation. There is unnecessary duplication and providers may have to update their information in multiple places. And signposting between the local authority and VCO databases is inadequate.

All the Oxfordshire sites researched would benefit from improvements to:

- information about the directories
- functionality and usability.
- standardisation of data inputs.

Proposals:

- As a first step, Oxfordshire's FIS and Livewell sites should be consolidated into one directory.
- There should be clearer information on all sites about the purpose of the directory and why each was created.
- All sites could improve user engagement through additional information on landing pages and comms with providers.
- Create standardised data input guidelines for all providers.
- Investigate the mechanics and cost implications of adopting ORUK.
- Examine if and how data standardisation could streamline services and benefit Oxfordshire residents.
- Research current VCO's who have adopted ORUK.

Janie Bickersteth for CAG Oxfordshire as part of the Oxfordshire Connects project

February 2024