

WE REFUSE TO ACCEPT THAT OURS IS A BACK ALLEY
COMMUNITY CENTRE

A history of the Bullingdon Community Centre

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CONTENTS

Preface	
Background and Context	1
1960s	13
1970s	22
1980s	33
1990s	52
Wood Farm Youth Centre Campaign	70
2000s	94
2010s	126
The Future of the Community Centre	150
Covid 19	174
Reflections	184
References	198

PREFACE

“Community buildings are largely invisible. The contribution which the people who manage and run them make to our society is often unrecognised and not celebrated”. Paul Marriot, ‘Forgotten Resources’.

I had mixed motivations in compiling this history of the Bullingdon Community Centre. The first was personal. Having been involved as a volunteer with Bullingdon for nearly forty years I felt that I owed it to myself and my colleagues at the centre, both past and present, to record some of our experiences and to make a contribution to making the value of community centres more visible. The second was more political. Over the many years that I have been involved in supporting community groups I had always been struck and irritated by the way in which some politicians and opinion makers glibly assumed that voluntary organisations could fill the gaps left by cutbacks in public services and underestimated the time and effort which is involved in sustaining voluntary action. This irritation came to head when, in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, declared that voluntary organisations in the guise of the “Big Society” should step in and fill the gaps left by the massive cutbacks in public services. My reaction to the rhetoric of the “Big Society” helped to kick start this project. Over the years of compiling the history several people provided valuable insights and information, often in informal conversations and exchanges. A particular thanks to Frank Holliday, Trevor Kimber, Patricia White and Liz Brighthouse. I also owe a debt to the late Fred Teale for preserving the records of the community centre, which enabled me to trace the history of Bullingdon between the early 1950s and the late 1970s. Finally thanks to Barbara for her support and advice and for being there.

BACKGROUND and CONTEXT

Community Associations and Centres

“The community centre was born among working men and women in new housing estates out of an honest effort to build their own culture and adorn their own leisure and it has grown since then by their efforts as a bit of honest democracy “(Barker, cited in Clarke, 1990)

Community Associations and community centres emerged in Britain in the aftermath of the 1st World War, mainly as a grass roots response to the lack of social facilities on the new housing estates which were built during the post war period and the inter war years. Amongst the many ideas which influenced the early development of what become known as the “community association movement” was the work of the University Settlements, which “emphasised the need for people of different social classes to meet, mix and work together” (Smith, 2002).

Underpinning the concept of associations and centres was an important assumption about the value of locality or neighbourhood based social relations. The assumption was that residents who lived in the same locality would share interests and needs in common and that the primary role of Community Associations and centres was to provide facilities, services and a voice for all residents of a local area. The association was envisaged as a “voluntary association of neighbours democratically organised within a geographical area which constitutes a natural community, who have come together

either as members of existing organisations or as individuals, or in both capacities, to provide for themselves and their community the services which the neighbourhood requires". The community centre was the means for achieving these goals ; "a building which serves a community organised in an association which is responsible for the management of the building: provides facilities for the development of the recreational, cultural and personal welfare of members of that community and constitutes a meeting place for voluntary organizations or other groups in the community which need accommodation". (National Council of Social Service, cited in Smith, 2002).

By 1947 there were over 300 community centres in England. In Oxford a small number of centres were established before the 2nd World War, for example in Rose Hill and South Oxford, but the majority of the Cities community centres were not established until the post war period.

Lye Valley and Wood Farm

The Bullingdon Community Centre is located in what to –day is known as Lye Valley but which, in past years, had been variously called the Bullingdon Field Housing Estate, the Bullingdon Green estate or the Bullingdon estate. The area is situated on the eastern side of Oxford, on the fringes of Cowley and Headington. The name Bullingdon derives from an ancient administrative unit, the Bullingdon Hundred, which dates from Saxon times and was attached to the manor of Headington. The Hundred was a large area of land which stretched east from the River Cherwell, with Headington at its centre. The court and meeting place of the Hundred was located in an area known as Bullingdon Green, which included the land now occupied by the Lye Valley estate and the community centre. The

Bullingdon Hundred was named after 'Bula's Valley' or 'Bulls Valley', which by the 13th century was spelt as 'Bulandene' (Headington History web site). The name Bullingdon crops up in relation to number of other groups, institutions and street names in Oxford and Oxfordshire, including Bullingdon Prison, the former Bullingdon Rural District Council, the Bullingdon public house in the Cowley Road, Bullingdon Road in East Oxford and most notoriously the Bullingdon Club, a drinking club for male Oxford University students which counts amongst its past members David Cameron (former Prime Minister), George Osborne (former Chancellor of the Exchequer) and Boris Johnson (Prime Minister and former Foreign Secretary).

In the 1920s housing for owner occupation started to be built in Lye Valley.

“The Bullingdon estate was developed near to The Slade, originally the site of a war training camp the buildings of which were used as prisoner of war camps. Prisoners were often to be seen working on local farms” (Newbigging, Shatford, Williams, 1994)

The growth of the new housing owed much to the demand for labour generated by the rapidly expanding motor car industry in Oxford. William Morris established his motor car works in Cowley in 1912 on the site of the former Military College, at the corner of Holloway and Cowley Road, which was less than a mile from Lye Valley. In 1919 the Morris Works employed 200, which had increased to 5,250 by 1939. By the same year 30% of the work force in Oxford was employed in the motor car industry by either Morris Motors, Pressed Steel and Osberton Radiators (Crossley and Elington, 1979). The new industry transformed the city and attracted workers from throughout the UK.

By 1930 there were 144 houses in Bulan Road, 140 in Dene Road, 50 in Benson and 29 in Coverley Road. Bulan Road and Dene Road were named because they were located in the centre of what, in the distant past, had been known as the 'Bulandene Valley' (Headington History web site) By 1931 shops had opened in Cinnaminta Road, including a grocer and post office, tobacconist, butcher, boot repairer, dairy and fishmonger. A further two shops were opened in Coverley Road later in the decade. Towards the end of the 1930s more housing was built at Gleblands (56 houses) and Town Furze (29 houses) and, by the early 1940s, a further 33 houses had been built at Lye Valley, 17 at Inott Furze and 16 at Fairview Road (History of Headington web site). Most of the properties on the estate were semi – detached with three bedrooms. A beer retailer opened in 1960 at Glebelands, which later became a public house when brewers H & G Simonds opened the 'Fairview Inn'. The site occupied by the 'Fairview' had previously been used for allotments.

A Council development (46 houses) started at Peat Moors, the location of the Bullingdon Community Centre, in the late 1930s with the road being named in 1940. The name derived from the peat which formed part of the Lye Valley fen, which is located close to Peat Moors. Jeune Morris grew up in Bulan Place, now part of Bulan Road, in the 1930s and recalls Peat Moors before the housing development.

"Bulan Place was a dead end and there was a five barred gate across the end where we used to play On Guy Fawkes bonfire night when I was young we would save our fireworks and have a bonfire on the land that Peat Moors Community Centre is now on.....Later in the 1930s the Council built a council estate. It was fun climbing in and around that lot. But the field was better." (Memories of Jeune Morris ; Headington History web site)

A short distance from Peat Moors, across the Slade, is Slade Park which was the location, during the 2nd World War, of an army camp which comprised around 200 wooden huts split into nine avenues. The Lye Valley area had a military presence dating from the Victorian times. In 1879 the Bullingdon Barracks, later called the Cowley Barracks, was opened in Holloway as the headquarters of the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire light infantry and in 1939 a second barracks ,for the Territorial Army, was opened on the Slade. It became known as the TA Centre. Also, in the same year, a new isolation hospital, The Slade Hospital, opened near to the TA Centre.

The Cowley Barracks served as the regiments headquarters until 1959 and, from the early 1980s, it was converted for use as the headquarters of the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation (UKWMO). The UKWMO was intended to provide military and civilian authorities with data about explosions and fall out in the event of a nuclear war, the infamous “four minute warning”. The UKWMO was based in a semi - sunken nuclear bunker and local CND supporters did not have far to go for their demonstrations. The UKWMO was disbanded in 1992 following the end of the cold war.

After the war the huts at Slade Park housed squatters and families nominated by the City Council, many of whom were the families of motor car workers. Despite the spartan conditions the tenants developed an attachment to the huts and the local community.

“Initially the camp had a military feel, but the families soon began to turn the area into a garden city. They became hut proud, developing gardens at the front and allotments at the back” (Oxford Mail)

The last families living in the huts were re-housed in the early 1960s , by which time the Slade Park community had been split by the

building of the Eastern bye – pass. The huts were finally demolished in the early 1970s (Morris and Mogeey, 1965).

During the pre – war period the social facilities available to the residents of Lye Valley were limited to the St Francis Church and the Corner House public house. The Corner House was built in the 1930s on the corner of the Slade and Holloway and was the first public house in the Lye Valley area. St Francis Church, which is located on Holloway, was built in the early 1930s on land donated to the Parish of Cowley by William Morris in 1929. The site was on the edge of a large field which Morris had bought as a sports ground for his employees. Morris had family connections with the local area through his maternal grandfather, who leased Wood Farm from Brasenose College in the late 19th century.

The driving force behind the building of the church was the Rev. M.E.Beauchamp, who felt that there was “a need for a place of worship and social occasions on the Bullingdon Estate which was then being built” (Parish of Cowley web site). Beauchamp’s vision received a lukewarm reception from some of the new residents of the estate. The Rev. Alec Whye recalls a public meeting in August 1929, which was held on the site of the proposed church.

“Very few people turned up to support Father Beauchamp, others looked on from over the hedge and some shouted “We want a school not a church” (Parish of Cowley web site).

The first educational provision in the area was the opening of the Slade nursery on Holloway during the 2nd World War, which was part of the government’s efforts to support working mothers. The nursery was to remain on this site until moving to the Wood Farm School in 1983.

The development of the Wood Farm estate, which was named after the local farm and is separated from Lye Valley by The Slade, dates from the occupation of the former army huts on Slade Park during the post war years. New Council housing started to be built in the early 1950s with 20 pairs of Hawksley aluminium bungalows being built at Slade Park and 510 houses on part of the former farm at Pauling Road, Palmer Road, Titup Hall Drive, Wood Farm Road and Masons Road. The remaining land continued to be farmed by RC White until 1964, by which time it was known as White's Farm. The Wood Farm junior and infant school opened at Titup Hall Drive in 1956 and by 1960 a small shopping centre had been developed at Atkyns Road. In 1958 new Council housing also began to be built at Town Furze, which faces Peat Moors across the Lye Valley nature reserve. Some 260 houses were built at Girdlestone Road, Atwell Place, Dynham Place, Flexney Place, Goslyn Close, Heath Close, Masey Close, Warren Crescent and Wylie Close. A small group of shops was opened in Girdlestone Road in 1960.

Origins of the Community Centre

The building of the Bullingdon Community Centre was part of a wave of new developments which occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War. Between 1947 and 1960 the number of centres in England increased from 300 to 929 (Clarke, 1990), many of them on the new council estates which were being built because of the acute post war housing shortage. These estates invariably lacked social facilities and residents collectively provided for themselves, often with assistance from the local authority. The shared experience of the war years and the desire to create a better world, the "spirit of 45 ", were crucial factors in driving these developments.

“The war had the effect of reducing class barriers and developing a sense of neighbourliness and community concern. From this sprang an increased feeling of equality based on the rationing of scarce resources and, for many, in coping with common experiences including bombing of the civilian population and from military service by millions of men and women “(Clarke,1990)

Support was forthcoming from Whitehall. Section 53 of the 1944 Education Act gave local authorities the discretionary power to provide for the social and physical recreation of local communities, including the provision of community centres. In the same year a booklet on community centres was published by the Ministry of Education which stated that;

“A community centre should be regarded as an essential amenity of normal community living in normal circumstancesVoluntary effort, unaided, is quite incapable of meeting the needs for social and recreational facilities” (cited in Clarke, 1990).

Bullingdon, like many centres of this period, owes its origins to a combination of local self help and support from the local authority. Oxford City Council actively promoted centres during the post war years, albeit on a limited budget, and on the estates in the city there were community groups which wanted to improve social facilities.

“In 1948 a scheme was evolved through which a modest building programme could begin. With foresight the Authority has acquired some prefabricated huts and these, with the necessary materials, were placed at the disposal of four community associations who undertook to provide the voluntary labour. In this way four small centres were built at Barton, Bullingdon, Regal and Risinghurst.” (City of Oxford Education Committee, 1963)

The local authority provided the basic materials and the resident's built the centre at Peat Moors. Planning permission for Bullingdon was granted 1949 and the community centre opened in the early 1950s. The main hall was 60 feet by 37 feet and the construction comprised a pre – cast concrete frame unit, known as an “Atco” frame, with concrete block infill and a corrugated asbestos roof. It was a small community centre serving an estate of around 560 houses. Jeune Morris recalls the building of the centre;

“The Centre was built with the late Cyril Hopkins, secretary, and workforce, the people of the area giving of their time and skills and labour for the community”. (Headington History web site)

Bill Hillman, a former Pressed Steel worker and committee member of the Community Association, was one of the volunteers;

“People from the new council estates became friendly during the war and a small group of us got together to build a centre. I believe it was one of the first” (Oxford Mail, 20/1/1986)

Joyce Fry, who moved to Peat Moors in 1948 and lived opposite to the Community Centre, recalls her father raising money to buy materials for the new centre;

“Residents bought bricks for a shilling and some scrapped their initials and names on the bricks” (Interview, 2013)

The process of building the centre was very challenging and time consuming for the local residents, as was acknowledged by the Oxford Education Committee;

“The story of the amateur builders was one of toil, sweat and almost despair relieved occasionally by visits of the then Mayor of Oxford. These four centres will stand as monuments to the untiring human

endeavour of the faithful few” (City of Oxford Education Committee, 1963)

The Centre was located in the corner of a field which is now known as the Peat Moors Recreation Ground. During the war it had been the location of a brick air raid shelter, which was demolished after the end of the war. The Recreation Ground had once been the site of a former quarry or pit which is described as ‘Stone Pit’ on 19th century maps of the area.

“This area was also known as the Pit. Many years ago this was a quarry with stone.....At the bottom of the pit the area was marshy leading through to the Southfield Golf Course. Lye Valley was filled in with all manner of waste” (Jeune Morris, Headington History web site)

One side of the field drops steeply into what is now known as the Lye Valley Nature Reserve, an area of ancient wetland which has been variously known as the Bullingdon Bog, Old Hogley Bog and the Headington Bog .The Lye Valley Nature Reserve has been described as the “last truly wild place of Oxford” (Oxford Mail, 28/12/2007) and was designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1995.

“It is a very rare environment: a wet area, fed by lime rich springs along the valley walls, making technically a ‘calcareous fen’. It is home to many unusual plants which are adapted to this environment” (Friends of Lye Valley, 2017)

A Coronation Party was held in 1953 and around 60 children attended. Amongst them was Donald Morrison, who recalls the occasion.

“The party was held at the new community centre which replaced the old air raid shelter, but most of the fun took place outdoors. Not many people had television in those days so we spent most of our time outdoors. We played on the grass by the community centre. Everyone at the party knew each other. We all played together” (Oxford Mail : 2/6/2003).

During the 1950s the activities of the community centre included bingo, old time dancing, sewing class, ladies night, youth club, socials, private lets and jumble sales (BCA records, 1963) Joyce Fry recalls other activities, such as singing competitions, a bridge club, senior citizens group, trips and excursions and bonfire night parties. A live band played “most Saturday nights” (Interview,2013).

Ray Bell, who lived at Peat Moors, recalls attending a boxing club run by Bill Hillman and a drama group which was organised by Cyril Hopkins, who was a key figure in the establishing of the community centre (Interview,2018). There were also groups which rented space in the centre , including a Salvation Army Sunday school and the St. Johns Ambulance Cadets, and private lets for family parties.

By the end of the decade the Bullingdon Community Association (BCA) had a membership of 118 and a committee of twelve, ten of whom lived on what was then called the Bullingdon estate. Although the committee lived locally not all of the leadership positions of the Association were held by people who lived around the community centre. The Chair was Councillor H. Cook who lived in East Oxford. The President of the Association was John Henry Brookes, the craftsman and educationalist, who lived a short distance from the community centre at the “Gate House” on the The Slade. Brookes was then the Principal of the Schools of Technology, Arts and Commerce in Oxford, which were the forerunner of the Oxford

Polytechnic. When the Polytechnic became a university in 1992 it was named Oxford Brookes University (Brown, B. 2015)

The BCA leased the building rent and rates free from the City Council, which also took responsibility for major items of maintenance and provided grants for the employment of youth leaders and adult education tutors. In 1959 the annual income of the association was £918 and the expenditure was £870. Bingo was by far the biggest source of funds, as it was to be over the coming years.

THE 1960s

Change and Challenges

By the 1960s there were over 900 community centres in England. In Oxford there were 14 centres, most of which had been developed during the post war period. Many of the centres were run exclusively by volunteers but a growing number, including Rosehill, Barton, South Oxford and Blackbird Leys, employed wardens to support the management committees.

Despite the post war growth the period from the late 1950s and the 1960s began to present a number of long term challenges for the community centre movement. The austerity of the 1940s and 1950s was being replaced by a more affluent society. Relatively full employment, combined with the impact of the post war welfare state, had improved the living standards of many households and was widening social horizons. The increase in the ownership of cars resulted in people becoming more mobile and the increase in commercial leisure facilities (eg; cinemas and bingo halls) provided more choice in terms of recreation. Households were becoming less dependent on local or neighbourhood based facilities for their social life, including the activities provided by community centres.

The impact of these changes prompted some observers to question the value of locality based social relations and the assumption that Community Associations could provide a collective voice and services for all the members of local areas. The sociologist Norman Dennis argued that the key ideas which informed the community association movement did not fit with the realities of modern life and were based on outdated and romanticised models of community living.

“There is little doubt that the Community Association movement as a device for making housing estates into communities is moribund. It is the old sad story over again – the Murder of a Beautiful Theory by a Gang of Brutal Facts” (Dennis,1958)

This critique was relevant but underestimated the fact that, in many areas, there were sub – groups of people which remained locality specific for much of their everyday social interactions and recreation. The all - inclusive local community, if it ever existed, had been eroded and replaced by “communities of limited liabilities” (Greer,1962)

“If locality-community remained a reality, it was among the mothers, the very old and the very young. Such disparate groups tended to prefer single interest groups, old people’s clubs, day nurseries, and community associations were among those catering for them. These groups, however, were often poor, and it was very difficult for them to sustain a full range of community activities on their own.” (Clarke, 1990)

Trends in social policy were also challenging the community association movement. In the immediate post war period community associations commanded considerable support from national and local government. However, by the late 1950s and 1960s, community associations were finding themselves having to compete with a range of other locality services and organisations for political attention and funding. These included leisure centres, community schools, adult education centres, purpose built youth centres, tenants and residents groups and a wide range of interest and issue based community groups. In the 1960s Community Development became something of a buzz word in government circles and more funding became available for voluntary organisations as part of area based

anti – poverty programmes, such as the Urban Programme which ran from 1968 to the mid 1990s. Community development was variously defined but, at its core, was an emphasis on promoting citizen participation and encouraging people to empower themselves through a process of self help and collective action. Policy makers did not always view community associations and centres as being an agency through which these goals could be achieved. They were perceived as being too concerned with maintaining their buildings, being unable or unwilling to respond to the wider needs of local areas and lacking the enabling skills required to support the process of community development. Also, some community centres had an image problem, particularly those like Bullingdon which were built in the immediate post war years at a time when building materials were in short supply. By the 1960s many of the prefabricated community centres were looking run down. The net result of these various factors was that community associations tended to become marginalised in terms of funding allocations.

“Much of the substantial public funding of voluntary effort went towards the development and sustenance of community groups from which the community centre movement was almost totally isolated.” (Clarke,1990).

Activities and Participation

Despite the impact of social change and the competition for resources Bullingdon was relatively successful during the 1960s. There was a core of groups and activities which the Association ran throughout the decade and others which ran during some years. The core groups and activities included bingo, the youth club, ladies night, dressmaking and a senior citizens group called the “Happy Circle”. Those groups and activities which operated during most or

some of the years included ladies keep fit, hairdressing, whist club, jumble sales and old time dancing. In addition the Association organised regular social events for members and, from 1964, held a summer fete on the Peat Moors recreation ground. The following year the fete had an attendance of 300 and the entertainment included a “ local beat group, the Jokers” (Oxford Mail, August 1965) In addition to the activities which were run directly by the Association there were groups who rented space at the centre and a regular round of private lets for family and children’s parties. The groups which rented space included church groups, dance schools, scouts, a table tennis club and, from 1968, a club for “handicapped children” with learning disabilities. This club was called the 7o’clock club and has now been meeting at the community centre for over fifty years.

The finances of the Association remained stable throughout the decade, with a modest surplus being generated in most years. The income in 1969 was £2512 and expenditure was £2409. In 1967 a major change occurred in the status and governance of the Association when it became a registered charity. The core groups which the Association ran were, as is usual with community centres, organised into sections or sub groups which were expected to be responsible for planning and financing their activities and reporting to the Associations management committee on a regular basis. Some of the sections were more stable than others. The Bingo, Happy Circle and the Ladies Night tended to have consistent numbers attending and organised their own programmes of social events and coach trips to seaside resorts, theatres and shows. The weekly Bingo was a popular activity and attracted relatively large attendances. For instance, 140 tickets were sold for the Christmas Bingo in 1963. It was also the major source of fund raising for the community centre,

a point which was often commented upon by the Officers of the Association – “Bingo continues to financially support our less fortunate projects” (BCA records,1969). The Happy Circle, which started in 1960, regularly attracted around 50 members to their weekly meetings and a similar number attended the Ladies Night. In November 1966 over a hundred attended an “all women’s social” at the community centre and this group was also responsible for setting up a ladies keep fit class in 1963. In terms of involvement and participation women were the cornerstone of the community centre, a point that was noted in the City Councils 1963 report;

“Without the active interest of women most voluntary organisations would fall apart. This is clearly to be seen in the community association movement for it is the women who run the canteens, make possible bazaars and rummage sales, act as street representatives, clean up and redecorate and loyally serve on a number of committees”

The Youth Club, in contrast to the other core activities, had a more erratic existence during the 1960s. Running youth clubs is one of the more challenging tasks for community centres and is particularly difficult when, as was the case for Bullingdon, space was limited and resources were shared with other users of the centre. In some years the youth club ran junior and senior sections and attendances of over 40 young people were not uncommon. Activities included table tennis, darts and football teams, who played on the Peat Moors recreation ground. However, there were periods when the youth club struggled to open and was closed for months. Difficulties included retaining the paid youth worker, a lack of volunteers to support the youth worker and fall outs with the Associations management committee over the running of the club. On occasions disruptive behaviour resulted in the temporary closure of the club, as

in 1963 when a fight broke out between some local young people and a group which was visiting from the Barton estate.

During the 1960s the membership of the Association rarely dropped below 200 and reached the “giddy heights” of 290 in 1969 (BCA records).Over the years the attendance at the Annual General Meeting fluctuated between 20 and 45 and the size of the management committee varied from 14 to 19, with an average attendance of 14 at the monthly meetings. In the early 1960s 11 out of a committee of 15 lived in the local neighbourhood and 3 lived on the Wood Farm estate. There was some turnover of committee members over the years, with only five people retaining their positions throughout the decade. Three of these long serving members had been on the committee since the 1950s, Mrs Wolliscroft, Mr Purves and Mr Rolf. Mr Rolf, who lived in Peat Moors, was a key figure in the running of the bingo at the community centre.

The local composition of the management committee was not reflected with regards to who held the key positions of Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. In the early 1960s all of these positions were held by people who lived outside of Lye Valley and Wood Farm. This began to change in the mid 1960s. In 1965 Fred Teale, who lived locally, replaced J.E. Gill as Secretary. Fred was to hold this position for over thirty years and became the administrative anchor for the Association. In the following year the long serving Chair, Councillor Cook , stood down and was replaced by Mr Gregory, who lived in Wood Farm. In 1967 the Treasurer, Mr Don Purves, stood down. Mr Purves lived in Wheatley and had previously lived in Lye Valley. His immaculate financial reports, complete with bar charts and graphs, were a feature of many of the Associations AGMs. In the same year JH Brookes resigned as President. In his resignation letter to Fred Teale he wrote;

“I have enjoyed and appreciated my contacts with the Association and I wish it very success in the future. I realise how much hard work you as Secretary and all those on the Committee have put in on behalf of the members and how difficult at times it seems to keep enthusiasm alive in such a small and rather isolated Centre” (BCA records, 1967)

In terms of gender the committee was equally divided in most years, with the majority being women by the end of the decade. However, men dominated the formal leadership roles of the Association and it was until 1967 that a women became an officer of the BCA, when Mrs Wolliscroft took up the position of Treasurer.

Apart from running activities a major concern of the management committee was maintaining and developing the community centre building. The size of the single hall limited use, the building was difficult to heat and the roof was prone to leaks, which was a problem which persisted over the years. A building fund was set up and money was raised from socials and fetes. In 1963 the Association jointly financed, with the Oxford City Council, the building of a second hall at the rear of the centre and on the site of a former nisson hut.

“The old nisson hut was dismantled and a homely building annexed to the main hall was erected in its stead” (BCA records, 1963)

The “homely” building was constructed of wood and was much smaller than the main hall, measuring 37 feet by 17 feet. The new hall enabled the Association to increase activities and lets but did little to address the shortcomings of the main hall and the appearance of the building. The committee were of the view that “that there is great potential in the future of this centre if the appearance and structure of the building could be improved” (BCA

records 1964) and lobbied the Education Committee for further improvements, including an enlarged kitchen, a new office, improved heating and alterations to the main entrance to make it look more attractive. This representation produced limited results and there was a feeling in the Association that Bullingdon and the local community were missing out on the allocation of local authority resources, a sentiment which was to be repeated over many decades. The feeling of being marginalised was clearly expressed by JE Gill, the Secretary of the Association, at the 1963 AGM.

“We refuse to accept that ours is a back alley community centre. Financial comparisons have proved that we are on a par with the best of the centres in Oxford, so why should we not have equal facilities for our members?” (BCA records,1963)

During the 1960s Bullingdon played a modest role in relation wider issues in the local community. On occasions the Association made representation to the Oxford Council about the condition of the roads on the estate, including the access road at Peat Moors and the need for a Belisha crossing on the Slade. The Association also lodged objections to planning applications for new commercial Bingo halls, which were viewed as having an adverse impact on the attendance at the sessions run at the community centre and the income generated for the Association, “Our bingo is being effected by more enterprising Bingos in the city” (BCA records, 1963). Some the groups who used the centre, such as the Happy Circle, Ladies Night and the Youth Club, held the occasional joint event with other community centres and the Association was represented on the Oxford Federation of Community Centres (OFCA), the umbrella organisation for Oxford’s community centres, which had been set up in 1948. The Association also regularly ran collections for national charities and in 1966 made a donation to the Aberfan appeal.

During the 1960s new housing developments continued on the Wood Farm estate. These included the building of Foresters Tower, one of the Oxforde's few high rise flats, which comprised 57 two bedroom flats and 28 one bed roomed flats, and the building of new Council housing and flats at Chillingworth Crescent, Nuffield Road, Bracegirdle and Bonar Road. A health centre for the area was also opened in the 1960s and the growth of the Wood Farm estate was to gather pace over the next decade.

In 1964 a significant development occurred with regards to social provision on the Wood Farm estate with the building, by the City Council, of a small hall on the corner of Chillingworth Crescent and Nuffield Road, which was no more than half a mile from the community centre at Peat Moors. The Wood Farm Residents Association, which had been lobbying for a community centre for the estate since the mid - 1950s, was given responsibility for the running of what became known as the Wood Farm Community Centre. Although residents of the Wood Farm estate used Bullingdon and were represented on its management committee the City Council was of the opinion that the Slade, the road which divides Lye Valley and Wood Farm, was a "barrier for the very young and the very old" (BCA records, 1964). The Slade may also have formed a social barrier between the Wood Farm council estate and the Lye Valley estate, which had a large number of owner occupied housing. By the end of the decade two small community centres served the Lye Valley, Wood Farm and Town Furze estates, which had over 1800 households.

The 1970's

Slade Park

In the early 1970s the Oxford City Council announced plans for a major development on the Slade Park neighbourhood of the Wood Farm estate. The plans included around 500 units of accommodation, of which there would be 100 "old persons" dwellings and 6 disabled person's bungalows. These were to be built on a site which ran from Wood Farm Road to the boundaries of the Territorial Army Barracks on the Slade and included the land which had been formerly used by the war time huts and the Slade Park Special School, which was based in the area between 1947 – 1955. In addition to the housing there were plans for a Catholic First School, a hostel for "mentally sub – normal adults", an adventure playground and a "Gypsy encampment" (letter from Planning Department, 1973). Also, at same time, Oxford United Football Club had submitted a planning application to relocate their ground from the Manor in Headington to the Morris Sports Ground on Holloway and Horspath Driftway.

A hostel for adults with learning disabilities, Marywood, was built on Leiden Road but the Catholic First School was never developed. Oxford United eventually relocated to the Kassam Stadium in Blackbird Leys in 2001. The Bullingdon committee had been one of the local groups which had objected, on the grounds of traffic congestion, to the proposed move of Oxford United to the Morris Sports ground. The adventure playground was intended as a replacement for a playground which had been run by the Woodlands Adventure Playground Association (WAPA) on Slade Park since the late 1960s. The WAPA organised summer holiday schemes on the site until 1973 and later provided play schemes at various locations in the area, including at the Peat Moors recreation ground. A feature

of the schemes was the involvement of international student volunteers.

The provision, in 1973, of a site for travellers reflected a long history of travellers visiting the area and parking their caravans on the Slade. Cinnaminta Road in Lye Valley is named after a Gypsy princess. The site which was designated was next to the TA Centre and was formerly used, from the 1950s, by the building firm Laings for employees working on contracts in the city, including the construction of the Eastern by-pass. From the 1960s travellers had started using the site, which provoked tensions and protests from Laings and local residents. By the late 1960s the travellers had informally taken over the site and the City Council decided to designate it as a permanent site, in order to meet their obligations under the 1968 Caravans Sites Act. Despite improvements to the site and the appointment of a warden in 1972 tensions between the travellers and local residents continued to surface throughout the 1970s. In 1978 the Oxford Mail reported, with a degree of hyperbole, that the conflicts “had grown almost to the point of open warfare”. A major factor in generating the tensions was the proximity of new housing, built in the 1970s, close to the boundaries of the site. In 1979 a decision was made to close and re – locate site and the controversy this caused was to run well into the next decade.

Apart from the conflicts over the travellers site the Slade Park development provoked controversy in relation to the social facilities which should be provided for the expanding population of Wood Farm, Lye Valley and Town Furze. In the early 1970s a new community group was set up, the Wood Farm Area Action Group (WFAAG), with the intention of “stimulating interest in the community in the environmental and social issues involved in planning and to act as a mouthpiece for residents who not normally

make their views known “ (WFAAG report,1973). A number of key organizers of the group, including the Secretary Colleen Gorman, lived in Lye Valley. In 1973 WFAAG canvassed opinion, throughout Wood Farm and Lye Valley, about how the area could be improved and views were sought on a wide range of issues, including road safety, the bus service, green spaces and whether the area needed a sports hall and a new purpose built centrally located community centre. A questionnaire was circulated to over 2200 households and responses were received from 500 (23%), which was a reasonable return for a local survey. The responses indicated that there was overwhelming support, 96%, for a new community centre which was centrally located and which combined a wide range of facilities, including;

“A hall, rooms for further education facilities and local organizations to meet in, including the elderly during the day. A room for library facilities, refreshment facilities and a bar. A large playroom with adjacent storage space and small room with access to a garden. Special facilities for youth club and youth worker. Special police office with access from the street as well as from the centre.” (WFAAG report, 1973)

Underpinning this ambitious and imaginative plan for a multi use community centre was the assumption that the social needs of the various estates which made up the Wood Farm ward should be addressed as a whole, rather than on an estate by estate basis, and that the existing community centres at Bullingdon and Wood Farm were too small to cater for the needs of the area.

“Residents feel that at present the area is inadequately served with community facilities. There are two small buildings and no community workers” (WFAAG report, 1973)

WFAAG produced a report on the findings of the survey and presented a petition to the City Council calling for a new community centre to be provided. The petition was signed by 800 residents. Prior to the emergence and intervention of WFAAG the City Council had mainly consulted with the local residents association, the Slade Park Residents Association, about the plans for Slade Park. WFAAG succeeded in widening the debate and the consultative process and put the need for a new community centre for Wood Farm, Lye Valley and Town Furze on the public agenda. In 1973 the group started a community newspaper, 'The Slade', with support from students from Oxford Polytechnic. The WFAAG also ran successful community events including, in May 1974, a street party in Atkyns Road which attracted around 700 people, with 300 children attending a tea party.

In September 1973 and January 1974 the City Council held public meetings about the plans for Slade Park. The September meeting had an impressive turn out, with 110 residents attending and 19 Council officers present. At both meetings a majority of the residents supported the building of a new community centre, as did the local Labour Party which was the dominant political voice in the area. Various suggestions were made about possible sites for the centre, including Nuffield Road (behind the shops), the Corner of Girdlestone Road and The Slade, Atkyns Road (facing the shops) and at the end of The Slade. The proposed site at the corner of The Slade and Girdlestone Road sparked considerable opposition from residents who lived close to the proposed site, especially from the owners of the bigger properties on the Slade.

Following these consultations the City planners concluded that a new community centre was needed.

“From two public meetings and informal discussion with local residents it has become clear that one of the most pressing needs in this area is for an adequate range of community facilities. Although there two centres in the ward, Bullingdon at Peat Moors and Wood Farm at Nuffield Road, it seems that these do not totally satisfy the variety of demands of local residents” (letter from Planning Officer,1974).

In April 1974 the Council convened a meeting to consider “the setting up a steering group to consider the provision of social and recreational facilities in the Wood Farm ward” (BCA records). The meeting was attended by 42 people, including officers from the Council, local councillors and the representatives of ten local community groups. At the meeting the possibility of extending one or both of the existing community centres was rejected on the ground “that the existing centres could not fulfil the communities needs and should be supplementary to a new large purpose built centre”(BCA records) There was, however, a clear indication from Councillors “ that a new centre was a long term solution, mainly because of problems with finance”. The meeting resulted in the setting up of group, the Wood Farm Steering Group (WFSG) with the brief “to consider the nature of demand for community facilities in the area and the concept, siting and financing of the facilities which it is felt are required” (BCA records). The Bullingdon and Wood Farm community centres and the Wood Farm Area Action Group were represented on the steering group.

The debates over a new community centre for the area provoked a defensive and ambivalent response from the BCA committee. This was not surprising given that, if the plans came to fruition, the future of Bullingdon community centre would be very uncertain. Although it was never publicly stated that the two existing community centres

would be closed it was clear that they were viewed as having, at best, a “supplementary” role in future provision. The position of the BCA was outlined in letter which the Secretary, Fred Teale, wrote to the Planning Officer of the Council in November 1973. While not rejecting the idea of the new centre Fred expressed reservations about a large community centre becoming “nothing more than a gloried social club” and stated that he was “in favour of the smaller community centres because more members of the community could be involved in the activities” (BCA records). He also suggested that Bullingdon could be renovated to serve the whole of Wood Farm ward.

A year on from the setting up of the steering group little progress had been made in developing the new centre. In 1975 the “Slade” reported that the various groups had “been unable to agree on a suitable site and have failed to construct a sound plan for the use of the centre”. The paper also reported that financial constraints were having an impact.

“Financial resources, as we all know, are very limited at the present and it looks as if our Community Centre will not be started for at least another ten years”.

By the end of the 1970s the plan for a new community centre had effectively been dropped by the City Council. While disagreements over an appropriate site and planning problems in relation to some the suggested sites played a part, it is likely that wider financial and policy issues were key factors in the demise of the project. During the 1970s local government funding was cut by both Conservative and Labour governments, in the wake of the oil crisis of 1973 and the loan deal with the International Monetary Fund in 1974.

“Since the early seventies community associations have had to adapt to deteriorating financial conditions and reductions in local authority provision” (Report of the City Engineer, 1981).

More locally the needs of the Wood Farm ward did not command sufficient political priority in the City Council, in relation to the allocation of resources, when compared to other estates in Oxford, such as Barton, Blackbird Leys and Rose Hill. This point was later acknowledged by local Labour councillors. At a public meeting on recreation provision in the area, held in 1980, Councillor Alan Pope stated that the “ward had sat back whilst higher priority areas had been helped and stressed that it must now be the turn of Wood Farm” (BCA records). By the end of the 1970s the Wood Farm ward had the second biggest concentration of council housing in Oxford, with 1348 properties spread over the Wood Farm estate, Slade Park, Town Furze and Peat Moors. Blackbird Leys, with 2207 properties, had the biggest concentration. Data from research undertaken at Oxford University indicated that council housing in the Wood Farm ward was rated as the most popular ‘preferred’ choice for applicants for council housing in the city. (Centre for Criminological Research, 1991).

At the end of the 1970s the area still had two small community centres which the City Council estimated served a population of 4,600 in their respective “areas of benefit”.(Report of the City Engineer,1981)

Decline in Activities

Compared to the 1960s the 1970s was a relatively less successful decade for the BCA. Apart from the concerns over the future of the community centres in the Wood Farm ward there was a gradual decline in the activities which were directly organised by the BCA. At

the start of the 1970s the core groups and activities were bingo, the youth club, ladies night, dressmaking, the Happy Circle and social events for members. By the middle of the 1970s the ladies night and the dressmaking class had ceased to run and the youth club only operated during six of the years during the decade. The bingo, member's socials and excursions and the Happy Circle ran consistently during the 1970s. The BCA also ran children's socials, on a fortnightly basis, between 1972 –78 and summer fetes between 1970 -72 and in 1977. Bingo remained the mainstay of the community centre's activities, both in terms of the numbers attending the weekly sessions, the numbers going on excursions organized by the bingo group and the income which was generated for the centre, "bingo is the one activity which is relied upon to run the centre" (Secretary's Report, 1973).

The dressmaking class, which had run since the 1950s, was closed in 1971 due to a combination of falling numbers and the Education committee withdrawing the grant for the group's tutor. This loss of the grant reflected the cutbacks in local authority expenditure which were occurring in the early 1970s. The ladies night, which had been one of the most successful of the BCA activities, closed in 1974. This was due to falling numbers and the retirement of some of the key volunteers who ran the group, particularly Mrs Miller. Although the loss of key volunteers can easily destabilise groups this is not always the case. In 1972 a key figure in the Happy Circle, Mrs Smith, retired but the group was able to carry on. The youth club, like the dressmaking class, also suffered from local authority cuts. In June 1972 a representative of Oxford City Education Committee informed the community centre that "this activity was costing too much and that there was no justification in continuing after September" (BCA minutes, 1972). Fred Teale remarked that "we have been under

extreme pressure to close Youth Club functions” (BCA records, 1972). The closure of the club resulted in the youth leader, David Ward, resigning from Bullingdon. Mr Ward had been involved with the club since the mid - 1960s and he had also acted as the Treasurer of the Association. To their credit the BCA committee made efforts to maintain activities for young people. A Children’s Social was run for six years on a fortnightly basis. This was staffed by local volunteers and sometimes attracted over 50 members. Various attempts were also made to re – start the youth club, with funding coming from the community centre. A club ran in 1974 – 75 and during 79 – 80 and in 1976 - 77 the community centre provided space for a club which mainly catered for young people from the Town Furze estate. Problems with recruiting and maintaining paid youth leaders and volunteers was the main reason why the youth club was not run a regular basis.

Despite the relative decline in the direct activities provided by Bullingdon the finances of the community centre remained stable during the 1970s. During most years a modest surplus was generated. By the end of the decade, the income was £4513 and the expenditure was £4324. The main factor which accounted for the financial stability was an increase in income from lets to other community groups and organisations, which increased three fold between 1970 and 1979. Groups hiring the centre included the 7o’clock club, dance classes, church groups and a playgroup. The changing balance between the Associations direct activities and lets to other groups was a source of concern to Fred Teale, who viewed the trend as potentially undermining the role of the community centre in providing activities for its members and the wider community.

“The time has come to decide whether this is a community centre in its full sense or whether it is just a building to be let out and used only by individual groups of people. Surely more community activity could be envisaged” (Secretary’s Report,1972)

The trend was not reversed, prompting Fred Teale to comment in 1977;

“We are providing a community service by hiring out our premises for playgroups, church services etc and, quite frankly, without these lets we would be hard put to maintain the centre” (Secretary’s Report, 1977)

During the 1970s there was a relative decline in the membership of Bullingdon and the numbers attending the AGM. Membership ranged from 231 in 1970 to 109 in 1979 and the attendance at AGMs ranged from 50 in 1971 to 22 in 1978. An average of 12 attended the monthly committee meeting, the majority of whom were women. Four people, Mrs Dalton, Mrs Wharton, Mr Wharton, Mr Teale, served on the committee throughout the decade. Following the resignation of Mr Ward, over the closure of the youth club in 1972, Fred Teale took over the role of Treasurer and filled the dual positions of Secretary and Treasurer for the remainder of the decade. From 1972 the Chair of the Association was Charlie Wharton, who was also the caretaker of the community centre. Charlie and his wife Maud were stalwarts of Bullingdon, with an involvement dating back to the 1950s. They lived in Peat Moors, across the road from the community centre, and were involved in supporting a number of activities, including the bingo, youth club, children’s socials and social events for members.

During the 1970s there were no major changes to the fabric and condition of the community centre. Despite the efforts of the

committee, in lobbying for improvements, the problems with leaking roofs and the heating of the centre persisted. The coldness of the main hall was a regular source of complaints from members and the groups which hired the space during the winter months. On the wider community front the Association was involved in the debates about the Slade Park development and the plans for a new community centre for Wood Farm and Lye Valley. As previously noted, Bullingdon adopted a rather defensive and parochial stance in relation the proposals for a new community centre and this stance extended to a reluctance to engage in joint activities with the other community centre in the area. In 1975 the Association turned down an invitation from the Wood Farm Community Centre to co – operate on joint activities on the grounds “that there was no reason why we should not look after our own area” (BCA records).

THE 1980s

Leadership Renewal

At the end of the 1970s the BCA was a rather inward - looking organisation, which tended to be dominated by the interests of the committee members who were involved in the running of the weekly bingo sessions. Significant changes began during the early 1980's which impacted upon the range of activities provided by the BCA, the composition and interests of the management committee and the physical condition of the community centre. In 1980 the core activities of the BCA were bingo, youth club, the Happy Circle and member's socials and excursions. By 1985 the core activities were bingo, youth club, member's socials and excursions, keep fit and the running of a bar and social club. By 1989 the core activities were bingo, youth club, keep fit, afternoon club (senior citizens), parent and toddler, bar and social club, the management of the Peat Moors all weather sports, junior football (Bullingdon Boys), after school club and a drama group. During the 1980s the number of activities more than doubled. The key factors which influenced these changes were improvements to the fabric of the centre and the facilities available at the Peat Moors recreation ground and an influx of new committee members from the early 1980s.

From 1980 the composition of the BCA management began to change, with several new members being elected and, by the mid 1980s, these newcomers formed more than half of the committee. The new committee members included, at various times, William Kearney, Barbara Bryant, Sonia Lester, Norman and Sue Bridgewater, Frank Holliday, Pat Newman, Mrs Newsham, Mrs Pumphrey and Mrs Saxton. All of the new committee members lived in Lye Valley or the Wood Farm estate. On a personal note I first became involved with

Bullingdon in 1980, having been persuaded to help out as a volunteer with the youth club and became a committee member in the following year. In 1985 I took over from Charlie Wharton as the Chairperson of the BCA, with Fred Teale continuing in the dual role as Secretary and Treasurer. The committee now included a strong element of younger residents, who had mainly become involved in the management of Bullingdon through their participation in some of the activities which were based at the centre. These activities included the youth club, the Wood Farm playgroup which had rented space at Bullingdon since mid - 1970s and the Wood Farm play scheme, which used Bullingdon as one of its locations for a summer holiday programme. Most of the newcomers had young families and had a vested interest in improving services for children and young people in the area. They brought with them a mix of skills and relevant experience, derived from previous involvement in community development, trade unions and engagement with local voluntary groups. In the later years of the decade there was a further influx of new committee members, a number of whom were involved in the running of the newly formed Bullingdon Boys junior football club and the setting up of the Social Club. These new committee members included Christine Coggins, Trevor Kimber, Mike Lygo, Dave Lawrence and Chris Perks.

Leadership renewal can be problematic for small community groups and tensions can arise over competing agendas, differences between generations and contrasting leadership styles. Dennis has argued that Community Associations need different leadership skills according to the stage of their development. For instance, the leadership skills required to set up a new community centre can be different from those required to run and maintain a centre. He also suggested that established management committees tend to focus on a limited range of activities and can be resistant to change and suspicious of newcomers.

“There tends to be a strain towards homogeneity and a limitation of capacity on the part of the group to carry out leadership tasks corresponding only to the particular character of the existing homogenous leadership.....the tendency, once a fairly harmonious relationship is established, is for the leaders to exclude newcomers as a potential threat” (Dennis, 1961).

In the case of Bullingdon the renewal of leadership did result in some conflicts, particularly with regards to the running of the youth club. There were threats of resignation, from both the established and the new committee members, but these tensions never led, as has happened with some community associations, to open and public strife which undermined the running of the community centre. The negotiation of change was greatly helped by key figures in the established leadership, especially Fred Teale, accommodating to the process of leadership renewal, albeit with reservations. This accommodation is likely to have been influenced by the recognition that the Association could no longer rely on bingo as its main activity and source of income, as was acknowledged by Fred Teale in his report to the 1982 AGM.

“Bingo can no longer be considered the money spinner that it was – it made little profit last year” (BCA records).

The accommodation between the established leadership and the newcomers was also based on the recognition that opportunities existed for achieving much needed renovations of the community centre. This was a goal which appealed to the interests of all the members of the BCA management, irrespective of how long they had served on the committee.

Renovation

The failure of the plans, in the 1970s, to build a new community centre for Wood Farm and Lye Valley had created something of a vacuum with regards to social provision. It had also created an opportunity to explore the potential for renovating and improving one or both of the existing small community centres. As Fred Teale had suggested, in 1973, Bullingdon could be renovated to serve “the whole of Wood Farm”. In the early 1980s the Bullingdon committee began to draw up plans for renovating the centre and improving the facilities of the adjoining Peat Moors recreation ground. This initiative was supported by the Wood Farm Steering Group, the group which had attempted to develop a new community centre for the area, and by the local Labour Party and the councillors for Wood Farm. One of the Labour councillors, Alan Pope, lived in Bulan Road and was a representative for the City Council on the BCA management committee.

The detailed work on the plans and funding bids was undertaken by a small group of committee members, who were mainly involved in the running of the youth club and all of whom had joined the management committee in the early 1980s. The plans which were drawn up focussed on improving the fabric of the community centre and improving the facilities which were available at the Peat Moors recreation ground.

“The existing building has changed little, both internally and externally, from the early days of the centre and imposes severe constraints on the existing programme of activities and on the potential for developing new initiatives. The rather run-down appearance of the centre acts as an inhibition and deterrent to

recruiting new members and encouraging new group activities.”
((BCA grant application, 1982)

The overall plan had the following elements; the building of new changing rooms with showers, the installation of a new heating system for the centre, the construction of a new hall, the alteration of the existing main hall to create two small meeting rooms and a lounge bar area, the incorporation of bar facilities into the existing kitchen area and the building of an outdoor all weather recreation area on the playing field at Peat Moors.

In September 1982 the BCA submitted a funding bid of £45,000 to the Urban Aid Programme (UAP). This was the first time the BCA had submitted a national grant application, as compared to making relatively modest bids to the City and County Councils and local charities. The UAP had been set up in the late 1960s, initially as a response to government concerns about race relations in British cities (Popple,1995) and involved targeting grants to areas of “special social need” (UAP circular,1982). Applications for funding had to be supported by the local authority and the central government provided 75% of the grant which was awarded. The BCA bid was intended to fund only some of the elements in the overall plan for the renovation of the community centre. These were the new changing rooms and showers, the new heating system and the all - weather area.

The UAP bid was supported by the City Council but was turned down by the Department of the Environment. Disappointment about this decision was short lived, due to an unexpected and fortuitous development in January 1983. The Southern Region of the Sports Council, which had funds to spend before the end of the financial year, approached the Oxford City Council with an offer to fund 90%

of the building costs of an all - weather floodlit sports area, which should be located in a local community with social needs. Following lobbying by local councillors, Alan Pope and Albert Ramsay, the BCA proposal for an all - weather area at Peat Moors was selected as a suitable project. The Sports Council grant was for £40,000, including the provision of floodlights and, because the funding had to be spent by the end of March, the work on the site for the new sports area began in February. The site was on land next to the car park at Bullingdon, directly opposite to the community centre. The news of this development was greeted with surprise and enthusiasm by the BCA and young people in the area. William Kearney, who was a key volunteer with the youth club, commented;

“For someone out of the blue to say they are going to offer £40,000 to pay for this is like having a fairy godmother. We have got nothing at the moment. A lot of the kids in the area have been playing for teams elsewhere because of the lack of facilities” (Oxford Mail, 28 January, 1983).

Teenager Tommy White, who lived in Peat Moors, commented;

“I think it is a good idea. We don't get a lot to do in the evening around here. I think a lot of people around here will use it and the pitch will attract people from other areas” (Oxford Mail, 28 January, 1983).

Because of delays to the building work the all - weather area was not officially opened until September. A well attended opening event was marred by the floodlights not working and the replacement emergency lights proving to be very inadequate. Despite this incident the funding of the all - weather area had given considerable impetus to the plans the BCA had drawn up for the renovation of the community centre. In October 1983 the BCA submitted a second UAP

application for £33,000 for new changing rooms, showers and improvements to the toilets, including facilities for the disabled. The priority given to changing rooms and showers reflected a commitment to develop the opportunities provided by the new all-weather area. Also, a separate grant application, for a much-needed improvement to the heating system at the community centre, was submitted to the City Council. This was approved and a gas central heating system was installed in early 1984. The UAP application was supported by the City Council but was again turned down by the Department of the Environment. The BCA then requested the City Council to directly fund the extension and renovation of the community centre from its capital budget for community centre improvements. In February 1985 the Council approved the development, despite being under considerable financial pressure from the cutbacks in public expenditure which were being implemented by the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher. Following the tendering process and various adjustments to the plans the final cost of the development was £73,000 (Minutes of Recreation and Amenities Committee, 7th January, 1985).

The renovations included extending the centre to include new toilets, kitchen, bar and bar store and changing rooms with showers. A canopy would be built to link the rear hall to the toilets. Externally the car park would be levelled and extended and the recreation ground would be levelled to make it more suitable for playing football. The work on the community centre was intended to be completed in a six month period between March and September, but delays with the building work resulted the completion date being put back to the end of December. During this nine month period the BCA struggled to remain open and a number of regular activities and lets were severely disrupted. The BCA marked the completion of the

renovations with an open afternoon and evening for local residents on the 18th January 1986. The new bar was officially opened by Albert Ramsay, one of the City Councillors for Wood Farm. The renovations and extension were the first major changes to the physical fabric of the community centre since the building of the back hall in the early 1960s. However, the pre - fabricated main hall remained largely the same, except for the installation in 1987 of a false ceiling. The ceiling cost £3000 and was funded by grants from the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, the City Council and a contribution of £1,300 from the BCA.

In 1987 the BCA made a third UAP application. Unlike the previous applications this was not for a capital project but for funding to employ a youth and community worker. Underpinning the application was a concern to maximise the use of the new facilities at the centre and the recreation ground and the recognition that the BCA committee lacked the time and resources to undertake community development work in the local area.

“The BCA relies entirely on a small group of volunteers to run and manage a developing programme of activities and there are serious limitations to the volume of activities and responsibilities which they can handle at any one time.....volunteers, in our experience, rarely have the time and back up resources to undertake the development work which is aimed at uncovering unmet need and encouraging new group activities” (UAP application, 1987)

The application was not supported by the City Council and was never submitted to the Department of the Environment. A revised version of the application was then submitted to the County Council, which had the statutory responsibility for youth work in Oxfordshire. This application was turned down because of financial constraints and it

was to take a further eighteen years before the County Council employed a full - time youth worker for Wood Farm.

Sports Development

Plans for the management of the all - weather area started to be discussed as soon as the funding from the Sports Council was confirmed. The BCA committee members who were involved in the running of the youth club, William Kearney, Norman Bridgewater, Frank Holliday and myself, submitted a proposal to the City Council which argued the case for a partnership arrangement for the management of the area, involving local groups and the Council. It was also proposed that there should be priority given to bookings and use by residents of Wood Farm and Lye Valley and that a minimum charge should be made for the use of the area and the floodlights. These proposals received a positive reception from the Council's Recreation Manager. In April 1983 a public meeting was held at Bullingdon to discuss the management of the area, which resulted in the setting up group to represent local interests in the running of the project. This group comprised representatives of Bullingdon, St.Francis Church and the Boy Scouts and became known as the Bullingdon Sports Association.

Although the partnership model for managing the all - weather area had been agreed in principle the details of how this arrangement would operate was open to different interpretations. Following the opening of the area a number of problems developed with the running of the facility. There were tensions over the priority given to local bookings and those made centrally by the Council, there was confusion over who was responsible for various items of maintenance and questions were raised about what happened to the income generated by lets. Also, there was a difference in opinion

with the Council over whether the area should be locked when not booked or left open for informal use. The BCA were committed to open access. These problems were complicated by the Sports Association not functioning effectively. Within months of the opening of the area BCA members were handling the local bookings and payments, which was not surprising given the proximity of the area to the community centre. Following negotiations with the Council it was eventually agreed that the BCA would take full responsibility for the local management of the area and, in 1986, a license agreement was finalised which defined the respective responsibilities of the BCA and the Council. The BCA would be responsible for bookings, minor repairs, keeping the area tidy and the payment of the energy bills for the floodlights. Of particular significance to the BCA, given that the area was seen as a local community resource, was that the license agreement gave the BCA the right to fix the hiring fees, retain the income from lets and keep the area open for informal use. These arrangements remain in place until the present day.

Following the opening the all - weather area was well used by football and netball teams, with over football thirty teams training on the area during the period between 1987 and the early 1990s (BCA records). Despite the popularity of the area problems developed with the rubber surface of the pitch. In rainy conditions the surface tended to become slippery, which resulted in complaints by the teams which used the area and critical reports in the local press – “Slippery sports surface a danger to children” (Oxford Mail; Nov.18, 1987) .Following investigations the Council decided to re - surface the area in 1988, at the cost of £10,000.

The building of the all - weather area, the levelling of the pitch at the recreation ground and the provision of changing rooms at the

community centre gave a considerable impetus to the development of junior football at Bullingdon. Youth groups based at the community centre had played football at the Peat Moors recreation ground for many years and, from the mid - 1980s, the running of teams and the arranging of fixtures became more organised. In 1986 Bullingdon Boys was set up by a group of local residents, many of whom were concerned by the decline in the opportunities for their children to play football at local schools. During the 1986/7 season under 11s and 13s teams played in the Critchley Boys league and by the 1988/89 season the club was running four sides and producing a newsletter, which included match reports. Over sixty young people and adult volunteers were involved. The BCA supported the club by not charging for the use of training and changing facilities and by assisting with fund raising events. Trevor Kimber, who was a Key figure in the setting up of Bullingdon Boys, became a member of the BCA management committee. Over the next decade Bullingdon Boys was to become the major activity based at the community centre.

Activities

Apart from Bullingdon Boys and the management of the all-weather area the new activities which developed, in the 1980s, included keep fit, the bar and Social Club, the Afternoon Group, after school club, parent and toddler group and the drama group. The keep fit group, which started in 1983, was run by a tutor from the Headington Community Education Committee and the drama group was developed by Caroline Gibbs, who was a volunteer with the 7o'clock Club. The drama group started in 1989 and during that year the programme included an Old Time Music Hall and a production of 'A Christmas Carol'. The group became known as the Ad Hoc Cabaret Theatre. Caroline and her colleagues made imaginative use of the

limited facilities of the community centre, as was commented on in a review of a production of 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory'.

"My first visit to Bullingdon Community Centre and to see Ad Hoc Cabaret Theatre perform. The venue is one of the smallest theatres in our network and the fifty in the audience was approaching the maximum. The stage is very small with little wing space and I wondered how such a production could possibly be staged. When the show started it became clear. Using very basic lighting, scenery and props, the mainly child cast acted out a condensed version of the story inviting the audience to use their imagination – is this what child play is all about. I had taken my grandchildren and they were perfectly entertained." (Tony Heath, Drama Network Newsletter, September 1991).

The Afternoon Group, the parent and toddler group and the after school club were the outcome of a Manpower Services Commission Community Programme (MSCCP), which was sponsored and supported by the City Council. This central government initiative was designed to provide employment opportunities for the long term unemployed. Part time Community Recreation Assistants were employed for a year for twenty five hours a week, with the remit to "increase the range of recreation activities of various kinds which take place in community centres, especially during the day when many centres are under used" (Letter from City Council, 5th October 1984). The point about under – use during the day applied to Bullingdon, as many of the activities at the community centre ran during week day evenings or at the weekends. Bullingdon was one of twelve community centres which participated in the programme, which ran between 1985 – 88. The Recreation Assistants were supervised by the City Council and were expected to work on priorities which had been agreed with the management committee

of the community centres. The first priority which was identified was to re – start a senior citizens club, as the long established ‘Happy Circle’ had recently stopped running, due to a falling off in numbers. By February 1985 a new group, the Afternoon Club, had been set up and was being attended by twenty members. Support was provided by local volunteers and transport was provided by Age Concern. Later in the year the Recreation Assistants, with the assistance of local volunteers, started the After - School Club for five to eight year olds and the Parent and Toddler group for under-fives. The MSCCP produced positive results, despite the limited duration of the programme and the lack of continuity in the staffing. For the BCA the experience served to underline the value of having staff available to undertake development work and reinforced the disappointment over the failure to attract funding for a community and youth post for Lye Valley and Wood Farm.

One of more challenging of the new developments was the establishing of a bar and a Social Club. The renovation of the centre included the provision of a bar and bar store and this sparked interest in running a bar on a regular basis and not, as had happened in the past, only running the occasional bar for socials and private parties. The momentum for this change came mainly from the newcomers on the BCA management committee, who were keen to link the bar with an expanding programme of monthly social events, which were open to the wider community and not just the members of the BCA. This drive gathered more support when the junior football teams run by Bullingdon Boys became established at Peat Moors, bringing with them a new and growing number of parents and families. A drinks license was granted to the BCA in 1984 and the bar became fully operational at the end of 1985, following the completion of the new bar area. Fred Teale was at pains to point out

to members that the intention was not to turn the community centre into a pub.

“It does not mean that the premises will be turned into a pub. It only means that the bar will be available at the socials and events put on by the Association”. (BCA AGM, 1984)

A decision was made by the BCA committee not to enter into any financial arrangements with a brewer or to employ a bar steward. The bar opened on Sunday lunchtimes, some Wednesday evenings and for BCA socials and private lets. It was staffed by a small team of volunteers, who only received a payment when they worked on private lets. The running of the bar was not without problems and challenges. Volunteers were not always available to staff the bar, the mechanics of managing a bar (eg ; ordering stock) put more administrative pressure on the officers of the BCA and the presence of the bar made the community centre more vulnerable to break ins and petty crime. Shortly after the opening of the bar a birthday party at the community centre, attended by teenagers, got out of hand and the bar was broken into, resulting in the loss of £200 worth of stock and the theft of a clock which had been presented to the BCA by a local football club. The incident made headlines in the local press – “Trouble after 100 youths gatecrash party” (Oxford Times, 14/2/1986).

In the late 1980s the BCA were advised that for tax purposes the bar should be separated from the Community Association and this eventually resulted in the setting up of the Bullingdon Community Social Club in August 1990. Fred Teale became the Secretary and Treasurer of BCSC, I became the Chairperson and a number of the twelve members of the Social Club committee were also members of the BCA management committee. This overlap between the two

organisations was not accidental and was intended to avoid the possibility of the Social Club adopting policies which conflicted with the priorities of the Community Association, a problem which had arisen with some of the community centres in Oxford and elsewhere.

The bingo, youth club and members socials ran throughout the 1980s. Despite fluctuating numbers and reduced takings the bingo remained a major activity for the older members of the BCA and, in addition to the weekly bingo sessions, regular trips and excursions for members were run in the summer. The youth club, under the leadership of William Kearney, had a revival in the early 1980s and played a key role in pushing forward the plans to renovate the community centre and develop the Peat Moors recreation ground. By the mid – 1980s the youth club was split into junior and senior sections, with a combined membership of over 70 young people. The numbers attending inevitably created pressures on the volunteers who ran the club and, on occasions, disruptive behaviour resulted in minor damage to the community centre and caused conflict with some of the BCA management committee. For the youth club volunteers this experience underlined the limitations of running a club in a small multi – use hall and highlighted the need in Lye Valley and Wood Farm for a purpose built youth centre and the support of paid youth workers. This issue was to become the focus for a major campaign in the 1990s. From the late 1980s there was a leadership change in the running of the youth club, following William Kearney and Norman Bridgewater leaving the area. Sandra Cheery and Val Baker, both local residents, took over the running of the club.

During the 1980s the BCA had a mixed record with regards to lets to other groups. The Wood Farm Playgroup, which had been based at Bullingdon since the mid1970s, moved to the Wood Farm Primary school at the end of 1983 following numerous complaints about the

poor heating and cleaning of the community centre. These often well founded complaints came to a head at the 1983 AGM.

“The meeting exploded and the officers faced numerous questions, particularly regarding the complaints from the Playgroup relating to heating” (AGM, March 1983).

The departure of the Playgroup represented a big blow to the BCA, not only because of the loss of income but because the group was the major day time user of the centre, meeting five days week during mornings and afternoons. In 1988 a second group, the Wood Farm Information Centre, left the community centre and moved to the Wood Farm Primary School. The volunteer run Information Centre, which was supported by the Wood Farm Labour Party, had been based at Bullingdon for five years and provided much needed advice on welfare rights for local residents.

Despite the growth in activities the income generated by the BCA only increased gradually during the 1980s. In 1981 the income was £1894 compared to £4009 in 1989 and in three years of the decade the BCA incurred a small deficit. There was a relative decline in the income raised by lets and bingo, which was compensated for by the bar beginning to generate funds from the mid – 1980s. Membership fluctuated over the decade and reached the giddy heights of 396 in 1986, following the renovation of the centre and the opening of the bar. An average of 13 attended the monthly committee, with only three members – Fred Teale, Charlie Wharton, Maud Wharton – being ever present on the committee throughout the decade.

Involvement in the Wider Community

The changes in the management committee also resulted in the BCA becoming more engaged with the wider community and local

pressure group politics. Planning and traffic issues were the catalyst, from the mid – 1980s, for the community centre becoming involved in campaigns which were to run throughout the decade and beyond. In 1985 a plan to close roads in East Oxford raised concerns about increased traffic in Lye Valley and the risks of more cars “rat running” through the estate, especially along Bulan Road, to avoid congestion at the junction of Hollow Way and The Slade. A petition, signed by 245 residents, was submitted by the BCA to the City Council but no action resulted, because traffic related accidents and incidents in Lye Valley were considered to be too low. In 1989 further representation was made by the BCA when it was announced that the Morris Sports ground was being sold for development, which included a number of large scale commercial units and 149 units of mixed private and social housing. A second petition was submitted on behalf of the residents of Bulan Road, which was signed by 127 households, calling on the City Council to introduce traffic management measures to cope with the increased flow of cars which was likely to result from the development. Also, the BCA raised wider concerns about whether the local area had a sufficient social infra – structure to support the increase in population which would result from the new housing.

“The growth of population will result in increased demands on local social, educational and recreational facilities. As an organisation which provides a range of community services we are acutely aware of the limitations of existing provision. The demand for youth and recreational facilities already outstrip the limited provision which we have at Bullingdon”. (Letter to City Council, 8/3/1989)

Issues related to new housing developments and the allocation of 106 funds or developer’s contributions were to become a major focus for BCA lobbying during the 1990s. The biggest planning issue

on the Wood Farm estate, during the 1980s, was the long running controversy over the traveller's site at Slade Park West. Following the decision, in 1978, by the City and County Councils to close and re – locate the site the authorities embarked on a tortuous process of finding a new site. In 1980 a Public Inquiry rejected a site at Garsington (Watlington Road) and a proposed site at Slade Park East, across the by – pass from Wood Farm, was ruled out because of objections from the County Council. In 1986, following a second Public Inquiry, planning permission was finally approved for a site at the Hinksey Hill Interchange, despite fierce opposition from many of the residents of Kennington. The long delays in resolving the issue put further strains on the relations between the travellers and the Wood Farm residents who lived close to the site.

“It is important to recognise that the social costs of the present site have fallen, very unfairly, upon the shoulders of both the residents and the travellers. By social costs we mean the long term psychological stresses and strains involved in experiencing the friction, the frustration of repeated delays over planning decisions and the deep seated feeling of being powerless to influence the situation. Trapped in a cycle of proposals, objections and the rejection of alternative sites, the problems faced by the residents and travellers have been given scant regard.” (Wood Farm Labour Party, Evidence to Public Inquiry, September 1984)

The controversy over the Slade Park West site divided public opinion in Wood Farm and Lye Valley and the BCA did not collectively make representation about the issue. However, individual members of the BCA committee, including myself, were active in supporting the travellers through a pressure group, the Oxford Campaign for Gypsy Rights, which had been set up by the Oxfordshire Council for

Community Relations. The site was closed in the late 1980s and the land was developed for housing.

At the end of the 1980s it was announced that the Wood Farm Community Centre was due to be relocated from the site on the corner of Chillingworth Crescent and moved to a hall which was part of the Wood Farm Primary School. Communication between the two community centres improved during the 1980s and a joint information leaflet was produced in 1986.

THE 1990s

Social Change

At the beginning of the 1990s the two community centres were serving a ward which had a population of 7124, of which 5% were from non - white ethnic groups. The housing tenure of the Wood Farm ward was 59% owner occupied, 31% social housing and 10% privately rented (1991 Census). The majority of the social housing was on the Wood Farm, Slade Park and Town Furze estates. It had long been apparent to local residents that social changes were occurring in the Wood Farm Ward and this was confirmed by evidence from research studies in the late 1990s. A household survey, conducted by the City Council in 1998, estimated that the population of the ward had increased to 8,628 and that 11% were from non - white groups, compared to 5% in 1991 (Oxford Ward Profiles,1998). The Wood Farm ward, which was once almost exclusively white, was becoming more mixed and diverse. The survey also indicated that changes were occurring in the pattern of the housing tenure. Owner occupation had fallen to 54.5%, social housing remained at 31% and privately rented had increased to 12.9%. The growth in the private rented sector was mainly due to former owner - occupied housing becoming rented properties, including conversions for multi occupation. Amongst the factors which influenced this trend was the demand for housing for the increased numbers of students at Brookes University and the growth of employment at the nearby Churchill Hospital.

During the late 1990s there was significant new house building in Wood Farm and areas which were close to the ward. The former Morris Motors sports ground, which had been closed and gathering weeds for years, became a site for a mix of private and council housing which numbered 149 units. Nearby part the former Slade Hospital site was developed for 99 units of private housing and part of the former Cowley Barracks on Holloway was converted by Brookes University for 244 units of student accommodation. Including smaller developments, such as the new housing on the former traveller's site, over 500 new housing units were built in Wood Farm and Lye Valley during the 1990s. The changes in the social composition and the pattern of the housing tenure in the area was to accelerate over the next decade.

Research reports also highlighted social deprivation in the Wood Farm ward. In 2000 the government published a major report on social deprivation in wards throughout England, which was based on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) which measured deprivation in relation to income, employment, health and disability, education and skills, barriers to housing, crime and living environment. The IMD was devised by Michael Noble and colleagues at the Social Disadvantage Research Centre at Oxford University. The Oxfordshire results indicated that Wood Farm was the twelve most deprived ward in the County and the eighth most deprived out of the seventeen wards in Oxford.

Major changes were also occurring in the labour market. In 1971 manufacturing accounted for nearly one in three jobs in Oxford and, thirty years later, manufacturing had been reduced to 10% of jobs in 2001 (Oxford Through the Censuses, City Council, 2011) Symbolic of this change was the decline of the motor car industry in the city. In the early 1970s around 28,000 people were employed in the Cowley

Works and firms engaged in related production. The Cowley workforce was over 90% male and two thirds were employed in semi and unskilled occupations. Around half of the employees lived in Oxford (McCarthy,1990).By the end of the 1980s the numbers employed at Cowley had fallen to 10,000, as a result of years of a “continuous process of rationalisation at Cowley” (McCarthy,1990). The “rationalisation” of production and employment reached a nadir in 1988 /89 when the Rover Group announced plans to close the South Works at Cowley with the loss of around 2,500 jobs and the closure of the North Works, once new assembly facilities were installed at the Body plant. It was estimated that these cuts in production and employment would “leave just 5,500 people employed by the Rover Group at Cowley by the beginning of 1991” (McCarthy, 1990).

The proposal by Rover to close the South and North works provoked opposition and outcry from trade unions and the public ;

“It was feared that the closure of two of the three works at Cowley would devastate the local economy and spell the end of 80 years of motor manufacturing in Oxford” (McCarthy, 1990).

The City Council set up an independent inquiry into the economic and social impact of the proposed closures, which was chaired by Lord McCarthy of Headington. Both the Bullingdon and Wood Farm community centres submitted evidence to the inquiry. The Wood Farm community centre highlighted the likely impact of income loss and unemployment on local shops and trades.

“The effects would be disastrous. There would be fall in business for local traders which, in the case of the small trader, could mean the collapse of his business altogether” (Submission to the Inquiry, 1990).

The Bullingdon evidence focused on the impact of unemployment on older workers, the majority of the Cowley workforce were aged over forty, the loss of future employment opportunities for young people and the lack of support services in the Wood Farm area.

“The area currently lacks a structure of support services to cope with the social effects of large - scale unemployment. The area has no full time youth worker, no locally based social work office and no advice centre with full time staff. Voluntary bodies, like the BCA, cannot be expected to pick up the pieces and offer specialist help on social and financial problems” (Submission to the Inquiry,1990).

The history of the Lye Valley and Wood Farm estates was inextricably linked with the development and fortunes of the Cowley Works. For many decades the area had the characteristics of an occupational community. A community which is heavily dependent on a single source of employment and where, particularly for men, there is an overlap between social relations formed at the workplace and relations in their place of residence. By the time of the proposed closures of the South and North Works Wood Farm had become less dependent on the motor industry for employment, because successive waves of restructuring since the 1970s had resulted in a large reduction in the workforce. Despite these changes Wood Farm, along with Blackbird Leys, Rose Hill, Littlemore, Temple Cowley, East Oxford, Risinghurst and Marston, was identified as being amongst the areas in Oxford which would suffer the most from the closures (Oxford Motor Industry Research Project, 1990).In addition to job losses there would also be a further erosion in the social capital of these areas.

“Some communities have very long associations with the Cowley Works going back two or three generations. For these areas, the run

down of car manufacturing over the years has led to the breaking of important cultural bonds. The political and social life of the City has been powerfully shaped by the existence of the Cowley Works. This has been under threat for some years” (McCarthy, 1990).

Decline in Activities

Community Associations tend, like many voluntary organisations, to experience cycles of expansion and contraction, which are shaped by a complex range of factors. These factors include the availability and skills of local community leaders, changes in the demography and social composition of local areas and the impact of the social and economic policies administered by central and local government. During most of the 1980s and the early 1990s Bullingdon experienced a period of expansion, but this trend began to tail off by the mid - 1990s and, by the start of the new millennium, the BCA was facing a series of critical challenges. At the start of the 1990s the activities provided by the BCA included bingo, the Social Club, afternoon club (senior citizens), parents and toddlers group, Bullingdon Boys (junior football), the all - weather area, youth club and the drama group. By the end of the decade three of these activities - bingo, the afternoon club and the drama group - had ceased to run. The only new activity which started was a short lived after school club which ran between 1994/5.

In 1993 the bingo closed after years of gradual decline in the numbers attending and the income generated. Bingo had been run, on a weekly basis, at Bullingdon since the early 1950s and it had been a cornerstone activity for the BCA. For decades it was biggest group using the centre, had produced a major source of income for the BCA and representatives from the group had been key players in the management of the centre. In addition to the weekly sessions

the group also regularly ran a range of social events for its members, including trips to the seaside, theatre and Xmas parties. The Ad Hoc Cabaret Theatre also closed in 1993, after Caroline Gibb was unable to continue her co – ordination of the groups for adults and children. The community centre had lost one of the most creative and innovatory of its activities.

The senior citizens group ran successfully for most of the decade and attracted up to forty members to the Monday afternoon meetings. In the early 1990s some of the group became involved in a six - month adult education project, which was jointly run by Bullingdon and the Ruskin College Age Well Group and which was funded by a £5000 grant from Charity Projects. The project had three aims;

“To develop a participative educational model suitable for people aged 50 – plus in a community setting. To actively involve participants in the shaping and direction of the project and their own learning. To produce by the end of the project a report and pack of materials for use by other community centres “(Hughes,1992)

A locally based development worker, Val Baker who worked with the Bullingdon youth club, was appointed to encourage participation and to ensure that people who were housebound could attend. The group ran on a Tuesday afternoon and regularly attracted 15 members. Most were female and the ages ranged from 61 to 92. All the members had left school at the earliest possible age, usually 14, and none had any qualifications. The topics covered in the programme were negotiated with the members and included early school days, health and welfare, myths about ageing, poetry and short story writing. Feedback from the group was generally positive, “participants clearly valued the opportunity to express themselves and have their experience valued” (Hughes,1992). The project did

not continue after the six - month programme, mainly due to a lack of funding, and was completed with the publication of a learning pack, “It’s Never Too Late” (Ruskin College, 1993).

The senior citizens group ran until 1999 and left the community centre in controversial circumstances. Following months of difficulty with the Age Concern transport for the club the group decided, without any consultation with the BCA, to move its meetings to the local ‘Fairview’ pub, following an offer from the landlord of free transport and space. The BCA had lost a well - established group, “poached” was the description used by some of the BCA committee members. This unexpected departure, coupled with the earlier demise of the bingo group, left a big gap in the activities which the community centre was providing for the older residents of the area. At the other end of the age range the parents and toddler group and the youth club ran throughout the 1990s. The youth club continued to be erratic, combining periods of well attended sessions with months when the club was closed due to a lack of staff or disruptive behaviour by young people. The need for improved facilities for the young people of the area become a major issue in the 1990s, following a spate of joy riding on Wood Farm .These incidents resulted in the setting up of the Wood Farm Youth Centre Campaign, which was to prove the most protracted and challenging of the BCAs engagements in wider community issues. A detailed case study of this campaign is provided in the next chapter.

Bullington Boys

The Bullington Boys Football Club was a success story during a period of decline in the activities run by the BCA. By the early 1990s the BBFC had replaced bingo as the biggest activity based at the community centre and continued to expand during most of the

decade. By 1998 the club was running ten sides, covering age ranges of under 8s to under 18s, and over a hundred and twenty children, young people and adult volunteers were involved.

The BBFC were also the prime movers behind the development of the bar and the Social Club at the community centre. There was an overlap between the committee members of the BBFC and the Social Club committee and BBFC volunteers, who were involved in the running of football teams, also helped out with the staffing of the bar. Unlike the bars and Social Clubs in some of the Oxford community centres the Bullingdon bar ran only on a part time basis. It was mainly open when football matches were played at Peat Moors on a Sunday and when the BCA and the BBFC ran social events or private lets which required bar facilities. The Social Club did not employ any staff and the volunteers who ran the bar were paid a small remuneration when they worked on private lets. During the 1990s the bar became the major source of income for the community centre and generated modest profits during most years, which were paid under a covenant to the BCA.

From the early 1990s the BCA and the Social Club started to draw up plans to expand the use of bar facilities by converting the centre's under used back hall into a dedicated space for the Social Club. The existing bar was located in the centre's main hall and this prevented it from being open when other activities were using the hall. The renovation of the back hall took five years and was mainly undertaken by volunteers from the BCA, BSC and the BBFC.

“Members have worked in the evenings and weekends and during holidays. Many of the materials needed for the project – eg; paint, wallpaper, tools – have been donated by local residents” (BCA press release, April 1997)

The building work, which included lowering the ceiling, was funded by the BCA and small grants received from the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council and the City Council. Furniture was donated by Oxford Brookes University. The new facility was officially opened, by Councillor Alan Pope, at a well attended event in April 1997.

The expectations for the new Social Club provision were never fulfilled. After an initial surge in interest the facility did not open on a regular basis and, by the end of the 1990s, the BCA and the BSC were struggling to find the volunteers to maintain the opening of a bar in either the main hall or the back hall. Even the well - established Sunday lunch time bar had ceased to open on a regular basis by the spring of 1999 and, in the same year, the Social Club recorded a small loss in its takings. The attendance at the BSC management meetings, mirroring the situation with the BCA committee, gradually declined over the decade. At the start of the 1990s an average of fourteen had attended the monthly meeting and, by the end of the decade, this had been reduced to five. The stalwarts who attended, on a regular basis, included Trevor Kimber, Charlie Wharton, Andy Lygo, Richard Hawtin and Chris Perks.

A reduction in the number of volunteers who were prepared to help with the running of the bar was a major factor in accounting for the decline of the Social Club. Other factors included the relatively small membership base of the BCA and the BSA and the rival attractions of the established pubs and clubs in the Wood Farm and Headington area.

BCA Committee

The BCA management committee and membership reflected the overall decline in activities at the community centre during the 1990s. At the start of the decade an average of ten were attending

the monthly meeting. This was down to six by 1995 and was further reduced to four by the end of the decade. Most of the people who had joined the committee in the early 1980s had left by the early 1990s and the BCA was having problems with leadership renewal. The membership of the community centre rarely exceeded a hundred throughout the decade.

In May 1996 the BCA experienced a major loss when Fred Teale died. Fred had joined Bullingdon in 1963 and become the Secretary of the BCA in March 1965, a position he combined with being Treasurer from 1972. When the Social Club was formally established in 1990 he also combined the roles of Secretary and Treasurer for the Social Club. Fred was the administrative anchor of the BCA and the Social Club. He handled the correspondence and kept the records, took the minutes at the monthly meetings, maintained the membership lists, helped with bookings, kept the stock records for the Social Club, provided the link with the City and County Councils and compiled reports for the Charity Commission and other external bodies. Fred was closely involved in the running of the bingo and was the President of Bullingdon Boys. He was also, for many years, the BCA representative on the Oxford Federation of Community Associations. When the Social Club opened the back hall it was dedicated to Fred. Following his death the BCA and the Social Club had to re – structure their committees. Trevor Kimber took over as Treasurer of the BCA and combined the positions of Chair and Treasurer for the Social Club. I became the Secretary of the BCA and the Social Club and Chris Perks took over the bookings for the community centre. Around the same period Charlie Wharton retired as the caretaker for Bullingdon and was replaced by Patricia (Pat) White. Pat lived next door to the community centre and her family

had been involved with Bullingdon for many years. Charlie Wharton remained on the committee after his retirement.

At the same time as the BCA committee was struggling to attract new members it was also facing financial challenges. Despite the income generated by the Social Club the BCA accounts were in deficit every year between 1993 – 97, a situation which reflected increased running costs (eg; heating), the loss of activities (eg; bingo) and the difficulties in generating income from private lets. On a couple of occasions the BCAs limited reserves had to be used to pay outstanding bills and, in 1995, the centre's alarm system and telephone were discontinued to cut down on running costs. It was ironic that these cuts were made during a period when there was an escalation in crime and disruptive behaviour at Peat Moors and in the wider Wood Farm community.

Because of its relatively isolated location the community centre had always been vulnerable to break-ins and petty vandalism. During the 1990s the incidents became more frequent and included thefts from the Social Club, young people disrupting activities held at the centre and damage to the all - weather sports area. Drug use, car related crime and joy riding had become more commonplace in Wood Farm and Lye Valley, as it was on other estates in Oxford. By the late 1990s the Bullingdon car park was being used for the trading of drugs and drugs paraphernalia was evident around the all - weather area, in the car park and on the playing field. On a number of occasions Pat White and myself collected discarded needles. The situation reached a nadir in the summer of 1998 when a stolen car, which had been used for joy riding, was set on fire in the car park close to the entrance to the community centre. The fire caused extensive smoke damage to the walls of the centre. In July the BCA management committee held a crisis meeting with the local City and County

Councillors, Officers from the City Council and representatives of the Thames Valley Police. The BCA committee highlighted the incidents which had occurred over recent months;

“Damage to the floodlights of the all - weather area, trading of drugs in the car park: between 15 – 21 needles being found around the community centre, a knife being found outside of the entrance to the centre, a stolen car being set on fire near to the entrance to the centre which caused smoke damage to the walls” (Minutes of Meeting ; 7/7/1998)

The BCA representatives stressed that the incidents represented a serious threat to the future use of the centre and reflected a wider set of issues in the local area. The parent and toddler group had suspended its sessions because of health and safety concerns and the fear of disruptive behaviour was having an impact on the lets at the centre. The meeting was tense and there were some angry exchanges, particularly with reference to police response times and the delays in removing discarded needles. After the meeting the police presence in the area was stepped up and a crime prevention survey was undertaken by the Thames Valley Police. By the autumn several measures had been implemented, at the cost of £12,000, to improve the safety of the site. These measures included installing gates at the entrance to the car park and at the entrance to the community centre and new fences around the centre. The BCA committee welcomed these improvements but recognised that longer term changes were also needed, particularly with regards to the lack of facilities for young people in the Wood Farm area. Over twenty years later the Bullingdon car park is still being used, on occasions, for drug dealing.

Planning Issues

Despite the difficulties which were being experienced in sustaining activities at the community centre the BCA remained heavily engaged in wider community issues, particularly in relation to facilities for young people and the planning issues which resulted from the housing and commercial developments which were occurring in Wood Farm and Lye Valley.

In 1991 the City Council granted planning permission for the development of a number of retail stores, including car parking spaces, on land at the junction of the Eastern By – Pass and Horspath Driftway. The site had previously been used for car storage by Rover. Under the planning agreement the developer was required, by the City Council, to contribute a sum of £100,000 for “highway and traffic measures in the vicinity of the development that help with the consequences of the extra traffic” (Oxford City Council, 20/3/1991). This payment was negotiated under the terms of Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and the payment made by a developer is variously referred to as “106 payment” or “planning gain” or “developer’s contribution”.

“106 agreements are a mechanism which make a development proposal acceptable in planning terms. They are focused on site mitigation of the impact of a development” (Local Government Association, 2015).”

In March 1991 the City Council held a public meeting, at St. Francis Church Hall, at which possible traffic management measures were outlined and discussed. These measures included road humps and road narrowing on the Lye Valley estate, which were intended to reduce the speed and volume of cars passing through the area. The BCA supported the proposals but it was apparent at the public

meeting that the measures, particularly the road humps, also attracted considerable criticism from some residents of Lye Valley.

Three years then elapsed before there was any further development on the traffic calming measures. The main reasons for the delay involved the negotiations over the re – opening of access to the Eastern By – Pass via Horspath Driftway and gaining the County Council’s approval for the scheme. In February 1995 an exhibition of proposed traffic calming measures for Lye Valley was held at St. Francis Church. The proposals included road humps in Bulan Road, Dene Road and part of Town Furze Road and the closure of Bulan Road at the junction with Hollow Way. The proposed closure of Bulan Road provoked a number of objections from local residents and opinion tended to be divided over the plan to install road humps. The residents of Bulan Road mainly supported the proposal for road humps but opposition was voiced by residents in Dene Road and other streets on the Lye Valley estate. Following a review of the consultation the Council dropped the proposed closure of Bulan Road and retained the traffic calming measures. Opposition to the road humps continued, via petitions and letters in the Oxford Mail, and local councillors reported that there was a possibility that the Council was considering cancelling the traffic calming measures for the area. The BCA responded by sending a lengthy letter which outlined the history of representation about traffic issues in Lye Valley and argued for the implementation of the traffic calming measures, including the road humps.

“The BCA is concerned with promoting a safe environment for all local residents and we have demonstrated this commitment over many years. To cancel the proposed calming measures would expose the area to an unacceptable level of risks and would create

an increasingly unsafe environment for local residents.” (BCA letter to City Council, 1997).

In the autumn of 1997 the Council started work on installing the traffic calming measures in Lye Valley. It was twelve years since the BCA and the residents of Bulan Road had first submitted a petition about the issue. After the measures were implemented opposition to the road humps continued to be voiced and there were calls for the humps in Dene Road and Town Furze Road to be removed. The humps were retained but modifications were made to their size and design. Of all the local campaigns which the BCA supported the traffic calming issue proved the most contentious and divisive in terms of local community relations. Over twenty later some residents of the area remain bitterly critical of the road humps and the role which the BCA played in getting them installed.

In the late 1990s the former Morris Sports Ground, which has been closed for nearly ten years, began to be developed for a mix of private and public housing. The planning gain from various developers amounted to £213,000, of which £100,000 was specifically earmarked for the of replacement recreation facilities. In November 1996 local councillor Alan Pope reported that the Council’s planning committee was recommending that all of the funding earmarked for replacing recreation facilities should be spent on a new running track at the Horspath Road Sports Ground, which is located some miles from Wood Farm and Lye Valley. The BCA committee reacted to this news with a “mixture of anger and amazement” (BCA minutes, 5/11/16) and immediately started to lobby the Council about the lack of public consultation over the spending of the funding and the prospect of much needed resources for Wood Farm and Lye Valley being diverted to elsewhere in the city. This lobby was supported by the local Councillors and the

Bullington Boys Football Club and the Wood Farm Youth Centre Campaign. Later in the month the Council agreed not to spend the whole of the £100,000 on the Horspath Sports Ground and to hold a consultation on how the 106 funds should be used.

In late December 1996 the BCA , Bullington Boys and the Youth Campaign submitted a detailed set of proposals about the use of the 106 funding. These proposals include upgrading the all - weather area at Peat Moors, provision of disabled access to the dressing rooms at Bullington, the setting up of a drop - in advice centre for young people at the Wood Farm first school, developing a new junior football pitch in Wood Farm and the upgrading of the children's play area at Peat Moors. The renovation of the all - weather area was a particular priority for the BCA, because of difficulties with the surface being slippery in damp conditions and the floodlights being inadequate. These problems had resulted in the BCA losing bookings and had attracted considerable criticism and concern from user groups and Council officers. On the 3rd March 1997 the Council held a public consultation meeting at the Wood Farm First School about recreation facilities in the area and the use of the 106 funding. Thirty members of the public attended, including ten children, and various proposals were considered and voted upon. These proposals included those suggested by the BCA and other community groups and suggestions which were put forward by the City Council. The major proposal favoured by the Council was the building of a new OXSPORT facility on the former Morris Motors sports ground, which would include a floodlit all - weather pitch. At a vote taken at the end of the meeting two priorities gained the most support and these were the OXSPORT facility and the renovation of the all - weather area at Peat Moors.

Later in March the City Council announced that the 106 funding would be used for the OXSPORT facility (£111,200), the upgrading of the all weather area at Peat Moors (£25,000), the improvement of the Horspath sports ground (£69,400) and the provision of children's play area for the new housing which was being built at the former Morris Sports Ground (£7,750). The BCA gave a mixed reception to these plans. There was a welcome for the proposal to upgrade the area at Peat Moors and for spending more of the funding in Lye Valley and Wood Farm rather than elsewhere in the city. Serious reservations were expressed about the OXSPORT facility, which was considered to be too close, less than half a mile, from the all - weather area at Peat Moors. There was also criticism about the proposed advice centre for young people not receiving support, which was mainly on the grounds that youth work was a County Council and not a City Council responsibility. The renovated all weather area at Peat Moors was officially re – opened, by Councillor Val Smith, on the 29th November 1999.

The third major planning issue which impacted on Wood Farm and Lye Valley, during the 1990s, concerned proposals to develop land which was formerly occupied by the Slade Hospital in Horspath Driftway. The hospital was opened in 1939 as an isolation hospital and, as the demand for isolation facilities decreased, two thirds of the buildings were adapted in 1983 for use by patients with learning disabilities. In the early 1990s the Regional Health Authority submitted plans for a large retail park to be developed on eight acres of land which was occupied by redundant wards and former hospital buildings. The BCA, along with many other organisations, lodged objections to the proposals. The BCA objections concerned the implications for traffic volumes, the over – provision of large retail stores in the area and the need for new housing to be built. The City

Council rejected the proposal and also rejected a revised proposal in 1997 which combined a retail unit with plans to build eighty residential units on the site. In early 1998 the Health Authority submitted a third plan which proposed using the site exclusively for residential purposes and which was approved by the City Council. The BCA welcomed the use of the site for housing but repeated previous concerns about the implications of increased traffic volumes in the area and the growth in population not being matched by increased services and facilities.

“The Bullingdon Association is concerned with the social development of the local community and the quality of the environment and services. In this context the Slade development, like other major developments in the area, raises wider issues about the current lack of facilities in the Wood Farm ward and the apparent failure of the planning and political process to match increased population with improved service and recreational provision” (Letter to Planning Control, January 1998)

The City Council negotiated several 106 contributions for the development of the former hospital site. One of these contributions was for £15,000 to be “made towards the costs of recreation provision for older children” (Letter from City Council, 31/7/1998). The 106 contribution was to prove vital for the campaign to establish a youth centre in Wood Farm.

Wood Farm Youth Centre Campaign

In the early 1990s housing estates in Oxford hit the national headlines because of a spate of joy riding and displays of stolen cars, which sometimes resulted in confrontations with the police. The most volatile estate was Blackbird Leys.

“By August 91 displaying on the Leys had turned into a spectator sport, people turned out to watch, bringing their children with them on a number of occasions. The police were making arrests for car related offences and a number of stolen cars were set alight.”
(Stockford, 1991)

The feminist journalist Beatrix Campbell suggested that there was a link between the displays and joy riding and the decline of the nearby Cowley Works. The joy riding was part of the “collective cultural price to pay” referred to in the McCarthy report on the closure proposals at the Rover factory.

“Within a single generation a major tradition of employment, political alignment, income and identity for working class men, indeed a tradition that formed cultures of masculinity, was all but extinguished..... The lads may have stopped making cars, but that did not prevent them from stealing them” (Campbell, 1993)

Joy riding and displays were not confined to Blackbird Leys and incidents also occurred on the Barton, Rose Hill and Wood Farm estates. In Wood Farm the displays were normally held outside of the shops in Atkyns Road and in February 1992 two young men were arrested for taking a car without consent and fifteen onlookers were detained and then released without charge (Oxford Mail, 5th Feb.1992). In the spring of 1993 the joy riding escalated, resulting in a stepping up of the police presence and claims that the police had

imposed an unofficial curfew on the estate. Malvin Moss, who was a Parish Councillor for part of Wood Farm, commented;

“Officers in riot vans have paid nightly visits ...forcing teenage residents to stay in in-doors” (Oxford Times,12th March 1993)

The displays and joy riding continued well into the mid and late 1990s. In May 1994 a police women was injured by stones thrown by a crowd who were watching a display in Leidan Road and crime comparison data for 1996/97 indicated that Wood Farm had a much higher rate of theft of a vehicle than Barton or Rosehill (Oxford City Council, 1997. The joy riding and the policing strategies generated considerable tension and controversy in the local community. In May 1993, at a time when the joy riding was escalating, the Wood Farm Tenants and Residents Association (WFTRA) held its AGM, which was attended by sixty residents. The meeting was dominated by concerns about the impact of the joy riding. Amidst calls for tougher policing there were also calls for preventative strategies to be adopted, which involved improving the provision for young people on the estate. The BCA representatives who attended the meeting were vocal in advocating this approach and, at the end of the meeting, it was agreed to hold further meetings to address the lack of opportunities and facilities for young people. At the time of the WFTRA meeting the Bullingdon youth club was closed, due to disruptive behaviour and a lack of volunteers, and the only youth club in the area was run by the Cornerstone Community Church, which held weekly sessions at the Wood Farm Community Centre. The leader of the youth club was Pastor David Bartrip, who lived on Wood Farm and was a well known and respected figure in the local community.

Building the Campaign

During the summer of 1993 a series of well attended meetings were held, involving representatives of Bullingdon, the Wood Farm Community Centre, the Residents and Tenants Association, Community Education (which included the youth service), the police and City and Parish councillors. One of the meetings was attended by twenty young people who had been contacted by Valerie Moss, a local resident and volunteer youth worker, when they were “hanging round the shops in Wood Farm”. The result of these meetings was the setting up an action group, which become known as the Wood Farm Youth Centre Campaign (WFYCC), and the drawing up of a plan to address the immediate and longer term needs of young people living in the Wood Farm ward. The short term goals involved the re – opening of the Bullingdon youth club and the establishing of new club at the Wood Farm community centre. The longer term goals included attracting more funding for youth workers, developing a purpose built youth centre and improved outdoor recreational provision for young people. For the first time for years the areas two community centres were working together on a joint venture. From the outset the BCA had two representatives at the meetings, Frank Holliday and myself, and I acted as the secretary/convenor of the action group.

By September a lobby of the County and City Council was underway and, by early December, several organisations had written to the County Council supporting the aims of the campaign. These organisations included the Wood Farm First School, the Slade Nursery, the police, the local branch of the Labour Party, the Tenants and Residents Association, the Headington Community Education Council, Foresters Playgroup, Risinghurst and Sandhills Parish Council (which covered part of Wood Farm) and the two community centres

in the area. Letters of support were also received from Andrew Smith, the MP for Oxford East, and three local councillors. In addition to the letter writing a petition was launched which urged the County Council, which had the statutory responsibility for the youth service, to;

“Take positive action to improve the facilities and provision for young people living in the Wood Farm area of Oxford. The priorities should be;

*The allocation of extra funding to employ additional youth workers.

*In the longer term, the provision of a purpose built youth club.

The needs of the young people of Wood Farm have been neglected for too long”.

The campaign also produced an eight page report which outlined the aims of the group, highlighted the relative lack of provision in the area and drew comparisons between facilities for young people in Wood Farm and the Barton estate. The smaller Barton estate had a purpose built youth centre, which was part of the new Barton Community Centre, and had a full time youth worker and funding for five youth work sessions a week. In contrast the Wood Farm ward did not have a paid youth worker, had funding for one youth work session a week and the youth club shared facilities at the Bullingdon community centre.

By the end of 1993 progress had been made in achieving the short term goals of the campaign. The youth club at Bullingdon had re – opened and funding from the County Council was made available for a club to be opened, on a once a week basis, at the Wood Farm Community Centre. The goal of building and staffing a new youth centre was to prove far more challenging. The cost of a new centre

had been estimated, by the County Councils Youth Service staff, at anything between £300,000 – 5000,000, with staffing costs of between £35,000 - £40,000 per year.

In March the petition, which was signed by 712 local residents, was presented to the Education Committee of the County Council and was referred to a sub - committee, the Community Education Development Working Party. The lobby of the Education Committee was attended by members the WFYCC, including four young people, local County and City councillors and staff of the Youth Service. The event was reported in the local press and radio. In April the Working Party considered the representation from the WFYCC and decided that the request for extra resources should be subject to a further report, which considered the issue of youth work in Wood Farm in the context of the County Council's policy and budget plans for 1995/96. At the working party meeting the WFYCC case was presented by Malvin Moss, who was now a Labour City Councillor for the Wood Farm ward.

Alongside the lobbying of the County Council the WPYCC was active on several other fronts. Plans were made to survey young people about their views on what should be provided in a new centre and approaches were made to the City Council about the availability of land in Wood Farm for the building of a centre. Amongst the sites which were identified as possibilities was land at the corner of the Slade and Girdlestone Road, the Bullingdon Community Centre site, the Wood Farm Community Centre site and the former Morris Motors Sports ground. Local fund raising also started and, in the spring of 1994, the WFCC received a considerable boost with the news that a major firm in Oxford, UNIPART DCM, was prepared to support the campaign as one of their business in the community project's.

“The company is willing to make available existing resources to assist where practical in administration, physical work, fundraising with other interested parties. Most importantly, we would wish to use the project to teach local young people a variety of skills both practical and administrative. Finally, the project may be backed with financial resources which will be used to purchase materials, furnishings etc” (UNIPART DCM, 26/9/1994)

Ron Mansfield from UNIPART began to attend the meetings of the WFCC and immediately become involved in the discussions about fund raising and possible designs for a new centre. Ron was to make a major contribution to the campaign. The link with UNIPART was due to the initiative of Frank Holliday who suggested to the firm’s management that they should support the WFCC, because of the proximity of Wood Farm to the UNIPART factory and the number of Wood Farm residents who were employed by the firm. Frank worked in the UNIPART warehouse and was on the BCA and WFYCC committees.

On the 7th November the Community Education Development Working Party considered the report on youth work in Wood Farm. Before the debate on the report I addressed the meeting supported by David Buckle, the County Councillor for Wood Farm, and members of the campaign group, including young people. The report made positive comments about the progress made by the WFYCC but held out no prospect of funds being made available for the staffing a new centre.

“In the light of the budget reductions facing the Council for 1995/6 there is no prospect of a £35,000 County contribution for staffing being found in the near future” (CEDWP minutes, 7/10/94).

A motion moved by Liz Brighthouse, a County Councillor who lived in Wood Farm, calling for more positive support was defeated by one vote and the working party accepted the recommendations of the report.

At the same time as the working party meeting the Recreation and Amenities Committee of the City Council was also meeting to consider youth facilities in Wood Farm. This meeting was attended by two Councillors for the Wood Farm ward, Malvin Moss and Susan Brown, and had a more positive outcome for the WFYCC. A commitment was made to investigate possible sites for a youth centre and the County Council were requested to include financial provision for the new centre and staff in its budget.

By the end of 1994 the WFYCC had established itself as a credible pressure group and had put the issue of the facilities for young people in Wood Farm firmly on the agenda of the County and City Councils. The campaign was supported by a broad range of local organisations and had the backing of UNIPART DCM and the Wood Farm City and County Council Councillors. Also supportive were officers of the two authorities, especially Colin Smith (Youth Service) and Fergus La Page (City Council). Despite this support it was painfully apparent that neither of the two Councils had the capacity to finance the building and staffing of a new youth centre. This was mainly due to the caps on local government expenditure which had been imposed by the Conservative government, which resulted in the City Council cutting £1.25 million in 1995/6 and the County Councils education budget being cut by over £3million during the same period (Oxford Times, 16/9/94 and 20/10/94). If the WFYCC wanted a new youth centre it would have to raise the funding through its own efforts.

Funding and Site Issues

During 1995 the campaign mainly focused on funding applications, local fund raising and issues related to finding a site for the proposed youth centre. In March the BCA submitted a proposal to the Millennium Commission, which was set up to celebrate the turn of the millennium and was the first of the national lottery funds to be established under the National Lottery Act of 1993. The BCA submitted the bid because it was a registered charity and had agreed to act as an umbrella organisation for grant applications made by the WFYCC. The bid was for a capital grant of £250,000, which was half of the total costs of building a new youth centre. The plan for the centre included a large hall, lounge/canteen, a workshop space, a small room for counselling, office and toilets. The proposal satisfied the Millennium Commission's eligibility criteria but the BCA/WFYCC was only given two weeks to submit a full application, which included a detailed business plan. The deadline was too demanding and the group decided to re – submit the application when the next round of bids opened in September. Apart from the lottery the campaign drew up a list of national and Oxfordshire based trusts to approach about funding.

Alongside the preparation of the lottery and trust applications the campaign also became engaged with local fund raising, which included a door to door collection, appeals to local businesses, jumble sales, social events and running stalls at local events. Volunteers from the Wood Farm community centre, including Marlene Soul, Val Moss and Jackie Merrit, were particularly active in the local fund raising.

In March the City Council agreed a grant of £10,000 to fund a feasibility study of possible sites for the new youth Centre. Even

before the study was announced the site issue had provoked controversy, following press reports about the possible locations for a centre. Residents living on the Slade had started lobbying the City Council and the local MP about the possibility of a youth centre on the corner of Girdlestone Road and the Slade. In December 1995 Doctor Wilson, who lived opposite the possible site, had submitted to the City Council a petition signed by 347 residents and thirteen letters objecting to the proposal. The housing on the stretch of The Slade which joins into Windmill Road includes large detached owner occupied properties and most of the householders are relatively affluent compared to the residents of the Wood Farm estate and Lye Valley. The residents from the same area had also objected to the plan to build a new community centre on the site in the 1970s. The site issue also provoked disagreements amongst the groups which were supporting the campaign. When the BCA committee discussed their preferred site it proved difficult to arrive at a consensus and Bullingdon Boys argued strongly against the centre being at Peat Moors, because of the impact it might have on their use of the all weather area and the recreation ground. After considerable discussion the BCA decided to come out in favour of the Girdlestone Road site.

In April 1995 the campaign circulated a five page report about the views of young people on the plan to build a youth centre in Wood Farm. The report was based on a survey of seventy eight young people, which was conducted between October 1994 and February 1995. The interviews had been carried out the local youth clubs, Cheney School and outside of the Wood Farm shops by a team of local volunteers, including Jackie Merrit and Marlene Soul, and youth service staff, including Bob Medcalfe and Simon Cornwall, supported

by social work students who were on placements with the Barton Project. The main findings of the survey were;

*All of the young people supported the idea of a centre and said they would use it.

*Half of the young people reported that they would be interested in helping with the design and construction of the centre.

*In relation to design and space the three priorities identified were a coffee bar, games room and TV/Music room.

*All those interviewed wanted a space for meeting friends, which had facilities for games, recreation and music.

* There was a clearly expressed need for a 'drop in' advice and counselling service, which provided young people with support on relationship/sexual issues and drug/alcohol problems.

*In terms of the possible location of a centre there was no clear consensus – 23 preferred Peat Moors/Bullington; 20 the site next to the Wood Farm Community Centre; 14 Girdlestone Road; 9 the former Morris Sports ground.

Following the report Ron Mansfield began to draw up plans for young people, from the youth club and local schools, to become involved in the process of designing a new youth centre.

In July the City Council released the feasibility study on the possible sites for the youth centre. Three sites were considered, at Bullington Community Centre, Wood Farm Community Centre, Girdlestone Road, and the pros and cons of each site were reviewed in detail. No recommendation was made, although the Girdlestone site was considered to be "in terms of design the most interesting location" (Feasibility Study, July 1995).

In late November the City Council held a public consultation on the sites at the Wood Farm school. Despite extensive publicity the meeting attracted a modest turn out of fifty, of whom ten were young people. Members of the WFYCC, including Ron Mansfield, outlined the case for a new youth centre. No one at the meeting opposed the need for a youth centre but there was considerable disagreement over the possible location for a new centre. Dr Wilson raised objections about the possible impact on the houses on the Slade, increased traffic and the loss of open space. Other residents from the Slade raised the issue of there being a covenant on the Girdlestone Road site, which might preclude any development. Prior to being purchased by the City Council the land had been owned by the Church Commissioners. Bullingdon Boys also raised their objections to locating the centre on the Peat Moors site. One of the Council Officers, who had been involved in the feasibility study, commented that the Girdlestone Road site was “the most suitable site from both an architectural and a planning point of view” (Council Report on Public Meeting, December 1995). At the end of the meeting there was no agreement on a preferred location for the centre.

By the end of 1995 the WFYCC had re – submitted the grant application to the Millennium Commission and was in the process of preparing an application to the National Charities Lottery Board. Three other smaller funding bids to help with the design and building costs of the new centre had been submitted during the year and had been unsuccessful. These bids were to the Rank Foundation, the Lankelly Foundation and Oxford Safer Cities. The following year was to prove even more difficult and frustrating with regards to both funding bids and the search for a site.

Setbacks

The early months of 1996 were dominated by the issue of the Girdlestone Road site. The WFYCC had been considering making a planning application to the City Council but the existence of the covenant created considerable complications. When the WFYCC investigated the planning issues involved it was discovered that a charity, the Disability Trust, were currently involved in a lengthy and expensive legal dispute with residents on the Slade about plans to convert a property into a house for their clients. The covenant was being used to block the conversion on the grounds that it was not for “family housing”. The members of the WFYCC concluded that a planning application for a youth centre would encounter similar legal challenges and obstacles. The campaign did not make a planning application and developments with the lottery funding bids further underlined how difficult it would be to realise the dream of building a new youth centre.

In April the campaign received the news that the Millennium application had been turned down.

“Your application met our key criteria for Millennium projects but was judged not to have as distinctive an impact as others we received” (Letter from Millennium Commission 24/4/1996)

Someone commented that we should have applied for an opera house! A second application to the National Lottery Charity Board (NLCB) had been submitted in February for £280,000 to help cover the building and staffing costs of the new centre. The theme of that round of NLCB applications was “youth issues”. In June the campaign heard that this application had also been turned down. No explanation was given, except for the volume of applications received by the NLCB. The decision was received with a “mixture of

dismay, anger and disbelief” (Minutes of WFYCC meeting, 20/6/1996).Speculation as to the reason for the decision ranged from the size of the application, the uncertainty over the issue of the site, insufficient evidence of matching funding, the low profile of the Wood Farm estate as an area of social need and the lukewarm support received from the County Council.

After three years the campaign had reached a crossroads and some members of the group were “feeling fed up with hitting my head against a brick wall” (Minutes of WFYCC meeting,20/6/1996). Morale was not improved by the rejection of the smaller grant applications and the difficulties which were being experienced in running the existing youth clubs. By the summer of 1996 the youth club based at the Wood Farm Community Centre had closed because of staffing issues and the local youth workers were struggling to maintain any provision.

“The workers feel isolated and are worried that the level of support from the Youth Service could be further reduced as a result of cutbacks” (Minutes of WYCC meeting, 15/8/1996).

In August the WFYCC held a “where we go from here” meeting at UNIPART. Ron Mansfield reported that, following a management meeting, UNIPART had re – affirmed their support for the campaign and stressed the need to define clear short and long term goals. Marlene Soul argued for a focus on improving the existing provision and scaling down the expectations about a new youth centre, a view which was shared by several other people at the meeting.

“We should concentrate on building the existing provision – more funding locally for equipment and, more important, extra paid staff and sessions. On the point of a building for a club is a portakabin feasible?” (Minutes of WFYCC meeting, 15/8/1996)

It was agreed that the campaign should continue, “We must maintain a high profile and not let all our hard work slip away” (Marlene Soul), and that there was a need to focus on the short term goal of improving current provision. The ambition of establishing a new purpose built centre was kept on the group’s agenda, but it was also recognised that efforts should be made to identify any existing buildings in the area which could be converted to provide space for a centre.

Change in Focus

Towards the end of 1996 the campaign began to make informal approaches to the Wood Farm School about the possible use of space for a young people. Because of falling rolls the school was known to have some under used capacity. A proposal was circulated which focussed on renting space for use as a drop in centre, for young people aged between 13 – 20 years. The drop in would run in out of school hours and would aim to provide advice, counselling and support on a range of issues, including relationship problems, sexual health, drugs and alcohol use and employment. These issues reflected needs which were raised in the WFYCC survey about young people’s views on what should be provided in a new youth centre. In January 1997 representatives of the campaign met with school governors to discuss the proposal. Despite sympathetic support from the Chair of the Governors, Elizabeth Brighthouse, the proposal received a critical and defensive response, with concerns being raised about drugs, vandalism and the possible impact on other out of school hour activities which were run at the school. The campaigns representatives were surprised that the most strident criticisms were voiced by a governor who helped to run the Church youth club at the Wood Farm community centre. The governors put back making a decision and in March they asked the WFYCC to

submit a detailed proposal for the use of what was known as the “family room” at the school. Ron Mansfield drew up plans for converting the space and estimated that the cost would be around £15,000. In October the campaign met again with the governors, to discuss the plan and how there could be shared use with other activities based at the school. The meeting was more relaxed than the previous occasion and in December the governors informed the campaign that they had agreed to the proposal to develop the family room, subject to the drawing up of detailed terms and conditions. The negotiations with the school had taken over a year.

The shift away from campaigning for a new youth centre was also reflected in the next round of the WFYCC’s funding bids. In November 1996 a small grant application (£500) was made to the Oxfordshire Community Foundation to fund publicity and health education material for the youth club at Bullingdon and in March 1997 a second application was made to the NCLB, for a full time youth and community worker and running costs for the proposed drop in centre. This bid totalled £94,500. Also, on the funding front, the WFYCC had reacted with a “mixture of anger and amazement” (WFYCC minutes 26/11/15) in November 1996 when Wood Farm councillor Alan Pope reported that the Councils planning committee had proposed that over half of the £200,000 of planning gain, which was earmarked to replace the recreation facilities lost from the development of the former Morris Motors sports ground, should be spent on a new running track at the Horspath sports ground. Until this news broke the campaign was unaware of the amount of the planning gain and the proposal to spend a significant proportion of the money elsewhere in the city. Why was WFYCC not informed about this potential source of funding when the bids were being made for a new youth centre? The campaign, along with the BCA and

Bullington Boys, protested about the lack of consultation and lobbied against the proposal to allocate funds to the Horsepath sports ground. This action, coupled with representation from the local councillors, resulted in a larger proportion of the planning gain funds being allocated to the Wood Farm area.

At the end of 1997 the WFYCC, BCA and Bullington Boys submitted a detailed set of proposals for using the planning gain which had been allocated to Wood Farm. The proposals included the setting up of the drop in centre for young people at the Wood First Farm School. In March 1998 the Council held a public meeting to consult on the use of the planning gain, which was attended by thirty members of the public, including ten children. When pressed over the issue of funding for a youth facility the Officers and Councillors stated that the planning gain was only for the replacement of outdoor recreation facilities and that the provision of youth centres was the responsibility of the County Council not the City Council. Following the controversy and disappointment over the planning gains from the Morris Motors site the WFYCC began to turn its attention to the planning gains which would result from the development of the former Slade Hospital site.

Alongside the bid for planning gain funds the WFYCC continued with grant applications and local fund raising. In March 1997 Marlene Soul organized a fund raising and publicity event with UNIPART at the Cowley Shopping Centre, which raised £150 and was covered in the Oxford Mail. The news on the grants front was less positive. The application to the Oxfordshire Community Foundation was turned down and, in September 1997, the NCLB application for the proposed drop in centre was rejected, again without any explanation. This decision sparked off a now familiar inquest;

“We can only speculate about our dismal record in attracting grants and awards. Local experience and research into lottery awards indicates that funding is more likely to go to those organizations which have paid staff and have a more “professional image”. It would also appear to be very difficult to attract funding to areas which do not have established community services and are perceived as not having social problems” (WFYCC minutes 11/11/1997)

By the mid to late 1990s National Lottery awards had been made to community and youth groups in Rosehill, Barton, Cuttleslowe, Blackbird Leys and Cowley/East Oxford. Wood Farm was the only area in the city, with a relatively large concentration of council housing, which had not received a grant. At the end of 1997, four years after the start of the campaign, the WFYCC was struggling to raise funds and was still without a base for a youth centre. Attendances at the bi - monthly meetings of the group had declined to a hard core of volunteers from the BCA, the Wood Farm Community Centre, UNIPART and staff of the Youth Service.

Portakabin

In January 1998 the negotiations with the school took a new direction, following the news that the Foresters Play Group had closed and had left vacant a portakabin in the grounds of the school. For the campaign the use of the portakabin offered clear advantages over converting the family room, as it would provide an exclusive space for young people and was separate from the school. The building dated from 1982, when it was used as a temporary classroom, and had been occupied by the playgroup since 1996. Officers from the City planning department described the building as a “rather dilapidated looking portakabin tucked away at the back of the main school building” (Planning Committee minutes,

8/11/2000)). By March a draft agreement for the use of the portakabin had been drawn up with the school but this was considered “unworkable” by officers at the County Council, who indicated that a lease needed to be negotiated between the WFYCC and the County Council. There then followed months of delays, punctuated by occasional meetings, as the details of a five year lease with the County Council were being negotiated. In these negotiations the WFYCC were assisted by a firm of local solicitors, whose services were provided free under a scheme run by the Oxford Council of Voluntary Service.

As the WFYCC edged slowly towards finalising the lease renewed efforts were made to raise funds for the renovation and staffing of the portakabin. Ron Mansfield had estimated that the cost of the renovation would be around £15,000. In 1998/99 the WFYCC made eleven grant applications to a range of local and national organisations. Most of the applications were concerned with the renovation of the portakabin and grants were awarded by the Lloyds TSB Foundation (£2000), AMCO Trust (£300), Doris Field Trust (£1000) and the Co – operative Society (£1000). Two applications to the NLCB small grants programme were rejected, continuing the campaigns dismal experience with the National Lottery, as were applications to the City Council, Oxfordshire Community Foundation, Stanton Ballard Trust and the Pye’s Charitable Settlement. One application was made for a full time youth and community work post and this was rejected by the National Youth Agency. It was apparent that the grants and the money raised by local fund raising would not be sufficient to cover the costs of the renovation and the WFYCC began to pin its hopes on the planning gain from the Slade Park Hospital site.

Planning Gain

In the summer of 1998 the campaign started to make enquiries about the planning gain which would result from the development of the hospital site and were informed that £15,000 had been earmarked for “recreational provision for older children” (Letter from City Council ; 31/7/1998). Compared to the development at the Morris Motors site the campaign was able to register its interest at an early stage in the planning process. The lobbying of councillors and officers about planning gain funding to renovate the portakabin was underway prior to the work starting on the hospital site. There then followed, from the campaigns perspective, months of delay and inaction. The payment of planning gain is triggered by the start of a development and the work on the hospital site did start not until the following year. It was also apparent that the City Council was likely to have reservations about funding a youth project which was considered to be a responsibility of the County Council – “The Leisure Services Committee has often been reluctant to put funds into what might be considered a County Council responsibility” (Letter from the City Council,8/11/98).

For the campaign the delays were very frustrating. The negotiations over the lease could not be finalised until the campaign had the funds to renovate the building and the unoccupied portakabin was becoming the target for vandalism. In the early months of 1999 a spate of vandalism resulted in serious damage to windows and panels and prompted the campaign to question the viability of the project – “If the vandalism continues there is a possibility that the building will become too expensive to repair” (WYCC minutes, 21/2/98). The situation required a positive response. Local youth workers started undertaking outreach work to spread the word about the plans for the portakabin and UNIPART agreed, with the

permission of the school and the County Council, to pay for a sturdy metal fence to be erected around the site of the portakabin. The cost of the fence was £4000.

It was not for another year, in July 2000, that the City Council held a public meeting to consult on how to spend the £15000 for “recreation for older children” which had resulted from the planning gain from the Slade Hospital site. The campaign viewed this event as the last opportunity to press for funding for the renovation of the portakabin and went into over-drive in relation to the lobbying of councillors and officers. Thirty five people attended the meeting, including fifteen young people. The campaign outlined its case and Jeffrey Sackey addressed the meeting about the frustrations felt by the youth people living in Wood Farm.

“They had constantly been promised a youth club and this had not materialised. He and his friends felt very left out and disenchanted at being consulted more than once and still nothing happens. On behalf of the young people at the meeting he gave his wholehearted support to the portakabin project” (City Council report on Public Meeting, 12/7/2000)

A very emotional and telling contribution was made by somebody who was not present at the meeting. Ron Mansfield was unable to attend and sent a letter which was read out.

“I have been involved with the Wood Farm Youth Centre Campaign for six years, which has been long and sometimes depressing. I am not a member of the local community so you might ask what this meeting has to do with me. Well six years ago I was asked if I could help and I said yes, not because I would benefit, not because I might get my picture in the paper and not because it would impress others. My reason was simple, I was young once and I still remembered what

it was like to be ignored, to be blamed for everything, to be treated as political fodder, to be called irresponsible.

These young people are the next generation of politicians, designers, businessmen, doctors, nurses etc. They will be bringing up the next generation of children and looking after us in our old age. They have on more than occasion voiced their feelings about what they need, they have filled in survey and after survey and have been the centre of a number of social studies. These young people are the future of our country and should be shown the respect they deserve.

This meeting is asking for ideas and proposals, then take the ideas and proposals of these young people who, on a number of times over the years, have clearly said that they want a youth centre. Somewhere they can go to be off the streets, meet their friends, get advice and help, something that they can call their own and which they can be responsible for. Listen to their cry for help. Don't ignore it."

The meeting agreed that that the planning gain should be spent on the renovation of the portakabin. No other proposals were put forward.

On the 8th November 2000 the Planning Committee of the City Council decided that a planning contribution of £16,165 should be made to the WFYCC for the renovation of the portakabin. The award was more than the campaign had anticipated, because of the interest which had accrued on the original sum of £15000. At the same meeting the committee approved temporary planning permission for the portakabin for ten years, as the existing permission was due to expire in 2001. A condition of receiving the planning gain funds was that the County Council lease for the building should be for ten years.

Last Stage

The campaign was now on the last stage of the tortuous journey to set up a youth centre in Wood Farm. The remaining obstacles included finalising the lease and this proved complicated, as the County Council was only offering a five year lease and the City Council had made a ten year lease a condition for the payment of the planning gain money. Not for the first time the campaign found itself caught in the crossfire of the two local authorities. The negotiations over the lease were not fully resolved until late in 2001, when the County Council agreed to a ten year lease which would be rent free for seven years. The BCA were reluctant to act as the lease holder for the portakabin and this responsibility was taken on by the Wood Farm Action Group, a recently formed umbrella group and inter-agency forum for community groups and statutory agencies which were based in the area.

While the negotiations over the lease dragged on the WFYCC started work on the renovation of the portakabin, which by now was in a very dilapidated condition. Windows had been broken and the walls and floor had been damaged. It took Frank Holliday and myself three days, with the help of a large skip, to clear the rubbish and debris from the inside of the building. By April 2002 the windows, walls and floor had been repaired, toilets had been installed and an office constructed. The internal work was finished by September and then the work stalled for months, due to delays in completing the external painting of the building and the building of a path and a disabled access ramp. This work was not completed until April 2002. Ron Mansfield managed the renovation and most of the labour and materials was provided free or at cost price by firms which supplied UNIPART. The layout and style of the youth centre was modelled on

an internet cafe. The modest budget (£16000) which the WFYCC had for the project did not reflect the true cost of the renovation.

Alongside the renovation the WFYCC renewed its efforts to obtain funding for the staffing and running of the youth centre. There was a concern that the building could be under used;

“After nine years of campaigning and voluntary effort we are now in the position to open the centre in Wood Farm, but face the prospect of not having the staffing to make full and effective use of the building” (WFYCC minutes, 31/1/2002)

An approach was made to the County Council to increase the number of youth work sessions which were funded for Wood Farm. This was turned down because of a lack of resources and the number of sessions remained at two per week, the same level of provision that had existed over the last ten years. On a more positive note a grant application to the Oxfordshire Community Foundation was successful, with £5000 becoming available to fund a weekly session at the centre. The WFYCC also made efforts to establish joint projects with other agencies. The Youth Mentoring Service (County Council) decided to base one of its projects, the M – One Project, at the centre and Centrepoint, the housing charity for young people, provided advice and staff support for the WFYCC during 2001/2. More locally the Cornerstone Church agreed to use the centre for its weekly youth club.

The Wood Farm Youth Centre was officially opened on the 14th June 2002 by Andrew Smith MP, who had been a long standing supporter of the campaign. The event was well attended by young people and was covered by the local press and radio. For the volunteers who had sustained their involvement over nine years there was a mixture of emotions. There was a sense of achievement but this was tempered

by the recognition that it had taken a long time to establish a relatively modest provision, when compared with the original aim of building a new purpose built centre for the young people of the area.

“Local support has been unwavering. This is a testament to the people in this community who refused to give up. In the early days we brought young kids to UNIPART to design their own youth centre. It is disappointing that it never happened and those kids are now grown up. One reason it has taken so long is that Wood Farm is not seen as a priority area.” (Ron Mansfield, Oxford Mail, 17/6/2002).

2000s

Under Pressure

The BCA entered the new millennium beset by challenges and problems on a number of fronts. The decline in activities had not been reversed and the back hall was scarcely being used. Even Bullingdon Boys was experiencing a reduction in the number of teams it was running. By the 2001/2 football season six teams were running compared to ten in the late 1990s. The income which was generated from lets and the Social Club was also declining. The reduction in income from lets was influenced by the run - down condition of parts of the centre, the inefficient heating of the main hall and regular incidents of vandalism and anti - social behaviour in and around the centre. These incidents had persisted into the 2000s, despite a more regular police presence in the local area and the new security measures which had been introduced in the late 1990s. The numbers involved in managing the BCA were also dwindling, with an average of four attending the monthly committee meetings in the early 2000s. The BCA was also facing external challenges in the shape of new ward boundaries, plans to build a new community centre in Wood Farm and a series of City Council reviews of the community centres in the city.

During the late 1990s community centres came under increased scrutiny from the City Council, partly as a result of cutbacks in public expenditure and the drive to get the “best value” out of public services. In 1997 the Council commissioned a survey of Oxford's community centres, which concluded that there was a need for continued provision in Oxford.

“The Community Centres provide a home for well used and well needed community activities and act as a focal point for many communities in Oxford (Oxford City Council, “Community Centre Review”, 1997)

Despite this positive conclusion the review also identified a number of shortcomings which needed to be addressed. These included the need for more provision for the African-Caribbean and Asian communities, the need for more activities for children and young people, the difficulties Community Associations experienced in recruiting committee members, the under use of some centres and the need to improve the marketing and image of centres. This review was followed, in 2001, by a “Best Value” review which focussed on how to improve the delivery of services and the economic worth of the buildings and the sites occupied by community centres. The assessment of the Bullingdon building and the Peat Moors site raised serious concerns for the BCA.

“From a property point of view the only way to release value would be to consider merging the Bullingdon Community facilities with Wood Farm and retaining the sports facilities by creating a smaller changing facility at Bullingdon, thereby releasing land for a small residential scheme” (Oxford City Council, “Best Value Review”, 2001)

The alarm bells really started ringing when, in the same year, it became apparent that the City Council were in negotiations with the Wood Farm Community Centre about a plan for a new and enlarged centre for the estate, which would be linked with a proposed regeneration of the Wood Farm school site. The regeneration of the site would involve the re – building of parts of the school, the building of a new Sure Start Children’s Centre and the new community centre. The obvious question arose as to whether the

City Council would continue to support Bullingdon if a new community centre was built less than a mile away from Peat Moors. As part of the feasibility planning for the new community centre the City Council carried out a “leisure needs assessment” of the Wood Farm estate in 2001. The report on the assessment made no mention of the role which the Bullingdon Community Centre played in providing recreational facilities for the residents of the Wood Farm estate, which included the junior football teams run by Bullingdon Boys and the major contribution the BCA had made to the development of the Wood Farm Youth Centre.

BCA committee members felt marginalised and this feeling was reinforced in 2002 when new ward boundaries were introduced in Oxford. Under the new boundaries the former Wood Farm ward disappeared and the Wood Farm estate and Town Furze became a new ward known as Churchill. The Bullingdon Community Centre and the Lye Valley estate were in a new ward called Lye Valley, which also included some of the neighbourhoods in Cowley. Bullingdon was located on the fringe of the new Lye Valley Ward and, despite being less than a quarter of mile from the boundary of the new Churchill Ward, was being administratively detached from its traditional links and networks in Wood Farm. When the new boundaries were being drawn up the BCA and local councillors had argued that the Lye Valley estate and the community centre should remain part of the new Churchill Ward

The concern about the future of the BCA being under threat was compounded by other factors. Within the community centre network in the city there had been long standing speculation that the City Council reviews could result in the closure of one or more of the smaller community centres.

“The City Council is no longer able or willing to support all the centresit would seem the Council is considering reducing the number of community centres. Rumour has it that the Council may consider a policy of only supporting 8 centres, with the rest being left to fend for themselves” (Oxford Federation of Community Associations, “Minutes of AGM”, 29th April 1999)

Bullington was rumoured to be one of the centres which was considered to be at risk of closure. This was confirmed by a City Officer at a BCA committee meeting in December 2001.

“The Officer at the meeting noted that Bullington had been mentioned when the possible closure of community centres is considered by the City Council” (BCA minutes, 4/12/2001)

The BCA responded to the threat of possible closure by drawing up a plan, in consultation with two of the local councillors, to address the decline in lets and to explore possible areas of co – operation with the Wood Farm Community Centre. The trustees also produced an “Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats, Analysis (SWOT)” of the BCA, which pulled few punches about the current shortcomings.

*The committee is too small and has problems in attracting new leadership.

*The Community Centre is underused, particularly during the day.

*There is a long - term reduction in the income being generated by the centre,

*Activities have declined over recent years.

* The run - down state of the building acts as a deterrent to users and potential users.

*Long term changes in the social composition of the local community, including the growth of multi – occupation and the displacement of family housing, is impacting on the use of the centre.” (BCA records, 12/8/2001)

Behind the scenes BCA committee members were also exploring contingency plans to challenge any attempt to sell off the Peat Moors site for a housing development. These plans involved checking out whether there were any covenants on the use of the recreation ground, traffic issues related to access to the site and the negative impact a housing development would have on the ecology of the nearby Lye Valley nature reserve and the SSSI site.

In 2007 the City Council published a “Draft Community Centre Strategy” which drew upon information from the Best Value Review and other investigations. The aim of the strategy was;

“To provide a framework for the development of Oxford’s Community Centres by ensuring that they meet the needs of local people and that they are fit for purpose” (Oxford City Council, 2007)

A central theme of the strategy was to modernize and broaden the range of services and activities provided by centres.

“Many of Oxford’s Community Centres still follow a traditional pattern of provision in that they provide activities such as senior groups, lunch clubs, bingo and community bars. However, modern best practice for Community Centres incorporates key local services such as health provision, family support, youth centres, recreation space, welfare and advice services etc.”

A number of recommendations were made, including negotiating new leases, the introduction of performance indicators, more partnership working, improved marketing and encouraging

Community Associations to achieve the “Visible” operating standards administered by “Community Matters”. Rather ominously the strategy also indicated an intention “to invest profits from the sale of high cost, low benefit Centres to improve others”. The strategy received a mixed response from community centres. Concern was expressed about the length of new leases, which were proposed for five years, not being sufficiently long enough to attract external funding. Also, the introduction of performance indicators was viewed with suspicion, because it could result in the Council exercising too much control over Community Associations. By the late 2000s the relations between the Council and the Oxford Federation of Community Associations, the umbrella body for the Cities community centres, were becoming strained and the negotiations over new leases stalled. The relationship became more volatile when the Council decided, as a cost cutting measure, that Community Associations would have to pay 20% of their business rates. Previously all of the rates had been funded by the Council.

By the late 2000s the threat to close Bullingdon had begun to recede. There was speculation that this might have been influenced by the Labour Party regaining control of the Council after a short period, between 2006 – 8, when the Liberal Democrats formed a minority administration on the Council. With the exception of a period in the mid - 2000s, when the Independent Working Class Association gained a seat in Wood Farm, the area had traditionally returned Labour Party councillors and, over the years, the BCA had developed positive working relations with a succession of Labour Party councillors. One of the Oxford community centres did close during the 2000s. This was the Cowley Community Centre, which closed in 2007 following major financial problems with its Social Club.

Revival

During the 2000s the financial situation of the community centre was becoming serious. Trevor Kimber, the Treasurer of the BCA, regularly warned at committee meetings that, if the income did not improve, the BCA could soon be hard pressed to cover energy bills and the wages of the part time cleaner and caretaker. In April 2005 the BCAs current account was overdrawn and money had to be transferred from a modest reserve account to cover on – going expenditure.

Efforts were made, with the support of the Councils neighbourhood officers and local councillors, to attract new groups to hire and use the centre. This drive was partially successful and resulted, in the early 2000s, in number of new groups starting to use the centre. These groups included a Singles Club, a Wood Craft Group, the Studio Theatre Club, Orinoco – The Oxfordshire Scrap Store and the Community Development Network (CDN), which worked mainly with people of African origins in the city. Some of these lets were relatively short lived. The Singles Group folded in less than a year and the Wood Craft group, after a short stay, moved to the Wood Farm Community Centre. The CDN maintained a small office at Bullingdon until 2007 and, for a number of years, had an active presence at the centre. The Studio Theatre Club became a more permanent fixture. Since 2001 the Club has met twice weekly at Bullingdon for rehearsals of productions which are staged at the Unicorn Theatre in Abingdon. Stephen Briggs, the Secretary of the Club, was a close friend of the best selling author Sir Terry Pratchett and, for twenty five years, Stephen collaborated with Sir Terry in bringing his books, including the Discworld novels, to the stage in Studio Theatre Club productions (Oxford Mail, March 14,2015).

Orinoco represented an unusual and challenging let for a community centre. Set up in 1993 Orinoco re-cycled and re - used unwanted materials and promoted creative play using scrap. The name derives from a South American goose but became more associated with one of the characters in the “Wombles of Wimbledon Common” books by Elisabeth Beresford, which were turned into a successful series of animated films in the 1970s. The Wombles picked up “things that the everyday folks leave behind”. For a number of years Orinoco was based in an industrial unit in Botley until financial difficulties in the late 1990s forced a move, on a temporary basis, to the Blackbird Leys Community Centre. In the early 2000s Paul Isaacs, the manager of the Council run Blackbird Leys Community Centre, approached Bullingdon about the possibility of hiring out the under used back hall as a new base for Orinoco. The Bullingdon committee agreed after considerable debate about the pros and cons of the proposal. The environmental and social objectives of Orinoco were shared by the committee and the let offered the prospect of bringing the back hall into regular use and earning much needed new income for the BCA. On the other hand, there were concerns about the financial viability of Orinoco, health and safety issues and whether a small community centre had the storage capacity to accommodate a scrap store. One committee member commented that he doubted whether many community centres would take the risk. Orinoco moved to Bullingdon in November 2002.

The early years of Orinoco’s tenancy were fraught with problems and difficulties for the BCA. The staffing of the Scrap Store was erratic, opening times were not consistent and, on a number of occasions, the BCA agreed to waive rent payments. Without the support of the BCA combined with the commitment of the Orinoco trustees, especially Lizzie Maisels (Chair), the charity would have closed. In

2006 the situation began to improve due, in no small part, to the efforts of Howie Watkins. Howie, who lived in Headington, joined Orinoco as a volunteer and later became the manager of the Scrap Store. A former presenter on the BBCs “Really Wild Show” Howie brought to Orinoco drive and entrepreneurial flair, combined with a passion for re – cycling and creative play. In Howie’s words, “banishing boredom and saving the world”. New volunteers were recruited, the storage of materials and scrap was improved and the store began to open on a more consistent basis. Howie was also responsible for starting a monthly SWAP SHOP at Bullingdon, “a chance to get rid of unwanted but re – usable items and pick up something useful” (Orinoco web site, 26/4/2014). The SWAP SHOP, which opened in March 2007, was the first of its kind in Oxford and, from the start, it attracted attendances of over 150 on a Saturday morning at the community centre. It has been estimated that each SWOP SHOP saved over half a ton of unwanted materials from going into landfill.

In his book on the Wombles Neil Mathews describes a visit he made the Scrap Store and how he was showed around by Glenys Jones, a long - standing volunteer with Orinoco. Mathews was struck, as most first time visitors were, by the sheer volume and variety of items which were packed into the back hall of the community centre.

“ Clothes, games, jigsaws, books, records, bathroom scales, CD holders, videos, cassette, tapes, fax machines, computers, an old Hoover, a banana stand – all manner of consumer goods were available.....We squeezed around to the far corner to find more pots of paint than anyone could hope to seeGlenys was pleased with the store’s latest major haul, from a local warehouse operator with three lorry loads of material to dump. There it was in the corner: bright red cushions, beach bags, handbags, necklaces and

picture frames. “It would all have gone to the tip” said Glenys. “Now we can sell it on for £2 a cushion. The money’s a great help with the rent for this place and the van” (Matthews,2012).

Orinoco’s recovery received a serious setback at the end of 2007 when the County Council cancelled a contract they had with Orinoco for the re - cycling of domestic paint. The contact was worth £630 per month. Orinoco had lost a major source of income and the re – cycling of paint had been made more difficult. This would become a recurring problem for the charity and the BCA over future years.

Later in the 2000s there were new lets to a home tuition group, the “Chess Club”, a German Speaking Parent and Toddler group, ORK Martial Arts and Zion Temple. The home tuition group met at the centre for two years and the German Speaking Parent and Toddler group met, on a twice monthly basis, between 2008 – 16. The Zion Temple, many of whose members were former refugees from Rwanda, held Sunday services at the community centre between 2009 -15. ORK Martial proved to be a success story. Starting with only a handful of members in 2008 the group, under the leadership of Otis Williams, build up a membership of over thirty and ran four weekly sessions at the community centre.

Despite the new lets the financial position of the BCA remained precarious for most of the 2000s, with deficits being incurred in six of the years between 2000 –2009. One factor which contributed to this situation was the decline in the income from the Social Club.

Throughout the 1990s the Social Club produced modest profits, averaging around £2500 per year, which were paid over to the BCA. By the late 2000s the bar was opening infrequently and small losses were being incurred. No business was done in 2007/8 and the Social Club was formally closed in March 2009. The decline in the Social

Club was a direct consequence of the reduction in the number of football teams being run by Bullingdon Boys. Only one side was running by 2008 and there was limited demand for a bar.

In the late 2000s two developments began to transform the fortunes of the BCA. The plans for the major regeneration of the Wood Farm First School were being finalised and the building work resulted in the Slade Children's Centre and the Wood Farm Community Centre having to be relocated on a temporary basis. The Children's Centre was initially due to be re – located to Marywood in Wood Farm, the site of the former residential establishment for people with learning disabilities, which had been empty and boarded up for a number of years. When Marywood proved not to be a viable option, mainly on the grounds of costs, the County Council opened up negotiations to move the Children's Centre to Bullingdon. Informal discussions about the move were greatly helped by some members of the BCA committee knowing the staff of the Children's Centre and, in the case of Frank Holliday and myself, having worked with them when the Children's Centre rented space at the Wood Farm Youth Centre. In addition to these links Barbara Bryant, who was on the BCA committee, had managed Children's and Family Centres and was familiar with child care policies and preventative services. The BCA welcomed the move. Although it was only a short term relocation the Children's Centre offered intensive day time use of the community centre and the presence of a staff team. The service fitted well with the BCAs history of working with children and families. Moreover, the County Council were prepared to fund the conversion of the former bar and bar store into an office and consultation room for the Children's Centre staff. The conversion work, which cost £14,600, started in June 2009 and the Children's

Centre opened at Bullingdon in the late summer. An open day, held in November, was attended by over 200 adults and children

In the case of the Wood Farm Community Centre the regeneration of the school proved to be more complicated and contentious. The original plans for a new community centre were ambitious, including a hall with the capacity for 150 people, a bar, three multi – purpose rooms and an independent youth wing (Oxford City Council, “ Wood Farm Estate – A Leisure Needs Assessment”, 2001) When the plans for the regeneration of the school site were eventually finalised the plans for the new community centre had been changed and scaled down. What was proposed was a large hall, situated on the second floor above the new Children’s Centre, with limited storage space and a very small kitchen. The hall was described on the plans as a “community facility” rather than a community centre and it was unclear whether the Wood Farm Community Association (WFCA) would have a direct role in the management and running of the space. The WFCA held well attended public meetings about the plan for the “community facility”, at which serious concerns were expressed about the nature of the provision and how the plan threatened the future viability of the community centre. The BCA supported this representation. The issue was further complicated by tensions between the WFCA and Officers of the City Council over how the WFCA was run and managed.

The plan was not changed. The Wood Farm Community Centre closed in 2010 and the twenty - two groups which had used the centre on a regular basis were relocated to other community centres and halls, including Bullingdon and the Wood Farm Youth Centre. At the time of its closure the WFCA hosted more activities and groups than the BCA. The WFCA never recovered from the closure of the community centre and many of the local groups which had used the

centre never returned when the new community facility opened. Amongst these groups was the Wood Farm Ladies Co-op Guild, which had been based at the community centre since 1977 and was a major provider of social activities for senior citizens on the estate. The closure of the centre and the prospect of a move to the new community facility was a factor in the Guild eventually closing.

“Sadly, the new community centre was relocated on the top floor of the Wood Farm Primary School and elderly Guild members, some with walking aids, found it difficult to get there. After struggling with this, as well as the payment of rent, it was decided the Guild would have to close.” (Oxford Mail, July 20, 2020)

By the early 2010s the BCA found itself, by default rather than a conscious policy decision, as the only community centre running in Lye Valley and Wood Farm. This turn of events, as much as any political pressure, accounts for why the threat to close Bullingdon receded over the years.

The second development, which boosted the fortunes of the BCA, related to 106 payments from the site of the former Territorial Army barracks on Horspath Driftway. In the 2007 the property arm of the Ministry of Defence, in partnership with Berkeley Homes and the Unite Group, submitted a planning application for the demolition of the TA Barracks and the development of the site for 362 student study room's and 72 flats and houses. The study rooms were for post graduate students from Brookes University and the overall development was the largest of the various housing developments which had occurred in Lye Valley and Wood Farm since the 1980s. The BCA had tracked the various planning applications and working with local councillors, particularly Claire Kent (Independent Working Class Association), Joe McManners and Bob Timbs (Labour Party),

had lobbied for some of the 106 payments from the TA development to be earmarked for improving energy efficiency at the community centre. The BCA had detailed plans for improving energy efficiency, which were based on research carried out by four post graduate students from the MSc course in “Energy Efficient and Sustainable Building” at Brookes University. In 2006 the BCA were approached by Brookes about the research project and, given the long standing concerns about the excessive heating costs of the centre, had jumped at the opportunity of having an energy audit undertaken. The report produced by the students made a number of recommendations about improving energy efficiency and concluded that the fabric of the community centre needed major improvement.

“The Bullingdon Centre is much appreciated by all who use it, but is in need of maintenance and repair, and needs to be upgraded. The state of the building means that the building does not retain heat well. The fabric needs to be updated. This is the priority for the centre and it would dramatically reduce gas consumption. However, due to the financial situation of the centre many improvements do not look possible.” (Kingford, “POE Assessment; Bullingdon Community Centre”, Brookes University, 2006).

The 106 payments included £80,000 for “community facilities” and, in the spring of 2009, the BCA were informed that £30,000 had been allocated to the community centre. The remaining £50,000 was initially allocated to the Wood Farm Community Centre but, because of the difficulties being experienced by the WFCC, was eventually used by the City Council as a contribution to the building of the community hall at the Wood Farm School. During the autumn the 106 funding enabled work to commence on various energy saving measures at Bullingdon, including the double glazing of the building, the insulation of the main hall and cavity wall insulation in parts of

the community centre. Another amount of 106 funding from the development of the TA site was for “play areas and outdoor sports”. This funding was due to be allocated at a future date to renovating the playground at Dene Road, which was located on the fringe of the Southfield golf course, and for improving the all - weather pitch at Peat Moors. During the 2000s the astro - turf pitch at Peat Moors had been damaged by vandalism and this had an adverse effect on the bookings for the all - weather area. The 106 grant, combined with the County Council’s funding for the children’s centre, represented the biggest injection of finance for capital improvements (£44,600) at Bullingdon for many years.

In addition to these developments the BCA also made other smaller scale improvements to the community centre during the 2000s. These included improvements to the toilets, the renovation of the kitchen, the redecoration of the main hall and the building of a new storage shed which was attached to the rear of the main hall. The £2000 for the improvements to the toilets was shared with the City Council and a grant of £5000 from the Council covered the cost of renovating the kitchen. Community Service Volunteers were responsible for the redecoration of the hall.

During the late 2000s there was a modest increase in the numbers attending the BCA management meetings. Four new trustees were recruited and, in 2009, Laura Carrelero was elected as the first women to chair the BCA. The membership of the BCA had declined over the years, especially after the demise of the Social Club, and in 2010 the trustees decided to introduce a non subscription based “open” membership for residents who lived in the Lye Valley and Churchill wards. In 2003 Charlie Wharton died and the BCA lost one of the last remaining links with the residents who had built and developed Bullingdon in the late 1940s. Charlie and his wife Maud

lived opposite the community centre in Peat Moors and, for many years, Charlie was the Chair of the BCA and shared with Maud the caretaking duties for the community centre.

In October 2008 the BCA received unexpected coverage in the national media. This was the result of press reports of a row involving two of the former members of the Oxford Universities Bullingdon Club, George Osborne (Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer) and Nathaniel Rothschild (Hedge Fund Manager) and Peter Mandleson (EU Trade Commissioner) while they were on a sailing holiday in Corfu. The BBC radio programme “Broadcasting House” ran an item on what become known in the media as the “Corfu Yacht Affair” and included interviews with volunteers at Oxfords “other Bullingdon Club”. BCA committee members jumped at the opportunity to contrast the Community Centre with the Bullingdon Club.

“What is disturbing about the Bullingdon Club is that it is a training ground for the ruling elite and political establishment of the country. It is a bastion of privilege” (Richard Bryant)

“The Bullingdon Community Centre is for the people by the people. The Bullingdon Club at the university is for the few to do whatever they want.” (Frank Holliday)

Involvement in the Wider Community

Youth Centre

With the opening in 2002 of the Wood Farm Youth Centre (WFYC) the youth club at Bullingdon closed. The BCA, however, remained heavily involved in the running of the new Youth Centre, through the involvement of two BCA trustees, Frank Holliday and myself, in the management of the Youth Centre and the role which the BCA played

in supporting grant applications for the WFYC. After the opening of the Youth Centre the WFYC experienced mixed fortunes and struggled to sustain a consistent service in the face of recurring difficulties with funding for the staffing of the centre and the impact of disruptive behaviour by a minority of young people.

Before the opening of the new youth centre the WFYC had lobbied the County Council about the need to allocate more resources for staffing. The lobby fell on deaf ears and the WFYC was informed that there was no prospect of the current level of funding for youth work on Wood Farm being increased. The funding from the County Council remained at the same level it had been for the last ten years, which was for two part time workers to deliver one youth work session per week. During 2002/3 two youth work sessions, for young people in the 13 - 17 age range, were based at the youth centre. One session was delivered by the Youth Service and the other was run directly by the WFYC and funded out of a grant awarded by the Oxfordshire Community Foundation. The youth work session which was run by the WFYC was staffed by two Ruskin College students, Ruth Priest and Kevin Mannion, and was attended by up to thirty young people a week. During the summer of 2003 a programme of activities, which included several trips away from Oxford, involved contact with over 80 young people (Report by Oxfordshire Youth Service, 2003). The youth work session at the centre was called the “Chilla” by the young people.

In the early 2000s there was a relatively high level of anti – social behaviour on the Wood Farm estate, the worst since the joy riding of the 1990s. Incidents included “gangs of youths smashing shop windows, shoplifting and frightening shoppers” at the shops in Atykins Road (Oxford Mail, 5/6/2002). This disruptive behaviour sometimes spilled over into the youth centre. During 2003/4 the

youth work sessions had to be suspended on a number of occasions, due to concerns about the behaviour of a minority of young people and the risk this posed to the health and safety of the staff. The response of various public and statutory agencies to these issues tended to be too “top – down” and overly reliant on the use of anti – social behaviour orders. It was also an approach which did not effectively engage with local community groups and residents. For instance, in July 2004 a meeting was convened by the City Council to consider responses to the problem of “crime and young people” on the Wood Farm estate. The meeting was attended by representatives of a range of agencies, including the Youth Service, Police, Fire Brigade, Housing Management and the City Councils Crime and Nuisance Action Team. No representatives from the Youth Centre and local groups in the area, including the two community centres, were invited to attend the meeting.

By the summer of 2004 the youth centre was not opening on a regular basis because of the disruptive behaviour of some of the young people. The problems being experienced by the WFYC were then further complicated by the news that the Wood Farm School wanted to close and move the youth centre, because an increase in the numbers attending the school had created the need for more playground space. Building work began in late 2004 and by the summer of 2005 the youth centre was closed because of the restricted access to the site. The centre had only been open for two years. Negotiations started with the County Council on relocating the centre to a new site, nearer to the front of the school, which had been previously occupied by a local housing management office. The closure prompted the WFYC to hold youth work sessions in other venues and to focus on outreach projects on the Wood Farm estate. One of these projects, the “Wood Farm Youth Audit”, was

particularly successful and attracted considerable media attention for the WFYC.

Youth Audit

In May 2003 the Youth Centre and the BCA collaborated in making a successful grant application to the Local Network Fund for Children and Young People to carry out an audit of the needs of young people living in Wood Farm. The Local Network Fund was a Department for Education and Skills programme which was administered in Oxfordshire by the Oxfordshire Community Foundation. The grant was for £5000 and the aim of the project was “to develop a youth audit which would involve young people, in the 14 – 19 age range, in auditing and evaluating the services and resources which are available to them locally” (Grant Application, 21/5/2003).

After considerable debate the WYC decided against the conventional survey based approach to assessing young people’s needs, which had previously been used by the group in the 1990s, and opted instead for an approach known as “participatory appraisal”, which actively involved young people in leading the research and defining their “felt needs”.

“The principle behind PA is that the insiders – the people who live on the estate, or the teenagers at the bus shelter for example – are the experts on what is happening in their community. Not only are they the ones with the best information about the problems to be solved, they are best placed to develop solutions to those problems, and are quite capable of doing so” (Rickford,2001).

It was decided that the audit should take the form of a film, as this was felt to offer a more creative way to involve and engage with young people. The WYC was fortunate in making a contact with a

London based film maker, Shona Illingworth, who had extensive experience of working with young people, including in Oxford. The planning of the project involved Shona attending several meetings with young people to identify the issues they wanted to cover and further discussions with the volunteers and staff of the WYC. A key contribution was made by Ruth Priest and Kevin Mannion, who had worked in the youth centre and acted as facilitators for the engagement with the young people.

“It is important to note the role of experienced youth workers in this film, Ruth Priest and Kevin Mannion, who both had good relationships with the young people and had gained their trust through the work they had previously done with them. This was essential to the success of the production of the film” (Shona Illingworth, 18/7/2005)

Filming occurred over three days in August 2004 and involved twenty five young people talking about their lives and experiences in various locations on the estate, including the Wood Farm green, outside the shops in Atkyns Road and the Forester Towers flats. The unedited version of the film ran for three hours, which was eventually reduced to 50 minutes and produced as a CD. Young people were involved in the editing process and two of the group, Chelsea Spencer and Kerry Whitlock, produced a sound track entitled the “The Streets of Wood Farm: The Way It Is”.

When asked about their felt needs and what would improve their lives the young people came up with a wide range of suggestions.

- Having more of a voice in the local community.
- Having an adult for young people to talk to in confidence about personal issues.

- Youth workers staying long enough for young people to get to know them properly.
- Trips to look forward to if young people are good.
- There are longer term activities which you learn from and which could change your life.
- Young people want to take part in running a youth club.
- Young people should be seen as individuals and not just as a group of trouble makers.
- There is somewhere safe and dry for young people to go.
- There should be more respect and understanding between adults and young people.
- There is support and encouragement from school to help young people to develop what they are good at and what interests them as individuals.
- There is more discussion between young people, the police and councillors about how to make Wood Farm better for young people and everyone else, rather than just being told what to do.

(“Wood Farm; Young People Voice Their Views”, WFYC Press Release, 23/5/2005)

The film was eventually released as a CD in June 2005, by which time the Youth Centre had been closed for nearly a year. The media interest which was generated surprised the WFYC and is likely to have been amplified because the film was released at a time when the Wood Farm estate was regularly featuring in the press because of incidents of anti - social behaviour. The Oxford Mail (6/6/2005) devoted a front page and two inside pages to a report on the film, which included interviews with some of the young people who were involved in its making.

“We are not yobs, we’re just bored and frustrated. We just sit at the shops for hours and at night time we get bored and stuff can happen. If we had somewhere all our own then no one would be on the streets”.

Shona Illingworth highlighted how the film challenged the negative stereotypes of young people living in Wood Farm.

“I felt very strongly that their voice was not being heard and they were receiving a lot of negative press. They were extremely responsive, very organised and gave intelligent responses to my questions “.

The national media also reported on the film. Extracts appeared on television and Chelsea Spencer and I did a live studio interview on the regional ITV news. As a result of the media coverage the film was shown as part of an exhibition, “Oxford 2015; Dreams, Plans, Visions,” which was held at Modern Art Oxford.

“Oxford 2015 is all about voices for change and this film is a powerful advocate for the need for more facilities for young people in Wood Farm, and by extension in many parts of Oxford” (Andrew Nairne, Director, Modern Art Oxford, June 2005)

The film also attracted the attention of the National Youth Agency, who featured the audit in an edition of their publication “The Edge”.

“Teenagers living on Oxford’s Wood Farm estate are a good example of young people trying to go about their lives under the shadow of negative media stereotyping. They are also an example of young people who have decided to do something about it” (Beebee,2005)

The Local Network Fund, who funded the audit, were “very impressed” with the film and requested 80 copies to distribute as “an example of good practice in championing the voices of young

people". At the local level the film did little to accelerate the County Council's timetable for the relocation of the youth club. On a more positive note the City Council agreed, for the first time, to fund a four weeks sport programme for young people in Wood Farm during the summer holidays. (Oxford Mail, 18/7/2005).

Relocation of Youth Centre

The relocation of the youth centre proved to be a slow and fractious process, which dragged on for over two years. The existing building was considered too old to be moved and needed to be replaced by a new portakabin. Negotiations over a lease for the replacement building started in the summer of 2004 and immediately encountered difficulties over the issue of which organisation would take responsibility and provide trustees for the youth centre. The Wood Farm Action Group (WAG), which held the lease for the existing building, and the WFYC had serious reservations about being responsible, because the experience of managing the centre over the last two years had proved difficult for the local volunteers.

"The opinion was expressed that the responsibility for the relocated building should be taken over by the Youth Service, as being legally responsible for the existing centre had created considerable pressure for local volunteers" (WFYC minutes, 24/5/2004)

What was being proposed was a partnership model, with the Youth Service having overall responsibility for the building and the WFYC contributing to the management of the centre and the delivery of youth work sessions. This proposal was supported by the local District and County Councillors and by the front - line staff of the Youth Service. In November the WFYC was informed that the proposal had been turned down by senior managers at the County Council because of the financial implications.

“The Youth Service is unlikely to be in a financial position to become the main occupier in this or the next financial year”. (Letter from Learning and Culture, 4/11/2004)

This position was repeated, some months later, following an offer from the City Council to allocate £10,000 for two years towards the running costs of the centre, providing the County covered the full costs from April 2006. The annual running costs of the centre had been estimated at £13,000. Following this development WAG was asked by the County Council to re – consider its position on the lease. The two trustees who had signed the existing lease on behalf of WAG were Margaret Warner and myself. Margaret was a former teacher at the Wood Farm School and she had, for many years, run a pre – school play group at the Wood Farm Community Centre. We were both reluctant to sign the new lease, partly because of the pressures involved but also because we were critical of the County Council’s refusal to take full responsibility for providing youth work in Wood Farm. A hiatus ensued which was only broken when two members of the Corner Stone Church, David Bartrip and David Steel, agreed to become the trustees for the youth centre on behalf WAG. Both David Bartrip and David Steel had been involved for years in running church based youth club at the Wood Farm Community Centre and they had close links with the WFYC. The new lease for the youth centre was finally agreed and completed in the autumn of 2005.

The protracted negotiations over the lease, combined with complications in gaining planning permission for the new building, caused a long period of delay and frustration for the WFYC and the young people of the area. There were, however, some positive developments during this period. In 2005 the County Council, despite its reluctance to take over the running of the youth centre, agreed to appoint a full - time youth worker for Wood Farm. Simon

Edmondson, who had recently completed his training at Ruskin College, took up the post in July. Because of the closure of the youth centre Simon ran sessions at the Bullingdon and Wood Farm community centres and at the Slade Fire Station and engaged in outreach work with young people on Wood Farm and Lye Valley. The appointment owed much to the lobbying of the WFYC and local councillors and was made over twenty years after the BCA had first argued the case for appointing a full time youth worker for the area. A second positive development occurred in 2007 when the City Council, working in partnership with the Wood Farm Residents and Tenants Association, received a £180,000 grant from the Big Lottery Fund to build an all - weather sports area and a children's playground on the Wood Farm green. The project also involved installing 134 wooden bollards around the green to prevent joyriders driving onto the field and burning out cars (Oxford Mail, 24th May, 2007).

Work on the relocation of the youth centre did not get underway until the summer of 2006 and was completed by the end of the year. The total cost of the relocation, which included the demolition of the existing building, was over £145,000. In addition to this County Council expenditure the WFYC received a grant from the City Council of £8000 to create an outside area for the youth centre. The youth centre was officially re – opened in February 2007 by Andrew Smith MP and Peter Rhoades Brown from Oxford United. The young people who attended welcomed the re – opening but were critical of the lack facilities in Wood Farm compared to other estates in the city.

“Kids have been going on for ages that there is nothing to do and nowhere to go. Blackbird Leys has everything and Barton has a swimming pool. But young people here they have nothing. It's good we now have this, we are all proud of it” (Oxford Mail, 19/2/2007)

For many people the event was overshadowed by the death of David Steel two months before the re – opening of the youth centre. David had worked with the Corner Stone Church youth club for many years and, as a trustee of the youth centre, he had played a key role in negotiating the lease for the new building. A plaque in his memory was unveiled at the re – opening.

With the support, for the first time, of a full time youth worker the re – opened youth centre expanded and diversified its activities.

Between 2007-9 sessions were held on most days of the week and at weekends and the programme included a girls and young women’s project, music workshops, dance classes and sessions which focused on life skills, self esteem and keeping safe. Most of the young people who attended were in the 13 – 19 age range. Joint work was also undertaken with the Connexions Service and the Slade Children’s Centre rented office space at the youth centre for two of its outreach staff and used the youth centre for stay and play sessions. Engaging with some young people still proved difficult and, on a number of occasions, sessions had to be cancelled because of disruptive and aggressive behaviour.

Within a year of moving to the new location the youth centre faced further uncertainty, as a result of funding being made available by central government for a major renovation of the Wood Farm School and the building of a new Sure Start Children’s Centre. The youth centre was not part of the remit for the development and the land it occupied would be needed for new buildings. In November 2008 the WFYC were informed that the portakabin would be relocated, on a temporary basis, to a location at the back of the school site and then would be moved again to a more permanent “resting place” nearer to the front of the school. The redevelopment of the school site reignited the debate about the future of the youth centre. The WFYC

committee again expressed their preference for the Youth Service to take over the running of the centre and the need for a purpose built building to replace the portakabin. Rather surprisingly the County Council now proved to be receptive to these proposals and in May 2009 the County made a bid to the Department for Children, Schools and Families for £250,000 to fund a new youth centre on the school site. The bid failed to attract funding and, within a year, any hope of the County taking direct responsibility for youth work in Wood Farm finally disappeared in the wake of the massive cutbacks in local government finance which resulted from the 2008 banking crisis.

Peat Moors Playground

Apart from the support provided to the Youth Centre the BCA also became involved in a project with the City Council to upgrade and renovate the children's playground at Peat Moors. The playground was opened in the 1970s and is located next to the community centre. By the early 2000s much of the play equipment had become dated, some items were unsafe and the area had a neglected appearance. In 2001 a City Council report had graded the playground as a Category Three provision.

“These are less well used areas. Often they are small and lightly equipped. Parents often perceive these sites as unattractive and dangerous places and will walk considerable distances to find an alternative” (Oxford City Council, “Play Area Strategy”, July 2001)

A Wood Farm resident, who was interviewed for the report, commented;

“The Peat Moors play area still has the equipment that I played on as a child and I am thirty five years old!”

Over the years the BCA had raised, on several occasions, concerns about the condition of the playground with the City Council. The BCA had a vested interest in improving the playground, as it was a valuable resource for the parents and children who used the community centre and the recreation ground. Also, an under used and neglected play area had the potential for becoming a focus for anti – social behaviour. In 2003 it was agreed that the BCA would, with the support of the Council, make an application to the Living Spaces programme for funding to renovate and the upgrade the playground. Living Spaces was a government financed scheme, run by Groundwork, which provided grants to local community groups to make improvements to open spaces in their neighbourhood.

In spring 2004 the BCA submitted an application for £24,544 to Living Spaces for new play equipment and also made an application for matched funding from the City Council. Prior to these applications being made the BCA had consulted with users of the community centre, local councillors and the Lye Valley Residents Association, at a public meeting which was attended by sixty residents. A key contribution to formulating the bids was made by the Bullingdon Parent and Toddlers Group which, under the leadership of Kathy Partlett, consulted with parents and children about the items of equipment which were needed for the playground. In the autumn of 2004 the BCA were informed that both bids had been successful, with a grant of £24,544 being awarded by Living Spaces and £25,328 being approved by the City Council. Work on the site started in the spring of 2005 and was completed by August. Compared with other BCA initiatives to improve the local neighbourhood, such as the traffic calming scheme, the renovation of the Peat Moors playground was relatively straightforward and free from political trials and tribulations.

Resident Research

In the late 2000s the BCA became involved in another project, the “Resident Research and Community Development Project” (RRCDP), which provided insights into the social changes which were occurring in Lye Valley and Wood Farm and the needs of local residents. The RRCDP was an adult education programme which encouraged residents to carry out research into the needs of their local community and provided accredited training for the participants. The programme was based on the experiences of the Barton Community Association which had run a similar project.

“Following the success of the Barton Community Development Project the Barton Community Association wanted to develop a project that both carried out new research and gave a cohort of residents the chance to be more involved in their local communities and develop new skills and confidence that would enhance their life opportunities. It was realised that this model of community development practice could be widened out to include both the Wood Farm and Northway estates. In both these areas there are significant levels of deprivation but there has not been the same level of investment in the community that there has been on other estates in Oxford.” (Barton Community Association, 2008)

The RRCDP was funded by the City Council, Oxfordshire Learning Communities, Barton Community Association and the Oxfordshire Community Foundation and was co – ordinated by a community worker, Alan Foulkes, who was based at the Barton Community Centre. Initially the remit of the project was limited to the involvement of the community centres in Barton, Northway and Wood Farm but, following the participation of representatives from the BCA in the planning of the project, it was agreed to include

Bullington and Lye Valley in the research. The RRCDP was unusual in that it involved joint work between different community centres, although this collaboration was more limited than was originally intended following a decision by the Wood Farm Community Association to withdraw its support during the early stages of the project.

The research in Lye Valley and Wood Farm took the form of surveys which asked residents about a range of issues, including what they liked and disliked about the area, the services and activities they used, what would improve the areas and their views on the local community centres. The research was carried out between April – July 2009 by a team of seven local residents, who were supported by the Project Co-ordinator and a community work student, Dawn Harrower, who was on a placement from Ruskin College. Through their involvement with the project a number of the volunteers became active in local community groups, including the youth centre.

One hundred and eleven residents were interviewed in Wood Farm and ninety seven in Lye Valley. The feedback from the Lye Valley survey indicated that what residents liked most about the area was that it was “quiet and peaceful”, near to the Lye Valley nature reserve and a convenient location for access to Oxford city centre and buses to London. The negative views on the area were dominated by concerns about the growth of multi-occupied privately rented housing (HMOs) in Lye Valley.

“When asked what they disliked about the area over half the respondents mentioned the issue of HMOs and commented on what they considered to be some of the consequences – such as badly maintained dwellings, untidy gardens, litter and difficulties with car

parking. A number of respondents also suggested that the increase in HMOs had a negative effect on social relations, resulting in a loss of community identity” (BCA “Neighbourhood Survey”, 2009)

Precise information on the number of HMOS in Lye Valley and Wood Farm was difficult to find. Anecdotal evidence indicated that, in some streets in Lye Valley, over a third of the houses were HMOs. In 2001 Peter Johnson, a Labour Councillor for the Wood Farm ward , had reported that of the 6102 people on the electoral roll only 3200 had been living in Wood Farm in 1997 and that there was approximately 600 students resident in the ward, many of whom lived in HMOs (Wood Farm Action Group minutes, 17/7/2001).

A majority of the respondents in Lye Valley (79) had heard of Bullingdon and nearly half (43) had used the community centre. Of the regular activities, which were based at the centre, the most frequently used was the Orinoco Scrap Store and the monthly SWAP SHOP. Several of the respondents made suggestions about activities which they would like to see provided at Bullingdon and these included keep fit classes for the over 50s and a Senior Citizens Club. These suggestions clearly reflected how Bullingdon, since the loss of the senior citizens club in the late 1990s, had neglected the needs of the older members of the local community.

The Wood Farm survey reported concerns about anti – social behaviour, “a common theme expressed throughout the survey “, and the need for “more youth facilities and activities”. These findings echoed those of other surveys of the estate which were carried out in the 2000s by the Tenant Management Services (2000) and the City Council (2005). The research also highlighted changes in the demography of the Wood Farm estate.

“Demographic information indicates a changing community. There is both a large population of people who lived on Wood Farm for many years and an almost equally large number of people who have lived there for less than 5 years. There has also been a significant change in the ethnic profile.” (Wood Farm Residents Research Survey Report, 2009)

The survey indicated that the Youth Centre and the Wood Farm Community Centre were well used, although there was criticism of the Community Association for “only expressing an interest in managing the building rather than being involved in the wider community”.

2010's

Changes in Population and Housing

The BCA started the new decade as the only community centre in the Lye Valley and Churchill wards and was serving areas which were undergoing long term social change. Data from the 2011 census (Oxford City Council and District Data Service, 2016) provided more detail on the trends which had previously been identified in local surveys. In the Lye Valley ward the population increased from 6157 in 2001 to 7372 in 2011, a growth of 19% compared with the average of 11% growth for Oxford over the same period. The ethnic composition of the population had changed significantly and had become more diverse. In 2001 26% of the population were from an ethnic group other than White British and by 2011 this had increased to 44%, with the largest increase being in White non – British and Asian residents. There were similar trends in the Churchill ward where the population increased from 6075 in 2001 to 7303 in 2011, a growth of 20%. In 2001 24% of the residents were from an ethnic group other than White British and by 2011 this had increased to 42%, with the largest increases being in White non – British and Asian residents. A striking feature of the demography of the Churchill ward was the high number of students living in the area, which reflected the proximity of part of the ward to Brookes University and the growth of communal establishments, such as student halls of residence. In 2011 29% of the working age residents in the Churchill ward were full time students and the number of students living in the area had increased by 45% between 2001 – 2011. Given the student population it is not surprising that the ward had a high turnover of residents, as measured by people who have moved addresses within twelve months of the census day. Churchill had a turnover rate of 35.1% compared with a national average of 12.3%.

The rate in Lye Valley was lower at 19.5% but was still well above the national average. This high level of population churn has implications for the social cohesion of local neighbourhoods, as was commented upon in one of the local surveys conducted in the late 2000s.

“Developing a community identity requires that residents have a vested interest in the well being of their local area and a high turnover of residents is not fertile ground for building trust and mutual support” (BCA “Neighbourhood Survey” 2009).

The increase in the population of the Churchill and Lye Valley wards continued until the mid - 2010s. By 2014 the Office of National Statistics (ONS) estimated that the population of Churchill ward had increased to 7975 and the Lye Valley had increased to 7590. The population increases were not matched by improvements to the infrastructure of social facilities and services in the wards. The availability of services and facilities actually reduced over the years, with the notable exception of the redevelopment of the Wood Farm Primary school and the building of a new Sure Start Children’s Centre on the school site. Over the last twenty years the Wood Farm part of the Churchill ward has lost its community centre and the new Children’s Centre was closed in 2017. The estates only public house, the Crown and Thistle, has closed and the TA Social Club closed when the site was redeveloped for housing and a hall of residence for Brookes University students. In the Lye Valley ward the Fairview Inn closed in 2014 and the Pressed Steel Sports and Social Club closed in 2016. On the fringe of the ward the Morris Motors Social Club closed in 2009 and the Temple Cowley Swimming Pools closed in 2015, despite an impressive and sustained campaign by the Save Temple Cowley Pools group. The closure of the Pressed Steel and Morris Clubs were symbolic of the decline of Oxford’s motor car industry as a social force in the local community.

The increases in population reflected the scale of new building in the wards, including communal establishments for students, and the growth in privately rented accommodation. Over a 1000 new houses and units of student accommodation have been built in Wood Farm and Lye Valley since the 1990s and this figure has increased in recent years. In 2017 Brookes University had a planning application approved by the City Council for a new hall of residence of 885 units of student accommodation on part of the former Cowley Barracks site. The hall opened in 2019 and is the fourth hall of residence for Brookes students which is either located in Lye Valley and Wood Farm or on the fringe of the areas.

Estimates from the ONS indicate that the population growth in the two wards paused and began to decline from the mid – 2010s. By 2019 the population of the Churchill ward was estimated to be 7,146, a reduction of 829 from the 2014 estimate. In the Lye Valley ward the reduction was more marked, an estimated 5292 in 2019 compared to 7590 in 2014, a reduction of 2,198. One possible explanation for these changes could be that the very high cost of housing in Oxford was forcing lower income households to move out of the city.

Alterations to the ward boundaries in 2002 make it difficult to document the changes which occurred in housing tenure between 2001 and 2011. The former Wood Farm ward, which included the Wood Farm estate, the Town Furze estate and the Lye Valley estate, had in 2001 54% of the residents living in owner occupied housing, 31% living in social housing and 13% living in the privately rented sector. By 2011 the new Churchill ward, which includes the Wood Farm and Town Furze estates, had 30% living in owner occupied housing, 42% living in social housing and 26% living in the privately rented sector. In 2011 the new Lye Valley ward, which includes the

Lye Valley estate, had 53% living in owner occupied housing, 18% in social housing and 27 % in the privately rented sector. During the 2010s there was a rapid increase in the privately rented sector. By 2020 data from the City Council indicated that the percentage of privately rented dwellings had increased to 54.8% in the Churchill ward and 50.8% in the Lye Valley ward ('Property Licensing Consultation', 2020). These increases reflected an Oxford wide trend and was due to the demand from increased numbers of university students, increased numbers of workers from the European Union moving to the City before Brexit and the high cost of buying a house resulting in more people renting in the private sector. Danny Dorling, Professor of Geography at Oxford University, has estimated that Oxford is one the most expensive places in Britain for housing, with house prices 15 times higher than the average income of people working in the city (Dorling, 2015).

Within the privately rented sector there has been, over recent decades, a significant growth in houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) which has contributed to the population increases in the Churchill and Lye Valley wards. HMOs are defined as a property occupied by three or more persons forming two or more households. It has been estimated that Oxford has the 15th highest number of HMOs in England and Wales and that over 60% of HMOs in the City are occupied by students (Oxford City Council, Planning Consultation, 2011). The increase in HMOs has generated considerable controversy and concern.

“The experience of Oxford City Council is that HMOs are associated with issues that affect the neighbourhood such as rubbish and anti – social behaviour which can occur because of poor management of property. HMOs can also change the nature of an area and result in reduced social cohesion. The conversion of family – size dwellings to

HMOs also reduces opportunities for families to buy or rent homes in Oxford, and is thought to contribute to the high cost of housing in the City” (Bates and Wyatt, Background Paper, HMOs; Oxford City Council, June 2011).

In 2011 the City Council introduced new policies to regulate and control the growth of HMOs. These measures included new licensing arrangements for all new and existing HMOs and new planning regulations which created a threshold for the proportion of new HMOs which could be located in a street or a segment of a street. Documenting the number of HMOs in a street or neighbourhood can be difficult, as not all HMOs are licensed with the City Council. Data from the HMO licensing register indicates that in the Churchill ward the biggest concentration of HMOS are in the streets near to Brookes University, with fewer being located on the Wood Farm and Town Furze estates (Oxford City Council, 2016). In the Lye Valley ward the largest number of HMOs are on the Lye Valley estate, with the main concentrations being in Dene Rd, Bulan Rd and Benson Rd (Oxford City Council, 2017).

The 2011 census data also provided insights into the incidence of child poverty in the Churchill and Lye Valley wards. The child poverty measure is based on the proportion of children, in the 0 – 15 age range, living in families which are in receipt of out of work benefits or tax credits where the income is less than a 60% of the median income for England. In the Churchill ward child poverty was recorded at 27.7% compared with a national average of 20.1%. Child poverty is rarely distributed evenly in a ward and the Wood Farm estate had a higher level (31%) than other neighbourhoods. In Lye Valley the proportion of children living in poverty was slightly below (19.7%) the national average. In 2017 data from the End Child Poverty Coalition indicated that child poverty in both the Churchill and Lye

Valley wards was increasing. In the Churchill ward over a third of children (35.4%) were living in households with less than 60% of the median income and in Lye Valley the figure was 26.64%, which was around the average for the city. Child poverty impacts on the work of local groups and agencies, as was noted by the staff of a holiday programme for children on the Wood Farm estate.

“We often found that children were arriving hungry, having not had breakfast and in some cases not bringing any lunch.....We quickly decided to offer children a sandwich or toast, which we funded and prepared” (Inspired Young Peoples Project, 2018).

Towards the end of the 2010s evidence from the English Indices of Deprivation (2019) indicated that levels of poverty and deprivation were reducing across Oxford. In Wood Farm 20% of children were living in low income families and one of the local neighbourhoods, which had been in the top 10% for child poverty in the country, had now moved into being in the top 20%. A City Council commentary on the data noted that it was not clear why the reduction in the levels of deprivation had occurred.

“The data does not provide clear evidence for the reasons for the changes.....it is possible that some of Oxford’s more deprived families have moved out of the city due to its unaffordability and settled in neighbouring towns in Cherwell, including Bicester and Banbury.” (Oxford City Council, 2019)

Activities

At the start of the 2010s the community centre was used, on a regular basis, by Orinoco, SWAP SHOP, the 7o’clock Club, Bullingdon Boys, the Slade Children’s Centre, Zion Temple, the Studio Theatre Group, ORK Martial Arts and the German Speaking parent and

toddler group. In 2018 the 7o'clock Club celebrated fifty years of meeting at the community centre. During 2010 two new groups started to use the centre, a rhythmic gymnastics group for children and an AGE Concern lunch club for senior citizens, which had previously been based at the Wood Farm Community Centre. The AGE Concern group was the first service to be specifically run for older people at the community centre since the late 1990s.

The Slade Children's Centre was based at Bullingdon between 2009 – 2011 and the weekly sessions included two stay and play drop-in's, family art, story group and library and baby massage. The presence of the Children's Centre had a very positive impact on the community centre. The day time use of the centre increased, more families visited and the profile of Bullingdon was raised in the local community. Joint activities were also organised, including events at the community centre for the Oxford International Women's Festival. The Children's Centre moved back to Wood Farm in the spring of 2011, occupying a new Sure Start Centre on the school site which had cost over £2 million to build. Later in the decade the Children's Centre became one of the many casualties of County Council cuts in expenditure, which were precipitated by the Conservative and Liberal Coalition government's austerity policies in the wake of the 2008 banking crisis. Forty - four Children's Centres in Oxfordshire had their funding cut and by the spring of 2017 the staff of the Slade Centre had either been made redundant or had been redeployed. A limited number of drop - in sessions were still run at the Children's Centre but the range of services is now a pale shadow of what was previously provided.

Apart from the departure of the Children's Centre the BCA experienced a series of other changes in the use of the community centre during the 2010s. The Bullingdon Boys Football Club, which

had been struggling to field teams for a number of years, finally called it a day in the autumn of 2011. The BBFC had had been a key part of the community centre for over twenty - five years and, at its peak, ran ten teams involving over a hundred and twenty young people, parents and managers. Volunteers from the BBFC also ran, for many years, the community centres Social Club and were active members of the BCA management committee. The demise of the BCFC prompted the City Council, as a cost cutting measure, to decommission the Peat Moors recreation ground as a venue for junior football. The BCA challenged this decision and argued that the Peat Moors recreation ground was now the only place left in Lye Valley and Wood Farm where junior football could be played. It was also pointed out that there was the possibility that in the future there could be a revival of interest in running junior teams at Bullingdon. As an expression of the commitment to maintaining football at the Peat Moors ground the BCA, with the support of local Councillors, purchased and installed new goal posts so that informal use could still be made of the ground. This optimism was not misplaced. In May 2013 a group of local parents approached the BCA about starting up a junior football team and using the Peat Moors ground. With the support of the BCA a new club called Bullingdon Youth was formed, which is now running two junior sides. The sports provision at Peat Moors also received a boost in 2011 when the Council carried out a major renovation of the all - weather area, at the cost of over £25,000. Local Labour councillor Bob Timbs played a key role in negotiating the finance for the renovation, most of which came from the 106 funding which had been generated by the redevelopment of the former Territorial Army Barracks.

Between 2014 – 16 three groups which had used the centre, for a number of years, stopped meeting at Bullingdon. The Zion Temple

cancelled their let because of a decline in the size their congregation, the rhythmic gymnastics group moved to a different venue and AGE UK, formerly Age Concern, cancelled their let at short notice and moved its lunch club to another venue in Lye Valley. During the same period two new groups, the Date Palm Tree and Teeny Tigers, started meeting at the community centre. The Date Palm Tree is a parent and toddler group for Muslim families and moved to Bullingdon from the Regal Community Centre in East Oxford. Teeny Tigers started as an exercise and kickboxing class for under – fives and later became a Women’s Kick Boxing group.

The unexpected departure of the AGE UK group posed a particular concern for the BCA, because it exposed the lack of provision at the community centre for older people. In 2015 the BCA were successful in obtaining a £6000 grant from the City Council and launched an Older People’s Project for Lye Valley and Wood Farm. The funding was used to employ a part time community worker, Alan Foulkes, on a short - term contract. Alan had previously worked with the BCA when the community centre was involved in the ‘Residents Research Project’ in the late 2000s. In the autumn of 2015 Alan conducted a small - scale survey of 38 older people which asked a series of questions about their interests and the activities they would like to see provided. The most frequently mentioned were meeting other people, gentle exercise, crafts, computer courses, local and family history and trips to the seaside and cinema. The project resulted in a number of new initiatives. In autumn 2015 a beginners Tai Chi group started at Bullingdon and a Craft and Social Group began to meet on a monthly basis. The Craft and Social Group grew out of a group called the ‘Friendly Group’ which had been started by Shirley Nelder, a local resident who lives on the Lye Valley estate.

The group met in Shirley's home and people were contacted via 'Street Life', an internet social networking site.

"We were set up by Shirley Nelder, who held a MacMillan coffee morning while her husband was dying. It started off with her needing some support and the few people who came along became very good friends. We decided it ought to be extended to others. It's just about pulling together people who are lonely" (Jasmine Wilson, Oxford Mail, 3/12/2015).

Combining meetings at Shirley's home with the sessions at Bullingdon the Craft and Social Group has engaged in a range of activities and has become the most socially active of the groups based at the community centre. The group's activities have included knitting a large comfort blanket for the Sobell House hospice, organising Xmas Fayre's and designing and making a community mosaic, which is now on permanent display at the Wood Farm shops. A second mosaic will eventually be on display, at the front of the community centre, when the building is renovated (see next section). The group has also been involved, in partnership with AGE UK, in starting a community choir and holding a variety of adult education classes. One of these classes, the Creative Writing group, produced a book in 2017, which was titled "Re – Visiting; Stories and Poems from the Bullingdon Centre". The Social group's most unusual activity has been Yarn Bombing, a type of graffiti or street art which uses colourful displays of knitted or crocheted yarn. Targets have included an abandoned Tesco supermarket trolley and trees on the Slade, the main road between the Lye Valley and Wood Farm estates. In 2017 the group renamed itself the Hogley Bogstars. Hogley was an ancient name for the Lye Valley fen and Bogstar is the name of a flower found in the fen.

The Older People's Project also developed an initiative which was aimed at men, who are often under-represented in groups for older people. In January 2016 a weekly Fix It Cafe started at Bullingdon, which invited people to bring in household items to be repaired by a group of retired men who have a wide range of technical skills. The group has also developed as an informal social club.

“We have joiners, plumbers and electrical experts who can deal with different items. We always have a look at anything people bring in and assess whether we have the tools for the job. You never know what's going to come in. Personally I joined to meet new people. I live on my own and this way I get to see people my own age” (David Wilkinson, Oxford Mail,1/7/2016)

Since the autumn of 2016 AGE UK have run, in conjunction with the Fix It Group, a “gadget drop in” at Bullingdon which provides older people with advice and support on the use of computers. Of the various initiatives started by the Older People's Project the Tai Chi ran for a year and the Craft and Social Club and the Fix It Group are still running.

The Orinoco Scrap Store remained the major group based at Bullingdon, occupying around over a third of the available space at the community centre. The 2010s was a turbulent period for Orinoco. After Howie Watkins moved away from Oxford there was a succession of managers of the Scrap Store and long standing issues about financial viability and the management of the stock and paint continued to re – surface. In 2014 and 2016 Orinoco experienced cash flow problems and the BCA agreed to waive rent payments for periods of up to six months. City Council health and safety checks in 2013/14 raised concerns about the storage of materials in the store and the potential fire risks posed by the re -cycling and disposal of

used paint. Following another check in 2016 Council officers closed the Scrap Store for a short period, to enable a clean up to be organised. The Council Officers more than hinted that if major improvements were not made the Scrap Store and the Community Centre would be at risk of being closed on a more permanent basis. Under pressure to act the BCA committee decided that Orinoco could no longer accept used paint for recycling or disposal. This decision strained relations between the two organisations, as Orinoco provided the only paint recycling service in Oxford and the selling of paint provided over a third of its income. The SWAP SHOP continued to run and, over recent years, BCA volunteers have taken the major roles in the organisation of the monthly event. Attendances have averaged around 80 and it is estimated that each year 6,200 kg of materials is saved from going to landfill.

During the 2010s the attendance at the monthly BCA committee meetings averaged nine trustees and volunteers. In 2015 Steve Dawe replaced Laura Carrelero as the Chairperson. Steve, like most of the BCA trustees, lives in Lye Valley within a short walking distance of the community centre. Like many small voluntary organisations Bullingdon faces the challenge of how to recruit new and younger trustees. The average age of the BCA trustees is 67, which is higher than the average of 61 for registered charities (Charity Commission, 2017). Since the late 2000s the finances of the BCA have improved, mainly due to an increase in the income from lets. Although the Children's Centre was only based at Bullingdon for a little over two years the income generated by the let enabled the BCA to build up substantial reserves compared with previous years. Another factor in sustaining the BCAs financial position has been the relatively limited expenditure on paid staff. Bullingdon, unlike some of the Community Associations in Oxford, has never employed a part time

administrator and has relied on volunteers to co – ordinate the day to day running of the community centre.

Involvement in the Wider Community

Apart from providing support for the Youth Centre (see below) the BCA's continued to make representation on traffic and planning issues and to be involved in developments relating to the future of Oxford's community centres. The traffic issues have included a long standing concern to have the Lye Valley estate designated by the County Council as a Controlled Parking Zone (CPZ). The BCA had a vested interest in the proposal for a CPZ, as parking by non-residents in the narrow streets around the community centre frequently created problems for larger vehicles, such as delivery lorries, accessing the community centre. During the 2010s parking pressures in Lye Valley increased, partly because of a growth in employment at the nearby Churchill Hospital which resulted in more people parking in the surrounding neighbourhoods. Lye Valley was eventually designated as a CPZ in 2017. In the same year Brookes University submitted a planning application to build a new hall of residence, which would have 885 units of student accommodation, on the site of the former Cowley Barracks in Lye Valley. The BCA worked with Liz Brighthouse, the County Councillor for the area, to organise a petition objecting to the proposed development. The grounds for objection included the implications for parking and traffic congestion in the area and the impact which more students would have on the social cohesion of the local community in Lye Valley and Wood Farm, which already had three large halls of student residence. In addition to these objections it was argued that if the site was to be developed it should be for social housing and affordable homes, because of the

housing shortage in Oxford. Despite the opposition the planning application was approved.

Other community groups and organisations have also been active in the Lye Valley area. St. Francis Church, which has had a religious and social presence in Lye valley since the late 1930s, started a food bank in 2008 and is part of the Community Emergency Foodbank which provides over 3,000 food parcels a year (BBC News, 18/3/2020). In early 2010s there was a revival of the Lye Valley Residents and Tenants Association (LVRTA) which made representation to the City Council about the growth of multi – occupied housing, lobbied the County Council for a CPZ and campaigned unsuccessfully against the closure of the local “Fair View” public house. In its early years the LVRA held well attended public meetings but has since become less visible and now mainly circulates information to local residents via email. The Friends of Lye Valley (FLV), a group concerned with the preservation of the ancient Lye Valley fen, has sustained an impressive level of activity The FLV has campaigned against proposed new housing and road developments harming the ecology of the fen and has carried out, with teams of volunteers, extensive conservation work. In addition to these developments there have been initiatives at the neighbourhood level on the Lye Valley estate, particularly in the streets around Lye Valley Road which border onto the golf course and the fen. Residents in this neighbourhood, which has a higher number of owner - occupied housing than other parts of the estate, have organised street parties and play days, set up a web site and have campaigned against new house building encroaching on the fen. In Lye Valley there was an increase in organised social action during the decade. On the Wood Farm estate the reverse happened, with the community centre closing and the Wood Farm Tenants and Residents Association not running since the mid - 2010s.

The long running saga of new leases for community centres and the policies which should inform the relations between centres and the City Council continued to run during the 2010s. In 2012 the City Council produced new proposals for three - year leases which would be linked to performance indicators, including grading centres on a gold, silver and bronze standard. OFCA and the majority of the community associations, including the BCA, rejected the proposals. Criticisms were voiced about the short- term nature of the leases and the Council appearing, via the performance indicators, to exercise too much control over the activities of community centres. Concerns about the Council taking over and running centres had been fuelled over the years by the experience of some of Oxford's larger centres. In the 2000s the City Council took over the running of the Blackbird Leys Centre, following problems with its Social Club and in 2014 the East Oxford Community Centre was taken over because of financial and organizational difficulties. In both these cases it could be argued that the intervention of the Council was due, in part, to shortcomings in the management of the buildings by the respective Community Associations. In the case of the new Rose Hill Community Centre, which opened in 2015 at a cost of £4.7 million, the situation was different. In Rose Hill the Community Association, which had run a community centre in the area since the pre – war years, was effectively excluded from an involvement in the management of the new community centre and has had to rent space in the centre. These developments prompted speculation as to whether “the City Council is losing faith in the capacity of residents to collectively help themselves” (letter, Oxford Mail, 10/8/2015).

By the mid -2010s there were 28 buildings in the city which the City Council classified as “community centres”, of which eighteen were owned by the City Council. Four of the City owned centres were

directly run by the Council, one (Barton) was jointly managed by the Council and a Community Association and the remaining fourteen were run by Community Associations (Oxford City's Community Centre Strategy 2016 – 2020, 2016). In 2013 the Council produced revised plans which proposed extending the length of the leases for centres to 20 years, maintained performance indicators but dropped the grading of community centres. OFCA again rejected the proposals, mainly because of concerns about the controls which could be exercised by the Council and the longer leases not offering all the community centres security of tenure under the provisions of the 1954 Landlord and Tenant Act. Whether a community centre had security of tenure under the 1954 Act had been a source of controversy in negotiations over community centre leases for years and was the result of the ad hoc way in which leases had been negotiated in the past and the lack of a standardized arrangement which covered the leases of all of the community centres which were owned by the Council. Of the eighteen centres which were owned by the Council five, including Bullingdon, had been granted in the past security of tenure under the 1954 Act and the remainder were on licenses or unprotected leases, which did not confer security of tenure and left them vulnerable to having their tenancy terminated at short notice. Whether an individual centre had protected status or not was an accident of history and this, not surprisingly, was a bone of contention for those centres which were not covered by the 1954 Act. The position of OFCA was that all the centres should be on long term leases (eg;25 years) which had protection under the 1954 Act and that the details of the leases should be based on the "model lease" recommended by Community Matters, formerly the National Association of Community Associations.

With the negotiations over new leases still stalled the Council embarked, in 2015, on yet another review of its community centres strategy. This review was more open and comprehensive than previous exercises and involved consultation with a steering group, which included representatives of OFCA, a needs assessment carried out by consultants and a public consultation on the draft version of the strategy. The overall tone of the strategy was positive;

“Oxford City Council has decided to retain an extensive network of community centres across the city..... The centres represent collectively a substantial investment by the Council in community managed facilities and the Council’s strategic objective is to support them to be active and inclusive places” (Community Centres Strategy, 2016 -2020, 2016).

In the strategy document the Councils major priority for investment was identified as the development of “community hubs” which are located in those areas of the city which are the most socially deprived, as measured by the indices of multiple deprivation. These areas were Blackbird Leys, Barton, Rose Hill and East Oxford.

“The Council will place a high priority on the establishment of high quality and inclusive community hubs in the priority areas.....providing a range of public and voluntary services, including health, advice and leisure activities”

These multi - functional community centres or hubs would offer a broader mix of voluntary and professional services compared with traditional community centres. Three of the community centres in the priority areas are directly run by the Council and the fourth, at Barton, is co – managed by the Council and the Barton Community Association. On the vexed question of leases the strategy offered community centres twenty five year leases but maintained the

distinction between those centres which were on protected leases and the centres which had leases which were outside the security of tenure provided by the 1954 Landlord and Tenant Act.

The strategy received a mixed reception. OFCA welcomed the positive tone of the strategy and the proposed increase in the length of the leases for community centres. However, criticisms were expressed about several issues, including the lack of security of tenure for those centres not covered by the 1954 Act, the marginalisation of Community Associations in the running of three of the community centres in priority areas and the lack of recognition in the strategy document of the economic value of community centres, as measured by the income generated from lets, grants, local fund raising and the cash in kind contribution made by trustees and volunteers. In its submission to the consultation on the strategy the BCA also expressed concerns about the lack of social provision in Lye Valley and Wood Farm, especially in the light of the closure of the Wood Farm community centre.

Youth Centre

The early 2010s proved to be a very difficult period for those BCA trustees who were involved in supporting and helping to manage the Wood Farm Youth Centre. In April 2010 the youth centre was relocated for the second time on the school site and re – opened a month later. In addition to the youth groups the centre was now being used by the Wood Farm Parent and Toddler group which, under the leadership of Belinda House, had previously been based for many years at the Wood Farm Community Centre. The Parent and Toddler rented space for four mornings a week and quickly become part of the social fabric of the youth centre.

In the same year that the youth centre was relocated the County Council announced massive cuts in its budget, as result of the government's austerity measures – “It is clear that we face an unprecedented reduction in public spending” (Oxfordshire County Council, 14/9/2010). The cuts in the government funding for Oxfordshire was over 28 % and savings of £155 million had to be made by 2015. The first wave of the cuts directly impacted on the Youth Service, with the budget for Children, Young People and Families being reduced by between 2.5 – 3 million. The response of the Conservative controlled County Council was to propose cutting support to youth centres in the county and setting up a new “Early Intervention Service”, which would be based in seven hubs and would focus mainly on working with children and young people who were “most in need”. (Oxfordshire County Council, 26/11/2010). Twenty six youth centres which the Council directly funded would close and finance would also be withdrawn from a further eight youth centres which received some support from the County Council, including the youth centre in Wood Farm. The proposals would mean the end of the County Council directly providing open access and universal provision for young people and employing youth workers to run these services. Future youth work provision was to be left mainly to the voluntary sector and the County Council proposed setting up a one off £600,000 fund to support local groups and charities to fill the gap left by the cuts to the youth and other services (eg; libraries) In Oxfordshire. David Cameron's “Big Society” was the way forward and wildly optimistic claims were made about the voluntary sector being able to increase the provision for young people in the county.

“Louise Chapman, who has responsibility for the youth service, said she thought more, not fewer, youth clubs would run across the

county, despite the cuts, through community initiatives” (Oxford Mail, 20/4/2011)

For the WFYC the proposed cuts were a devastating blow. After years of struggling against the odds to establish the youth centre in Wood Farm the WFYC was faced with the prospect of losing the full time post held by Simon Edmondson and the sessional post of ten hours per week held by Jeanette Scott. The like for like replacement costs for these posts was over £30,000 a year. The loss of the paid staff would inevitably result in a reduction of the number of weekly youth work sessions and a reduction in outreach work and joint work with other agencies. Like many other youth centres in Oxfordshire the WFYC responded to the situation by campaigning against the cuts. At the local level a petition was started, local councillors were lobbied, appeals were made for donations and public meetings were held in February and March of 2011. The meetings were well attended by young people, councillors and staff from the Youth Service but attracted little active support from local parents and residents. The local campaign attracted some media interest, including a feature in the “Oxford Mail” which ran under the headline “Big Society is a Big Con”.

“It is difficult to expect volunteers to take complete responsibility for the youth club. This could destroy a good project which is built upon the expertise of the youth workers” (WFYC committee member, Oxford Mail,15/2/2011)

The WFYC also supported County wide protests against the cuts and made representation at a Cabinet meeting of the County Council.

“A trustee of the Wood Farm Youth Centre said that the Big Society idea was “barking mad” and that volunteers would not be able to fill

the gap left by paid employees. There are limits to self - help” (Oxford Mail, 22/12/2010).

In April 2011 the County Council confirmed that the cuts to the Youth Service would be made and implemented by the early autumn. The WFYC reluctantly started to draw up plans to keep a basic level of provision running for the young people of Wood Farm and Lye Valley. Despite the criticisms of the County Council “Big Society” policy the WFYC applied for a one-off grant and also began to explore whether any funding was available from the City Council. These initiatives received strong and active support from local Councillors Liz Brighthouse (County Council) and Dr Joe McManners (City Council). By September the WFYC had received a grant of £6000 from the County Council and had submitted an application to the City Council for a grant for the 2012/13 financial year.

During the autumn of 2011 the WFYC ran a reduced programme of activities, staffed by sessional workers and local volunteers, and experienced problems with sustaining the programme. The workers and volunteers struggled to cope with operating on limited resources and disruptive behaviour by a small group of older teenagers compounded the stresses and strains. In November a decision was made to close the youth centre, on a temporary basis, in order to enable the WFYC to re – think the survival plan for the centre. An approach was made to Positive Futures (PF, Oxford City Council) to explore whether PF could provide, under a contract with the WFYC, youth work sessions at the centre. This move was viewed as a possible means to provide much needed stability in the delivery of the local service. PF was a City Council programme which was targeted at vulnerable young people living in areas of social deprivation and the WFYC was aware, from contacts with local Labour Party Councillors, that the City Council was concerned to plug

some of the considerable gaps in provision left by the demise of the County Youth Service.

In February 2012 the Youth Centre re – opened, with PF running one session a week on a Wednesday evening funded by the WFYC from a £10,000 grant received from the City Council. Compared with previous sessions the age profile of the Wednesday group was younger, with mainly boys in the 11 – 14 age range attending. Later in the autumn two of the local volunteers, Hayley Nash and Karis Daniels, started a Girls Group in partnership with PF. The setting up of the group was a response to girls being reluctant to attend the Wednesday session because it was too male dominated. Before the Girls Group could become well established the WFYC was informed that, because of the on - going redevelopment of the school site, the youth centre would have to be relocated again. This third move in ten years, which was promised to be the final one, was to a corner site next to the school car park and separated by a high fence from the now closed “Crown and Thistle” public house. The youth centre was shut in February 2013 and the relocation of the portakabin took fifteen weeks to be completed. During this period the Girls Group struggled to keep going at various alternative venues, the Wednesday group organised trips away from Wood Farm and the Parent and Toddler group relocated to Bullingdon.

In the years since relocating to its final location on the school site the youth centre has experienced a period of relative stability and has expanded the range of its activities. In February 2015 Hayley Nash, Marisa Corbett and Karis Daniels started a junior club, the “Friday Night Project”, for children in the six to ten year age range. The initiative was prompted by requests from local parents who were concerned about the lack of after school provision in the area. The Junior Club rapidly became the best attended of the youth centre’s

activities, attracting up to thirty children to the sessions on a Friday. By the late 2010s the WFYC had around sixty children and young people registered with the three groups which are based at the centre. Staff from Youth Ambition (formerly Positive Futures) ran one group, under a contract with the WFYC, and the other groups were run by local volunteers. In addition to these sessions the Wood Farm Parent and Toddlers Group has continued to meet on four mornings and during the summer school holidays the Inspired Young People's Project has run an activity programme at the centre for children and young people. Despite its modest size and limited resources the WFYC remains the only non – uniformed and non – church based provider of youth work in Wood Farm and Lye Valley.

During the 2010s the biggest challenge the WFYC faced was raising funds to maintain the activities at the youth centre, in the context of an economic and political climate which was hostile to public expenditure. The austerity policies of the Coalition government resulted, between 2009 - 2015, in cutbacks in local government expenditure of over 20% (Institute for Fiscal Studies, March 2015) and local neighbourhood services were the hardest hit, “taking a shrinking share of a shrinking budget” (New Policy Institute, 2017). It has been estimated that cuts and underfunding had “forced at least 763 youth centres to shut since 2012 “(The Guardian, 4/1/2021). In Wood Farm the visible signs of the cuts included the closure of the Slade Children's Centre and the cuts to the youth work staff at the youth centre.

In a typical year the WFYC needs to raise around £13000 to fund three sessions and cover the running costs of the centre. This has only been achieved because of regular grant support from the City Council, supplemented by one off grants from local trusts and a modest amount of income generated from letting space at the

centre. The key funding contribution of the City Council was further underlined in 2015 when the County Council closed two grant programmes for voluntary sector youth work, the Chill Out Fund and the Positive Activities Fund, and also cut the County Councillors Community Budget which Liz Brighthouse, the County Councillor for Wood Farm and Lye Valley, had previously used to support the youth centre. Towards the end of the decade the County Council introduced modest improvements in the grants which were provided for the voluntary sector. The Councillors Community Budget was reinstated in 2018 and in 2019 a new £1 million programme, the 'Youth Opportunity Fund' (YOF), was launched for voluntary and community organisations which worked with young people. The WFYC submitted a bid of £40,300 for a two - year part time youth worker post which would combine outreach work on the estate with assisting with the running of sessions at the youth centre. Strong support for the bid was received from Liz Brighthouse and the local City Councillors. In February 2020 the WFYC were informed that they had been awarded a grant of £35,620. Given the WFYC's history of failed grant applications for youth work posts the decision came as a very welcome surprise, particularly as there had been very stiff competition for the YOF grants. Only 24 out of the 95 organisations which made applications received grants (Oxford Mail, 29/2/2020). The number of applications clearly reflected the chronic under funding of the voluntary youth work sector in the county.

The survival of the WFYC, in an age of austerity, is a testament to the commitment and resilience of the small team of local volunteers who managed the centre and delivered youth work sessions.

THE FUTURE OF THE COMMUNITY CENTRE

Funding for a New Hall

The main hall of the community centre was built by local residents in the late 1940s with materials provided by the City Council. The walls of the hall were made of pre - cast concrete blocks and the roof was made of corrugated asbestos. The intended life span of the building was twenty - five years and, over the decades, the BCA experienced recurring problems with leaks in the roof, dampness and cracks in the columns of the walls. By the mid - 2010s cracks in four of the columns on one of the walls in the main hall were becoming more visible, exposing the supporting steel struts. In late August 2016 a consultant engineer carried out a survey of the hall for the City Council and the results made very disturbing reading for the BCA.

“Significant repairs are required to restore the structural integrity of the building. The cost of these repairs is unlikely to be financially viable for this sub – standard building. Demolition and construction should be considered.” (Allcott Associates, Specific Defect Report, 26/8/2016).

Within days of the inspection the Council installed two temporary props to support the worst effected columns in the hall. The BCA was a facing a crisis. The hall was not fit for purpose and further deterioration could result in its closure. Also, it was apparent that there was no immediate prospect of funding being made available for a major renovation. Previous discussions with the City Council about the condition of the hall had indicated that only limited funding might be available for short term remedial work and the recent review of the community centres in the city had made no mention of Bullingdon being a priority for renovation.

With the active support of Councillor Pat Kennedy, who represented the Lye Valley ward, the BCA began a relatively low - key lobbying of the City Council officers and councillors. The focus was on the need to replace the hall and to fund the renovation by using some of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds which would be generated by a new student hall of residence which was due to be built on the site of the former Cowley Barracks. This development was liable for a substantial CIL payment of £2,342,100.17 (Oxford City Council web site, January 2018). It was also emphasised that Lye Valley and Wood Farm had lost a number of community facilities over recent years. The initial response was negative. At a meeting in early October the Head of Community Services informed BCA trustees that only £50,000 was available for remedial work on the hall and that there was no prospect of CIL funds being made available for a major renovation of the community centre. The BCA responded by stepping up the lobbying of the Council. A letter was sent to the Leader of the Council and eleven of the groups which are based at the centre contacted local councillors.

“The hall is run down and in need of work, but for us it means a great deal. We have security being tucked away at the end of the road, no traffic concerns, a park to use in the summer, disabled facilities, a good sized parking area and a hall just big enough for us. Were we to lose Bullingdon, I think sadly that could easily mean losing the club too.” (MENCAP – 7o’clock Club)

The issue also began to be raised in the local press;

“The small Bullingdon centre in Peat Moors is facing a crisis because its hall is at risk of falling downfunds from the Community Infrastructure Levy should be used to improve social facilities in the area (eg; renovate Bullingdon).....It is time that the needs and

interests of the residents of Lye Valley and Wood Farm were given a priority” (Letter, Oxford Times, 2nd November 2016)

In early December the BCA received some unexpected news. Councillor Pat Kennedy reported that, following a meeting of senior Officers of the Council and local Councillors, a decision had been made to earmark £500,000 as a priority for the renovation of the hall and that the funding would be included in the Council budget which was due to be finalised in February 2017. The news was “greeted with considerable surprise by the BCA committee” (BCA minutes, 6/12/2016), mainly because of the negative reaction to the first round of lobbying and the recognition that the City Council, like most local authorities, was under severe financial pressure because of the Conservative government’s austerity policies. Councillor Kennedy indicated that the decision to provide the funding was because of the “deteriorating condition of the hall and the lack of facilities in Lye Valley and Wood Farm” (BCA minutes, 6/12/2017).

In the new year the BCA started to consider a design strategy for the renovation of the community centre. The aim was for trustees, user groups and members of the local community to be actively involved in the process and to avoid plans being imposed from above with the minimum of consultation. The trustees drew up a “wish list” which included proposals to sub – divide the hall, create a central corridor and replace the existing flat roofs. The wish list also included proposals to improve other parts of the centre, such as the changing rooms and the entrance to the rear small hall. An effort was also made to recruit outside expertise and advice from the School of Architecture at Brookes University.

“The management committee of the centre are keen to get advice on how to plan the renovation and make the most creative use of

the available space. Is this a project which might be of interest to any of your students?" (email; 18/1/2017)

It was not until late May that a contact was made with Andrea Placidi, who teaches Interior Architecture at Brookes. Andrea, who had previous experience of working with local groups on the design of community buildings, embraced the Bullingdon project with enthusiasm and commitment. Following meetings with BCA trustees and visits to the site Andrea and a student, Gintara Guzaviciute, quickly prepared a design proposal and drawings. In mid-June the proposal was discussed with Council Officers, including the senior staff member responsible for the co - ordination of the renovation, who were more than surprised that the BCA and Brookes had been able to draw up detailed proposals in advance of the architects for the renovation being appointed by the Council. It was agreed at the meeting that the BCA/Brookes proposal would be fully taken into account when the architects were appointed. Later, in early July, Andrea presented the design proposal at a well - attended AGM of the BCA.

Crisis

The positive progress which was being made on the plans for the renovation was shattered on Friday the 14th July when the City Council decided, without any prior warning, that the main hall at the community centre should be closed on health and safety grounds. A notice was put on the front door to the centre.

"In the interest of public safety this building is closed until further notice. No access under any circumstances".

All bookings for the weekend, which included a children's party and a Youth Centre disco, had to be cancelled. The BCA and the groups

which used the centre were thrown into chaos. Three days earlier there had been a visit to the community centre by the City Engineer and a newly appointed Health and Safety Officer for the Council. I accompanied them when they inspected the hall and the props which had been installed to support one of the walls. Concerns about about the conditions of the hall were expressed, especially by the Health and Safety Officer, but no clear indication was given that the centre was at immediate risk of being closed. It transpired that the decision was made by the Health and Safety Officer - "the nub is that H&S said the hall is unsafe" (email from a City Officer, 18/7/2017). The view of BCA trustees was that some senior Officers of the Council were in a moral panic about the safety of Council property following the tragic fire which had occurred, some weeks previously, at Glenfall Towers in London. This explanation was lent some credibility by the findings of an inspection of the hall, conducted by the consultant engineer in early July, which concluded that the props were working and that there was no likelihood of a wall collapsing.

"We do not consider there is any structural concern at present due to the fact that the propping that has been carried out has not moved and appears to be satisfactory for its purpose" (Allcott Associates, Specific Defect Report, 6/7/2017)

Three days after the closure of the hall the BCA committee held an emergency meeting in the garden of the community centre, because no access was allowed to the hall. Fortunately the weather was fine! There was anger about the complete lack of consultation over the closure and disbelief about why the decision had been made after the consultant engineer had reported that the existing props were ensuring the safety of the hall. By the time of the BCA meeting an email had been obtained which indicated that the consultant engineer had been contacted on the day of the closure and had

advised Council Officers that the existing propping was “adequate” and that, if there were safety concerns, the hall could be kept open by installing an additional seven props on the other pillars of the wall.

The committee agreed to write to the Council about their concerns and anger over the lack of consultation and to request that additional props should be immediately installed to enable the hall to re – open. It was also agreed to highlight the disruption and distress that the closure would cause the groups and activities which used the centre. Of the nineteen groups and activities based at the community centre thirteen would require relocation to other venues. A major concern for the trustees was the possibility that the hall would not now re – open until the planned renovation was completed, which would be a long period during which contact could be lost with the user groups.

In addition to making representation to the Council the BCA decided to quickly launch a public campaign to re – open the hall, which involved contacting the local media and asking user groups and members of the local community to lobby the City Council. During the week of the 24th July the BCA managed to achieve a high profile in the local media. Trustees were interviewed on the regional BBC news, Radio Oxford and the local ‘This is Oxfordshire’ TV channel. There was extensive coverage in the “Oxford Mail” and a photo call, attended by over thirty adults and children, turned into an impromptu demonstration outside of the closed community centre. The paper ran a front page story under the headline “Left In Lurch by Shutdown” and devoted an inside page and editorial to the issue.

“An entire community has been left adrift with the abrupt loss of a single hall. Reading the heartfelt testimonies of those who use

Bullington Community Centre week in, week out, it is clear that the current situation – with the main hall in Peat Moors locked and out of action – cannot be allowed to continue for the whole summer” (Oxford Mail, July 27, 2017).

Trustees, user groups and members of the local community emailed Council Officers and Councillors and wrote letters to the press.

“Taking away, with no notice, our facilities and allowing a club that that been running for a huge number of years to just flounder is devastating. A gap like this will make it enormously difficult to bring back volunteers, carers and our members” (Katie Hollier, Oxford and District MENCAP).

“I worry that groups will find it hard to find new locationsThis is a massive loss for our area and communityWe are in a climate that needs us to stand together and focus on building and strengthening our relationships, rather than dividing and separating” (Rachael Fisher, Bullington Parent and Toddler Group).

The response from Councillors, including Bob Price the leader of the Council, was sympathetic and supportive. On the 31st July a meeting was held at the Town Hall to discuss the closure, which was attended by six BCA trustees, the Head of Community Services, the Councillor who was the Portfolio Holder for Community Services , two of the City Councillors for the Lye Valley and Churchill wards and the County Councillor for the area. The meeting was testy at times and there were tensions over which issues should form the focus for the discussions. The BCA trustees and the local Councillors wanted to concentrate on why the hall had been closed and what plans the Council had to install additional props and re-open the hall as soon as possible. At one point in the meeting the Trustees offered to fund the purchase of additional props and arrange for them to be installed

by a local builder. On the other hand the Head of Community Services wanted to mainly focus on the support the Council could provide for the relocation of user groups and was reluctant, because of health and safety concerns, to engage in detailed discussions about additional props. After considerable discussion it was agreed that the Head of Community Services would consult with the Head of Building Services for the Council about the BCA proposal to install the extra props. At the meeting it was also reported that an Oxford based firm of architects, Jessop and Cook, had been appointed as the architects for the renovation of the hall.

Following the meeting the BCA trustees were sceptical about whether any significant progress had been made. This pessimism proved to be misplaced. On the 6th August the BCA were informed that the Council had agreed to install seven extra props and the work started two days later. Against the odds the BCA, with significant support from user groups and local Councillors, had achieved a notable success. After an inspection of the new props by the consultant engineer the hall re – opened for public use on the 29th August and the BCA trustees returned to the business of planning the renovation of the community centre.

Plans for the Renovation

The trustees started meeting with Jessop and Cook in August and by early October a draft design was discussed at a well attended meeting of the Association. The design shared some of the features of the plans drawn up by Andrea Placidi but differed in other significant respects, particularly with regards to a proposed realignment of the main hall, an enlarged foyer and more garden space at the rear of the building. The response to the draft design was generally positive, although some Trustees and representatives

of user groups expressed reservations about the proposed realignment of the hall. More generally concerns were voiced about whether the £500,000 budget for the renovation would be sufficient, given the complexity of demolishing and rebuilding the main hall while retaining other parts of the existing community centre. These concerns were to prove prophetic.

With minor modifications the Jessop and Cook design proposal was approved by the BCA in November and was submitted by the architects to the City Council in late December. City Officers and the architects had initially indicated that the renovation was likely to start in April 2018 but the date had slipped to June by early in the new year. The building work was predicted to take between nine and twelve months to complete and was due to be undertaken by Oxford Direct Services, a company which had recently been set up by the City Council. At the January meeting of the BCA the architects reported that the detailed costs of the project were still not available and that ground surveys of the site had indicated that one corner of the community centre was on the site of an old quarry, which would add to the costs of the work. The presence of the old quarry was well known to local residents but apparently came as a surprise to the Officers of the City Council. Despite the uncertainty over the costs and the timetable the BCA decided to advise the thirteen groups and activities which currently used the main hall that they should start planning to relocate. There was also the possibility that the groups which used other parts of the building, such as Orinoco and Bullingdon Youth Football Club, could also be affected if the plans for the renovation impacted on the dressing rooms and the rear hall of the centre.

In early February the BCA wrote to the City Engineer raising concerns about the uncertainty over the timetable for the renovation, the

implications if the project was over budget and access to the building during the renovation for those groups which would be still based at the centre (eg; Orinoco). No response was received and the BCA had to rely on informal contacts with City Officers, Councillors and the architects to monitor developments. The information which filtered through indicated that June was still the likely start date and that the full costs of the project were still not available. It was also becoming apparent that the renovation would have a significant impact on the rest of the building and that it was likely that the Football Club and Orinoco would not have access to their space during the period of the building work.

At the BCA meeting in May the Council Locality Officer reported that Direct Works wanted groups relocated and the hall cleared by early June. By this stage a number of groups had already moved to other venues and by the end of May all the groups, with the exception of Orinoco and the Football Club, had left Bullingdon. The groups relocated to a variety of venues, including St Francis Church, the local Scout Hall, the Slade Nursery and the Headington and Barton Community Centres. The moves involved a considerable commitment of time and effort and, in some cases, groups found themselves incurring increased hiring costs. Alongside the relocation of group's the BCA had started in early May to gradually clear the main hall and store away equipment and furniture. This process involved a dozen volunteers and was eventually completed in early June. In addition to the clear out of the hall Trustees were also engaged in lengthy discussions with Council officers and the architects about plans for hiring shipping containers, which would be located in the car park to store items for the BCA, Orinoco and the Football Club.

At the BCA meeting in June the Locality Officer reported, to the dismay of the Trustees and user groups, that the renovation would not now start in June. The BCA responded to this news by writing to the City Engineer expressing serious concern and outlining what the consequences of further delays could entail.

“It will mean more of the building work being undertaken over the winter months and will put back the completion date. For the groups who used the centre it will mean a longer period being spent in alternative venues, some of which charge higher hiring fees than those charged by the BCA. Delays will also increase the likelihood of the social capital developed by the community centre, over many years, being fragmented and fractured. If the main hall remains empty and is not used for any period of time this could increase the risks of vandalism and anti – social behaviour in the Peat Moors neighbourhood.” (BCA email, 6/6/2018)

Another Crisis

This time the letter to the City Engineer received an immediate response and a request was made for an urgent meeting with the BCA. A group of trustees met with Ian Brooke, the Head of Community Services, on the 13th June and were informed that the renovation of the community centre had been suspended, due the costs being over budget by between £200,000 - £300,000. The increase in costs was mainly attributed to having to build on part of the site of the former quarry, the discovery of which had apparently been unexpected and a surprise to the City Council. Following this announcement Ian Brooke indicated that the future of the project was now under review and that a number of different options were being explored. These options included not proceeding with the renovation because building on the former quarry was considered

too risky and expensive, seeking the additional funding needed to proceed with the renovation, relocating the centre to a different part of the Peat Moors site or building a new community centre elsewhere in Lye Valley or Wood Farm.

The BCA trustee reacted to this news with a mixture of disbelief and anger. Four days earlier volunteers had finished clearing out the main hall and only two groups had not been relocated to other venues. The BCA was faced with the future of the community centre being back in the melting pot and being left to run a half empty building. Why did the City Council not warn the BCA about the funding problem and the likelihood of the renovation being suspended? Why did the existence of the old quarry come as a surprise, when it was well known to local residents that Peat Moors was the site of a former quarry which dated back to the 19th century? For the second time, in less than a year, the BCA faced a major crisis.

On the 19th of June the trustees held an emergency meeting which was also attended by two local Councillor's, Pat Kennedy (City Council) and Liz Brighthouse (County Council) and Marie Tidball, who was the Portfolio holder for Community Centres on the City Council. The trustees expressed their concerns to the Councillors, including the failure of the Council to communicate with the BCA about the increased costs of the renovation, the impact the suspension would have on local groups and the loss of the income which would be incurred by the BCA because of the relocation of activities. There was also amazement expressed about the 'discovery' of the old quarry and it being an obstacle to the renovation, given that its presence had not prevented extensions to the community centre being built in the past. As far as the trustees were concerned the renovation should proceed on the existing site and the City Council would need to find the additional funding which was required. By the end of the

meeting the trustees had agreed to offer groups which had been relocated the opportunity to return to the centre until the renovation started. This move was driven by the concern to avoid the centre being left under used and half empty. It was also decided to give the Councillors a couple of weeks to try to negotiate a reversal of the decision to suspend the development. If this did not materialise the BCA would launch a campaign and contact the local media.

Within a matter of days the 'softly softly' approach to negotiations was blown out of the water. The City Council released a press statement which was published in the "Oxford Mail".

"A £500,000 revamp of a creaking Oxford community centre may have to be abandoned after the city council found it was built on a former quarry" (Oxford Mail, 22 June 2018)

With the issue now out in the public arena the BCA immediately went into pressure group mode. Groups which had used the centre and local residents were urged to write to or email the press, councillors and senior officers .A detailed briefing note was produced which outlined the concerns of the BCA and provided the contact details of key officers and councillors, including Susan Brown who was the Leader of the Council and represented the Churchill ward, which includes the Wood Farm estate. Over a two week period in late June and early July ten letters appeared in either the Oxford Mail or the Oxford Times, along with other letters and emails which were sent directly to councillors and office. A number of the letters and emails commented on the social value of Bullingdon.

"The centre is a lifeline for those of us who would otherwise experience isolation, loneliness and boredom as the "community" around us becomes more disparate and transient. The latest mantra

is keep the brain alive for longer by taking on new challenges, socialising and learning new skills – all offered at the Bullingdon Community Centre at a affordable cost”. (Creative Writing Group, Oxford Mail, 12/7/2018)

The “discovery” of the old quarry attracted considerable comment.

“It is very wrong to say the council were not aware of the quarry underneath the centre. In the 1980s the council built onto the centre, adding new changing, three toilet blocks and two large store rooms. My house is adjacent to the centre and I have always been led to believe that the whole of the Peat Moors estate, which was built by the City Council, was built on a quarry” (Pat White, Oxford Mail, 4/7/2018).

On the 17 July the Oxford Mail carried a report with the headline;

“Common Knowledge : Community Fights back after council delays renovation – How did you not know about the quarry under our centre ?”

This report was accompanied by a picture of over thirty BCA trustees, members of groups and local residents protesting outside the community centre. A few days later the paper carried another report about how a resident of Lye Valley, Darren Grant, had found a hand drawn map of the quarry at Peat Moors on the City Council’s web site. The map dated from 1949 and had been produced as part of the original planning application for the community centre. It showed the edge of the filled in quarry overlapping with the proposed site for the community centre. Evidence of the “unforeseen” quarry had been in the Council’s archives for the last sixty - nine years!

At a well attended BCA meeting in July it was decided to step up the lobbying campaign and to employ additional strategies to keep the

pressure on the Council. These included making a formal complaint about how the Council had handled the suspension of the renovation, making a claim for compensation for the loss of income which the BCA had incurred by groups relocating to other venues and making a Freedom of Information Request (FIR) about the reports on the land surveys which had been undertaken at Peat Moors and the costs the Council had incurred to date on the planning of the renovation. It was also decided to check out whether there was a covenant on the land at Peat Moors and whether an application could be made for the community centre to be designated as a “community asset”.

By the middle of July there was evidence that the campaign was beginning to have an impact on the City Council. Susan Brown, the leader of the Council, issued a reassuring public statement.

“I am looking forward to working with the Community Association, other councillors and council officers on the future of the Bullingdon Community Centre”. (Letter, Oxford Mail, 13/7/2018)

Around the same time Tim Sadler, Executive Director of the City Council, requested a meeting with BCA trustees and local groups in order to “hear at first hand” about their experiences and concerns. A meeting was held on the 17th July which attended by four trustees and the representatives of five groups which used the community centre. At the meeting Tim Sadler commented on the reasons for the increased costs of the renovation (eg; the old quarry) and outlined three options for the future. These options were to proceed with the renovation and secure the extra finance required, not to proceed with the renovation and look for an alternative use for the site or find an alternative site for the community centre in Wood Farm and Lye Valley. When pressed about an alternative use for the site Tim

Sadler speculated about the possibility of the land being used for housing or a GP surgery. He also indicated that the review of the future options would be completed within a month and that an investigation would be held into the BCAs complaint about how the Council had handled the suspension of the renovation.

A recurring theme in the meetings between the BCA and Councillors and Officers concerned the breakdown in trust between the Council and the BCA. This tension was reinforced by the possibility, which was mentioned in the meeting with Tim Sadler, that an alternative use might be found for the Peat Moors site. This possibility sparked off a fresh round of letter writing to the local press.

“Bullington is the only usable venue for the Wood Farm, Lye Valley and Town Furze communities left and must be kept for future generations and must not be demolished with the land being used by developers or given to the NHS”. (Richard Anderson, Oxford Mail, 24th July).

The public speculation about the future of the site prompted a response from the Leader of the Council.

“Unhelpful rumours are being spread about the future of the site.....I would like to take this opportunity to categorically state that there is no truth whatever in any of the stories about alternative uses for the Bullington siteI remain committed to a long term future for Bullington Community Centre”. (Susan Brown, Oxford Mail, 15th August, 2018)

This statement was quickly followed by the BCA receiving an offer from the City Council to join a Project Board, which would oversee decisions about the future of the Community Centre and was intended to “improve communications”. At a committee meeting in

August the BCA accepted the invitation and nominated two trustees to attend the Project Board.

“After being ‘left out of the loop’ members will now join the board.... after complaining about ‘appalling’ communication the group has ‘welcomed the offer of improved communication and involvement in developments’. (Oxford Mail, 16th August)

At the BCA meeting in August it had been noted “that there is a clear indication that the lobbying undertaken by the BCA and local groups has had an impact on the City Council” (BCA minutes, 7th August). The scale of this impact was to become more evident over the next two months. On the 13th September a meeting of the Project Board was held and the BCA representatives were informed that, much to their surprise, that the City Council was now proposing to demolish the existing building and build a new community centre on the Peat Moors site, using a modular system of construction. Apparently the cost of this new build, which was around £1 million, would be similar to the cost of renovating the main hall and carrying out work on other parts of the existing centre. The plan was contingent on the extra funds required, £500,000, being included in the Council’s capital budget for 2019/20. In a short period of time the BCA had gone from experiencing complete uncertainty over the future of the community centre to being offered a new community centre.

At the BCA meeting in October the trustees and representatives of groups which used the centre voted unanimously for the proposal to demolish and rebuild the centre. Later in the month a further meeting was held with the City Council to review future plans and receive feedback on the results of the investigation into the BCA complaint about how the Council had managed the suspension of the renovation. The Council’s representatives at this meeting

included Susan Brown (Leader of the Council), Tim Sadler (City Council, Executive Director) and Ian Brooke (Head of Community Services). The BCA representatives included five trustees and nine members of groups which used the centre. The feedback received from the City Council exceeded the expectations of the most optimistic of the BCA trustees. It was confirmed that the existing centre would be demolished and that a new community centre would be built on the same site and that the extra £500,000 needed for the project would definitely be included in the capital budget for 2018/19. With regards to the BCA complaint Tim Sadler summarised the main findings of the investigation, which highlighted mistakes made in the management of the project and issues which the staff of the City Council had failed to address in the planning of the renovation. These mistakes and oversights included the decision not to appoint a full time project manager for the renovation, underestimating the costs and complexity of the renovation and poor communication with the BCA.

“Oxford City Council would like to apologisewe have learnt lessons.....we are now trying to rebuild our relationship with the BCA” (Bullington Community Centre: Sequence of Events, Oxford City Council, 2018)

Tim Sadler had concluded that the BCA’s complaint was valid and indicated that the Council would make a payment (£3,612) to compensate the BCA for the loss of income incurred because of having to relocate groups from the community centre prior to the suspension of the renovation. Following the meeting a joint press release was released.

“Agreement has been reached in principle with the BCA for the demolition of the defective Bullington Community Centre building

and its replacement with a brand new purpose – built facility, using off – site construction methods. A revised budget for the works of £1 million is being put forward to the City Council’s capital programme and we hope to commence construction next year.”

A spokesperson for the BCA commented:

“The Trustees and the groups who use the community centre are delighted with the news that a new community centre will be built on the existing site. The last two years have been very challenging and turbulent for the BCA, and this positive development is due, in no small part, to the collective support we have received from local groups, residents and councillors. It has been a fine example of our community refusing to give up in the face of adversity”. (Oxford City Council,29/10/2018)

New Plans and More Problems

The City Council agreed a revised budget of £1.2 million for the re-building of the community centre. During the early months of 2019 the BCA trustees began to engage in a series of meetings with the architects, Jessop and Cook, and City Council officers about the design plans for the new centre. The process went relatively smoothly and was helped by the rapport which the trustees had previously developed with the architects and the advice which was provided by Andrea Placidi (Brookes University), the BCAs architectural consultant. The major concerns raised by the trustees focussed on issues of cost and what appeared to be the very protracted timetable for the development. Concerns about costs included the unpredictable implications of building on part of the old quarry, the need to replace drains and the cost implications of new EU building regulations which required new public buildings to be

‘nearly zero energy buildings’. The new regulation, known as Regulation 25B, came into force from the 1st January 2019.

Information on the timetable for the project was difficult to pin down and there were indications that work on the Peat Moors site would not begin until well into 2020. The uncertainty over the timetable impacted on the BCAs capacity to book long term lets and left user groups and the local community unsure about the progress of the project. These concerns resulted in the BCA trustees holding a meeting, in March, with the Leader of the Council and other Councillors at which it was agreed that a public Information event on the plans for the new centre should be held at Bullingdon. The event was held on the 4th July and was well organised, although the attendance (60) fell short of the expectations of some of the BCA trustees. Draft design plans were on display, with the architects, Council Officers and BCA trustees being on hand to answer questions. There was an information sheet which outlined the next stages in the project, including gaining planning permission, and which cautiously stated “that it is hoped that work will start on the new community centre early 2020 and be completed by Autumn 2020”. The event was covered by the local press.

“Users of a worn out community centre were able to see the design of a new 1million building due to replace it next year. It has taken years for a plan for Bullingdon Community Centre to be settled on – but now it will be demolished and rebuilt as part of an innovative project” (Oxford Mail; 6 July 2019)

Following the information event the BCA trustees assumed that the next stages in the project, including procurement and planning permission, would start. Given the turbulent history of the project we should have known better than to make any assumptions! On the

19th September there was a meeting of the Project Board at which the BCA trustees who attended, Steve Dawe and myself, were informed by Council Officers that the project was £200,000 over budget due to the new building regulation (25B) which required new public buildings to be “nearly zero energy” buildings. The Officers then proposed that to reduce the costs of the project the rear hall, currently occupied by Orinoco, should be cut out from the plans for the new centre. It was also indicated that the rear hall could be built at a later date, providing the finance was available. The BCA trustees reacted with a mixture of anger and disbelief and stated that they would recommend that the BCA should reject the proposal and lobby Councillors for an extra £200,000 to be included in the budget for the project. At the meetings the Officers also mentioned other possible cost saving options, including retaining the two halls and cutting other space, including two small meetings and an office, and putting a portakabin on the site of the rear hall to provide a base for Orinoco.

Following this unexpected news the BCA convened an emergency meeting on the 25th September. The meeting was well attended and three Councillors were present, Pat Kennedy the local councillor for Lye Valley, Marie Tidball, the Cabinet member for Supporting Communities and Liz Brighthouse, the County Councillor for the area. Neither of the City Councillors had been given prior warning of the project being over budget and of the Officers proposal to cut out the rear hall from the plans for the new centre.

At the meeting the trustees reported on the meeting with the officers and outlined why the loss of the rear hall would have a very negative impact on the future of the community centre. There would be a reduction of 30% in the lettable space, which would result in a significant loss of income. Currently Orinoco rented the space for

£4,800 per year, which accounted for nearly a third of the BCAs income. The loss of the rear hall would inevitably mean that Orinoco would have to relocate, which would involve a social cost as well as a loss of income. Orinoco has been integral part of Bullingdon since the early 2000s and received around 4000 visitors a year. Having only one hall, in what was already a small community centre, would impact on the appeal and viability of the new building.

There was general support for rejecting the proposal to reduce the size of the centre and for lobbying Councillors for the extra £200,000 needed to make the new building a nearly energy zero building. Scepticism was voiced about the suggestion that the rear hall could be built at a later date – would it ever happen? There was strong support for the aim of making the community centre a nearly energy zero building, which was considered to be positive feature of the plans and one which would strengthen the green credentials of Bullingdon. There was, however, criticism of the Council Officers and the architects for not fully taking into account the cost implications of the new building regulation (25B), when it was known that this regulation would be coming into force in January 2019. The Councillors were supportive and committed themselves to trying to find the extra funding, either through direct Council funding or a combination of Council funding and grants from ‘green’ trusts. Several people at the meeting mentioned the CIL funding (2.3 million) which had been generated from the new Brookes University development on Holloway. Why could not a fraction of this be used to improve community facilities and the renovation of the community centre? At the end of the meeting there was unanimous agreement on the following;

“(1) That the redevelopment of the community centre should continue without undue delay, on the basis of the design plans which

have agreed with Council Officers and Jessop/Cook and which were approved by the BCA on the 6th August.

(2) That the BCA will request that the City Council allocates additional contingency funding of £200,000, to be included in the Council budget for 2020/21.

(3) The BCA, if required, will work with Council Officers on grant applications and funding bids to external agencies.” (Minutes of BCA Emergency Meeting, 25 September, 2019)

It was agreed that the lobbying of local Councillors and the members of the Cabinet should start immediately, as the Councils budget plans for 2020/21 were already in the process of being prepared. It was also decided to concentrate on a letter writing and emailing campaign and keep contacting the local media as a ‘Plan B’ in case these tactics did not produce a result.

Over the next two weeks trustees, user groups and people who attended events at the community centre sent over 100 letters and emails to the local Lye Valley and Wood Farm Councillors and Councillors who were on the Cabinet of the Council. Most of the letters were signed by people attending the SWOP SHOP and the Orinoco Scrap Store on the 12th October. Positive replies were received from eight Councillors and a supportive reply was also received from Anneliese Dodds, the MP for Oxford East. There were early signs that the lobbying was having an impact, with senior Labour Councillors indicating that the Officers proposals were being reviewed.

“I have taken all of the Associations helpful and detailed input forward with officers and tasked them to look at all options, as

expediently as possible, to deal with this additional pressure on the budget” (email, 4/10/19)

On the 17th October Steve Dawe and I attended a meeting at the Town Hall with Marie Tidball (Cabinet Member for Supporting Communities), Pat Kennedy (Lye Valley, Councillor) and two senior Officers. At the meeting we were informed that the extra funding needed for the redevelopment of Bullingdon would be made available and that the work on the next stages of the project, the planning application and procurement, would be proceeding. It was exactly a month since the BCA trustees had been informed of the proposal to cut the rear hall out of the plans for the new community centre. Andrea Placidi, a close observer of the lobbying, commented;

“The deluge of letters to the Council was effective and inspiring, because it showed real concern for the project and not just petulant requests. You have achieved a rare exploit in the design process of publicly funded buildings: retain design integrity while avoiding the usual last minute pressure which comes at the end of a costing review.” (email,22/10/2019)

The redevelopment of Bullingdon was back on course. Over the next month the City Council agreed to increase the budget for the project by £200,000 to £1,403,000 and the planning application for the new community centre was approved. The overall contract was awarded to Oxford Direct Services and tenders were invited from outside contractors for the demolition of the existing building and the construction of the new centre. At a meeting of the Project Board, in early February, it was agreed that the BCA would clear out and hand over the building to the City Council by the 5th May.

COVID 19

What happened next could not have been anticipated. By March the coronavirus was rapidly spreading in the UK and was having an impact on everyday life. By the middle of the month most of the groups and activities based at Bullingdon had stopped running because of concerns about the virus. At a Board meeting, held at the end of March, Council Officers made it clear that Covid 19 was likely to result in serious delays to the start of the project. There was uncertainty in the construction industry about safe systems of working and the availability of materials through the supply chains. Contract negotiations had stalled and the Council was cautious about being exposed to financial risks. Following the government's announcement of the first nationwide lock down all of Oxford's community centres closed for their usual activities on the 24th March and, two weeks later, the City Council announced that most of its planned capital projects, including the redevelopment of Bullingdon, would be 'paused' because of the lock down.

"Those projects that were about to start on site, such as the redevelopment of Bullingdon Community Centre, have also been paused for the interim." (Oxford City Council Statement, 6/4/2020)

The community centre was closed for the third time in three years. The Wood Farm Youth Centre also closed in March, as did the all-weather area and the playground at Peat Moors. The plans for the redevelopment of Bullingdon were again looking uncertain and, compared with previous crises, the trustees and the user groups were powerless to influence events. The BCA trustees were also concerned

that the impact of COVID 19 on the Councils finances could result in budgets being reviewed and some capital projects being further delayed or even cancelled. The Council had estimated that it could have a £24 million shortfall in funding as a result of the virus, due to the loss of income and extra expenditure on emergency services (Oxford Mail, 5th May, 2020). The concerns of the trustees proved to be well founded. In the middle of June the Council produced a 'financial report and strategic response to coronavirus' which recommended that a number of capital projects, including Bullingdon, should be further delayed and subject to a financial review.

"The majority of the capital programme work has been paused during the lockdown period. A review of all capital expenditure is now proposed before they are restarted.....These projects include the replacement of the Bullingdon Community Centre ". (Oxford City Council Statement, 15/6/ 2020)

On the 23 June the BCA trustees held a 'zoom meeting' with senior Council Officers at which it was made clear that the redevelopment of Bullingdon was being delayed until 2021/2022 and that the future of the project would depend on the finances of the Council and whether the funding for the project was included in the Council budget for 2021/2022. It was also stated by the Officers that much would depend on 'market forces' and the bail out funding made available by central government to compensate for the financial impact of COVID 19 on local authorities. The BCA trustees acknowledged the unprecedented circumstances but expressed disappointment and deflation at the turn of events.

"We campaigned for three years for the redevelopment of the Centre and by the spring of this year the Council was within weeks of finalising the contracts for the re – build. A date (5th May) had even been

arranged between the Council and the Community Association for the handing over the site at Peat Moors. So near but so far. It is important to underline that the re – build has been delayed not cancelled”. (Oxford Mail, 19/6/2020).

During the months of the first lock down the BCA circulated information about the support which was available to vulnerable residents, some of the user groups continued to meet on line and trustees maintained regular communication with the Council Officers who were handling the redevelopment plans. When the lock down started to be eased in July the BCA found itself faced with the unexpected prospect of having to prepare for the gradual re – opening of the centre in the autumn. A sub – group of trustees, led by Barbara Bryant, carried out a risk assessment of the centre and made plans to make the building ‘COVID secure’. A similar exercise was carried at the Youth Centre. Contact was made with those groups which had used the community centre before the lock down and with other groups which had previously used the centre before re-locating because of the of the closures in 2017 and 2018. Only a minority of the groups contacted expressed an interest in returning to Bullingdon by September. The COVID regulations which had been put place were a major deterrent for a number of the groups. The numbers using the hall were limited to twenty and social distancing was hard to implement for some activities, such as the parent and toddler groups and the SWAP SHOP. Also, for some of the groups, there were concerns about the vulnerability of their members because of their age or disabilities. The loss of income which the BCA incurred during the lock down was more than compensated for by a grant of £10,000 from the Local Restrictions Support Grant, a government scheme to assist businesses which had been forced to close because of the lock down. By September six groups had re – started at the community

centre. These were Bullingdon Youth (junior football), Orinoco, Women's Kick Boxing, Martial Arts, Studio Theatre Group and the Fix It Group. The Studio Theatre Group returned to Bullingdon for the first time since the temporary closure in 2017. All these activities were suspended again during the second national lock down between the 5th November – 2nd December. At the end of the lock down the groups resumed their activities only to close again when the third national lockdown started on the 5th January 2021.

The negative impact which COVID 19 and the lockdowns had on Bullingdon was reflected in the experiences of other community centres and community buildings (eg; village halls) throughout the country. Surveys undertaken by 'Community Matters' (Hindley, A. 2021) on the impact of the 2020 and 2021 lock downs on community centres highlighted issues relating to the the fracturing of social networks, the difficulties of retaining contact with user groups, the loss of income from lets and management committees struggling to cope with uncertain circumstances and changing COVID regulations.

“Many of those taking part in interviews stressed the issues of isolation and loneliness experienced by people during lockdowns because halls and centres has been shut”

“There is evidence of some organisations reaching the end of their financial reserves”

“It was clear that people managing community buildings, often on a unpaid basis, were struggling with knowing what they were allowed to do and when”

A survey by 'Action with Communities in Rural England' on the impact of COVID 19 on village halls (Archer T. Skropke C.2021) reported similar findings and highlighted the impact on volunteers.

“Halls stated that the biggest problems they faced was the drop in fundraising, alongside challenges in managing services under COVID 19 restrictions and the pressures placed on volunteers. There is a reticence among older volunteers about returning to voluntary commitments. The difficulties recruiting new volunteers may affect the return of services and activities, as well the prospect of good governance”

Following the first lock down the Youth Centre did not re – open during 2020 for sessions which were based at the centre. The plans to recruit a new part time youth worker were put on hold and an appointment was not made until the spring of 2021. The local volunteers, all of whom had family responsibilities, were reluctant to take the risk of running in - door sessions and the staff from Youth Ambition were not available to run sessions because they had been re – deployed by the City Council to a network of ‘community hubs’, which had been set up to help with the administration and delivery of emergency services during the COVID crisis. The local volunteers continued to do informal outreach work on the estate and on two occasions they delivered over 60 ‘entertainment parcels’ to children and young people. Between lock downs the Parent and Toddler group did re – open at the Youth Centre, with reduced numbers and following weeks of careful planning by Belinda House. The impact of COVID 19 on the youth centre reflected a crisis which youth organisations were facing throughout England. A survey by the charity UK Youth of 1,759 organisations revealed that “58% were operating at a reduced level, with a further 20% temporary closed or preparing to permanently close “(The Guardian, 4/1/2021).

The year ended on a sad note for the Youth Centre and the wider Wood Farm community. David Bartrip died in December following a long illness. David had been the paster of the local Cornerstone Church

and, amongst his many community activities, he had run a church based youth club at the Wood Farm Community Centre and had been the Treasurer of the Wood Farm Youth Centre. David was a well - known and much respected figure in the local community.

Lobbying over the Budget

Alongside the efforts to re – open the community centre the BCA were also engaged in planning a lobby of the City Councillors, which was aimed at ensuring that the funding for the redevelopment was included in the Councils budget for 2021 – 2022. The trustees were under no illusions about the pressures the Council was under in drawing up the budget and made no assumptions about the funding for Bullingdon being guaranteed. They were in a sober mood and there was feeling that this was a ‘do or die’ situation.

“There is, increasingly, a feeling of desperation among the trustees and all the many who use the centre. The building is really on its last legs and there are no other facilities of the same sort nearby. Quite frankly, we feel this is do or die for the centre and the community that goes with it” (Tom Crook, BCA trustee).

Because of COVID 19 the Council had lost income and incurred extra expenditure and the support provided by central government had not covered the deficit. During 2020 it was estimated that the Council had lost around £12million and that the government had provided around £8million to assist with COVID related expenditure (Oxford City Council Press Release, 1/12/ 2020).

“Without adequate funding we, along with other councils up and down the country, will have to make some very difficult decisions about the services we provide in future years.” (Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, Press Release, 4/11/2020).

At a meeting on the 22nd September the BCA agreed a plan to lobby the City Council. The focus would be on Labour Party councillors, who formed the majority of the Council, and on members of the Councils Cabinet. Key meetings about drawing up for the budget were due to be held in November and the proposals were expected to be made public in early December. Mobilising the support of the users of the centre, local residents and other supporters was inhibited by the COVID regulations, which limited face to face contacts and meetings. Communication was mainly via emails, telephone calls and the occasional on - line meeting. The contact with Councillors was almost exclusively conducted through emails and letters. By the end of October the BCA estimated that around 100 emails and letters had been sent to Councillors. The lobbying included a four - page briefing document which detailed the BCA case for the funding for the re – build to be included in the budget for 2021 – 2022. At a BCA on line meeting in late October the informal feedback from local councillors indicated that while there was considerable support for the Bullingdon case the “financial constraints on the Council, due to the impact of COVID 19, makes it uncertain as to whether the re – build will be included in the budget”. (BCA minutes, 27/10/2020).

This understandable caution proved to be misplaced. On the 2nd of December the BCA heard the news that the funding for the re – build would be included in the proposed budget, along with funding for the redevelopment of the East Oxford Community.

“Two significant community centre redevelopments, paused as Oxford City Council responded to the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, have been unpaused in the Councils latest budget...The Council has given the two projects the green light to restart, even within the context of significant financial constraints...The existing Bullingdon Community Centre has been deteriorating for some years

and the plans to replace it were well advanced when the project was paused. The Council has worked very closely with the Bullingdon Community Association and had already undertaken community consultation and received planning approval for redevelopment.” (Oxford City Council, Press Release, 2/12/202,)

The news was greeted with a mixture of relief and celebration.

“Supporters of the Bullingdon Community Centre have been on tenderhooks anticipating the council’s decision on whether, in these difficult times, they should or could go ahead with the planned re – build of the community centre.....A lot of people worked hard to get project to where it is to – day, there were a lot of challenges and disappointments.....I want to thank those hard working committee members who have selflessly pushed, shoved – whatever it took – to make theirs and our dreams of a new, purpose built community centre that one step closer” (Shirley Nelder, Letter, Oxford Mail,3/12/2020).

The plans to re – build Bullingdon were back on track and on the 17th February 2021 the City Council approved a revised budget of £1.506 million for the project. At a meeting in April of the Project Board it was agreed that the BCA would clear out and hand over the community centre by the 7th May, a year later than had been planned before COVID 19 had paused the project. Because of the COVID restrictions there was very limited use of the community centre prior to the closure. Orinoco undertook a major clear out of materials from the Scrap Store, including filling six skips with unwanted items, and Bullingdon Youth continued to train and play matches at the recreation ground. The only group which used the main hall was Autism Champions, which provided support and training for a small group of young people. The group rented the main hall during February and March and, because of its educational function, was

exempted from many of the COVID restrictions which applied to other activities. Because of the restrictions a plan to hold a final BCA management meeting at the community centre had to be cancelled and held on-line. The decision was taken with considerable reluctance and disappointment. The last group to use Bullingdon was the Studio Theatre Group, which held a rehearsal of its latest production in the back garden of the community centre.

On the 1st May seventeen volunteers and well - wishers gathered at Bullingdon to move furniture and equipment out of the community centre and into a shipping container which was located on the fringe of the recreation ground. There was a mixture of emotions and some tears were shed for a building which held many memories. The 'Oxford Mail' (5/5/2021) carried a full page of photographs and a report on the event. On the 7th May the keys to Bullingdon were handed over to the Council and in late September the demolition work started on the site. Five years after the cracks in the wall of the main hall were first reported to the City Council the redevelopment of Bullingdon had finally begun.

The building of the new community centre was completed, with relatively few delays and hitches, in late November. Throughout the process the BCA trustees were provided with regular updates from Jessop and Cook and Oxford Direct Services and were involved in detailed consultations about the internal design of the building. On the 16th of December the keys to the new community centre were handed over to the trustees, at an informal event attended by members of the groups which used the centre, local Councillors and City Council officers and residents from Lye Valley and Wood Farm. A spokesperson for the BCA commented;

“Everyone who looked round the new centre was impressed by the design and the quality of the building. For those of us who campaigned long and hard for the new centre there was a sense of excitement mixed with almost disbelief that our goal had been achieved”.

REFLECTIONS

The Role of Community Centres

How does the history of a small community centre, located in a suburb of Oxford, relate to wider debates about the value, role and shortcomings of Community Associations and Community Centres? In his report on community buildings, including community centres, Paul Marriott constructed a typology which describes four different ways the “volunteers who manage community buildings relate to their local community”.

“Symbol – where the primary motivation of the managers is to hold the building on trust.

Resource – where the primary motivation of the managers is to maintain the building as a resource for local groups and activities.

Gathering Place – where the managers take on the additional role of arranging events within the building for the whole community.

Cultivator – where the managers look beyond the building and are motivated by a desire to see the growth and development of their local community” (Marriott, P.1997)

The typology is based on “ideal types” and it is likely that community centres will often combine a number of these roles and that, over a period of time, the emphasis might shift from one role to another. How do the roles played by the BCA relate to this typology?

Symbol

One of the core responsibilities of the management committee of a community centre is the upkeep and maintenance of the building, which includes not only caring for the physical fabric of the building but meeting the costs of energy bills, water and business rates, insurance and other running costs. The management committee of centres are in a “position of trust to guard and protect the asset” (Marriott, P. 1997). In some cases this responsibility can become more onerous if the building is regarded as being a distinctive part of an area’s history and heritage.

For generations of BCA committee members and trustees the condition of the community centre has been a recurring source of concern, including leaking roofs, inadequate heating, cracks in the walls and defective toilets. Over the decades a considerable amount of time and energy has been spent in reporting repairs to the City Council or organising self help repairs. This pre – occupation with the upkeep of the building links with the often-repeated criticism of the trustees of community centres spending too much time on building issues at the expense of responding to the needs of the local community.

“There is a concern that a focus on the building becomes so absorbing that there is neither the time or the energy to focus on the object of addressing the needs of the local community.” (Marriott, P.1997)

This is a relevant criticism. For the trustees who manage community centres which are ageing and in need of renovation they can be caught in a “Catch 22” situation. On the one hand the poor condition of the building can deter lets and the development of activities while, on the other hand, trying to improve the condition of the building

can absorb time and energy which could be used more creatively in responding to the needs of the community. The management committees of the BCA have juggled with this dilemma over many years.

Although the community centre at Peat Moors could not be described as a symbol of the areas heritage the building has become, for many trustees, volunteers and local residents, a social symbol which has helped to shape the identity of the local community. This is due to the social relationships and networks which have developed around the centre over many years, rather than because of any affection for the bricks and mortar of the building. This sentiment was apparent on those occasions when the future of the community centre has been under threat, as happened in the summers of 2017 and 2018. There was a feeling that a valued social asset could be lost and this reaction was reinforced by the perceived lack of facilities in the local community compared to some other local areas in Oxford

Resource

A key role of community centres is to provide space for groups to meet and a base for the running of various services and activities. The range of groups, activities and services will vary between different centres, depending upon factors such as the size and condition of the building, the finance available to the Community Association, the support received from the local authority and the skills and leadership qualities of the management committee. Over the years the use of Bullingdon has covered a range of activities and lets which are likely to be typical of other small traditional community centres. These include :

- Activities which are run under the umbrella of the Community Association and are subsidised or directly financed by the

Community Association. At Bullingdon the examples, over the years, have included bingo, senior citizen clubs, parent and toddler groups and youth groups.

- Activities which are run by independent local groups and are subsidised by the Community Association. An example would be the Bullingdon Youth junior football teams, which are not charged for the use of facilities in the community centre and the use of the all weather sports area.
- Activities which are run by other organisations which rent space from the Community Association. Examples have included church groups, Orinoco, the Studio Theatre Group and the 7o'clock Club (MENCAP)
- One off "private lets" for children's parties and family events.

In some of the larger community centres it not uncommon for space to be rented for services provided by local authorities and the health services. Only once in its history has Bullingdon been used by a statutory agency, when the Slade Children's Centre (Oxfordshire County Council) was based at the community centre between 2009 – 11.

For most community centres the revenue generated by letting space and the activities which are run by the Community Association provides the major source of the income needed to cover the running costs of the building. This income also provides an important degree of independence for Community Associations, which would not always be the case if they were heavily reliant on grants from external bodies. Striking a balance between raising income and providing space for socially useful activities can present challenges for management committees.

“There needs to be a balance of activities between commercial hirings and, where necessary, subsidised community use. Volunteers who manage community buildings need to determine which of their decisions are needs driven and which are cash driven and to ensure that there is a balance between the two” (Marriott, P.1997)

Community Associations are non - profit making charities which have a tradition of subsidising lets and rents, in order to provide services for local community groups and low income households. The rising costs of energy and utility bills and cutbacks in the support from local government can result in pressure to increase hiring charges and to let out more space to commercial organisations and to better resourced voluntary or statutory agencies. Over thirty years ago Fred Teal, the Secretary of the BCA, expressed concern about the community centre becoming too focused on letting space at the expense of running activities for members and the local community. The “letting agency” model of community centres is more likely to become the norm in times of financial constraints.

Gathering Place

Community Centres have a tradition of organising collective events, either within or outside the building, which are intended to provide activities or services for the wider community. Over the year’s examples at Bullingdon have included Xmas and Spring Fayres, New Year parties, dances, jumble sales, street parties, amateur drama productions, local festivals and public meetings. The archive records suggest that Bullingdon held regular public events in the 1950s and 1960s, which may have reflected the relative lack of commercial entertainment during these decades and the more homogenous population of the local community. Public events have tended to be less frequent since the 1970s, which apart from reflecting changes in

the availability of other leisure activities, may also reflect the capacity of the Community Association to organise events.

Organising public events can be very time consuming and when the number of trustees and volunteers is limited, which has been the case for the BCA during periods since the 1970s, there is tendency to concentrate energies on maintaining the building and providing space for local groups.

One public event has run on a regular basis at Bullingdon since the mid - 2000s. This is the monthly SWAP SHOP which the BCA runs in partnership with Orinoco – The Oxfordshire Scrap Store and which, before the COVID lockdowns, was attended by around eighty people. A SWAP SHOP is like an old style jumble sale without the exchange of money. People bring household goods, clothes and books which they no longer need and exchange them for other items, with the aim of reducing waste and the use of landfill. A cafe is run at these events and, over the years, the SWAP SHOP has developed as an informal meeting place for many of the people who attend.

Cultivator Role

In this role the management committees of centres are concerned with the needs of the wider community.

“The people running the community building are motivated by a desire to see the growth and development of their local community. They do not limit themselves to what goes on in the building”.
(Marriott, P.1997).

As previously noted a recurring criticism of the people who run centres is that they tend to be too building focused at the expense of engaging with the wider community.

“More concerned with the physical management of the building than with the development of the local community and the role the building has to play within such a development” (Marriott,P.1997)

It has been argued, by a number of observers, that the cultivator or community development role should be the primary role played by community centres. Twelvetrees has suggested that Community Associations should be local development agencies, which identify unmet local needs and support local groups in addressing these needs.

“Community Associations seem particularly good at providing leisure time opportunities but have not, as a whole, become local development agencies. In order to do this they need to approach their work like a paid community worker who helps residents to identify needs in their community and form organisations to meet those needs” (Twelvetrees, A. 1985)

Up to the 1980s the BCA mainly focused on symbol, resource and gathering place roles. Wider engagements with the local community did occur, as in the debates during the 1970s about a new community centre for Wood Farm, but these were the exception and not the norm. In the 1980s a shift in roles occurred, with the BCA management committee placing more emphasis on the cultivator or community development role. This shift in roles was mainly due to an influx of new members joining the BCA management committee, a number of whom had experience of working as community workers and social workers or had experience of trade union activism. Without abandoning its other roles the BCA began to place a greater emphasis on engaging with the wider community and, along with this change, came a more pro – active approach to applying for grants and other sources of funding.

Over the years the community development role of the BCA has tended to focus on broadening the use of the community centre, improving the facilities at the Peat Moors recreation ground and responding to issues which are impacting on residents in Lye Valley and Wood Farm. Examples of development work in and around the community centre have included the support provided for junior football teams, parent and toddler groups and senior citizens groups and the lobbying for funding to develop the all weather sports area and improve the children's playground at Peat Moors. Engaging in the wider community has included the support provided for the nine year campaign to set up a youth centre in Wood Farm, lobbying for traffic management measures in Lye Valley, making representation on planning issues and lobbying for 106 and CIL funds to be spent on improving social facilities in Wood Farm and Lye Valley. The experience of the BCA clearly indicates that Community Associations, which adopt a community development role, must be prepared to engage in political action and processes, which can involve campaigning, lobbying councillors and the use of the local media.

Advocates of a community development role for Community Associations have suggested that paid community work staff need to be employed if the role is to be effectively performed. Marriot in his report on community buildings concluded;

“What is evident from the project is that paid workers with a community development role do make a difference” (Marriot, P. 1997).

Twelvetrees, on the basis of his research and experience as a community worker, suggested that it is;

“Unrealistic to expect community associations to become development organisations without professional help” (Twelvetrees, A. 1985)

Small Community Associations, like the BCA, are unlikely to have the resources to employ either part time or full time community workers on a regular basis. They are also likely to have difficulties in attracting funding for posts from statutory bodies and other funders, especially if the centre is located in an area which does not rank high in the local league table of social deprivation. In the 1980s the BCA made several unsuccessful attempts to attract funding for a part time community work post and this experience was repeated when, in the 1990s, the Wood Farm Youth Campaign made numerous unsuccessful bids to the National Lottery and national trusts for funding for a youth work post. To – day the competition for funding is more intense and the number of paid community workers posts, in both the voluntary and statutory sectors, has declined due to the impact of cutbacks in public expenditure. This decline in community work posts has mirrored the reduction in youth work posts.

To its credit Oxford City Council has retained a team of neighbourhood or locality workers and a major part of their role is to provide advice and guidance to those community centres which are owned by the Council. This mainly involves working with the management committees of Community Associations, rather than a direct engagement with local residents and groups in the wider community. Over its history there has only been three relatively brief periods when the BCA has had the support of paid community workers who were based locally and had a remit to engage directly with local residents and groups. In the 1980s part time workers,

funded by the Manpower Services Commission, worked on projects based at the community centre for a period of three years, in 2009 the BCA worked with a part time community worker on a Resident Research Project and in 2015 a part time community worker was employed on the Older People's Project for six months. All these initiatives produced positive results in terms of developing new activities at the community centre.

Community Associations which adopt a community development role are often reliant, as the BCA has been, on the resources and skills of trustees and local volunteers. This can have the strength of drawing upon the contacts and social networks of people who know their local area and who may pick up on felt needs and emerging issues more quickly than paid staff who live away from the local community. On the other hand, as Twelvetrees has suggested, local volunteers can experience difficulties in separating out the enabling functions of the paid community worker and the leadership functions which they are likely to be more familiar with in their work in community centres. Volunteers are also juggling with many other commitments in their lives and finding the time to undertake development work can be a challenge. Development work can be demanding and time consuming and ideally requires the stability which can be provided by paid staff. There are limits to self help.

There are also limits to the numbers of people who use community centres. In a good week, when Bullingdon is fully booked for activities and the outdoor facilities are being used, the numbers visiting the centre rarely exceeds 400, which is a fraction of the population of Lye Valley and Wood Farm.

The Value of Community Centres

The value of community centres is usually described in relation to providing services and activities, generating opportunities for volunteering and participation in civic life and developing cohesive social bonds in local areas.

“Community buildings play a major role in strengthening their local community, often providing the only place where people can associate with their neighbours, thus combating social isolation and encouraging social cohesion” (Marriott, P. 1997)

Community centres can contribute to building what sociologist’s term “social capital”.

“Connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and the trustworthiness that arise from them.” (Putman, R. 2000).

A distinction has been made between three types of social capital – bonding, bridging and linking (Gilchrist, A. 2004). Bonding social capital refers to close – knit relations which are based on family, peer group friendships and sharing a common interest. In community centres groups which come together over a common interest can develop strong social bonds, particularly if they meet over a long period of time. Examples from Bullingdon would include the 7o’clock Club, many of whose members have met at the centre for decades, and the groups which have formed around the shared interests of older people and running services for children and young people. These groups can provide individuals with a sense of purpose and identity, but they can also have a negative dimension if they become inward looking and territorial in their use of the space provided by the centre. Intra group tensions can be commonplace in community

centres, as the BCA experienced in the 1980s when the youth club provoked criticism and hostility from some of the other groups which used the centre. This negative side to bonding social capital can also apply to the management committees of community centres, particularly when the leadership is resistant to new ideas and is reluctant to welcome new members.

Bridging social capital refers to developing connections between individuals and groups who may not share common interests and identities. As previously noted, intra - group tensions exist and it cannot be assumed that sharing the same social space will generate cohesive relations in either community centres or local neighbourhoods. Public events, such as Fayres and SWAP SHOPS, can encourage interaction and, in the case of the BCA, conflicts with the City Council over the future of the centre has also functioned to improve the links between different groups, as they collectively engaged in lobbying campaigns.

Linking social capital refers to developing connections between people or organisations “which extend beyond peer boundaries, cutting across status and similarity and enabling people to exert influence and reach resources outside their normal circles”. (Gilchrist, A.2004). This can involve partnership working and building bridges between the community centre and other agencies, such as schools, the local authority and health services, the police, churches and other community organisations. Over the years the trustees of the BCA have regularly participated in local inter - agency forums (eg; the Wood Farm Action Group and the Wood Farm Community Partnership) and the meetings of city wide bodies (eg; the Oxford Federation of Community Associations). These meetings, which can easily be dismissed as “talking shops”, has enabled the BCA to build up an extensive network of contacts. These contacts include links

with local Councillors, which have often proved valuable in the various campaigns which the BCA has organised.

Linking social capital is a key strand in the role which Community Associations can play as agencies through which material improvements and gains can be made in local areas. This can involve Community Associations acting as pressure groups to influence decision making about planning issues and attempting to lever in grants for local projects and funding for capital programmes which will improve the physical infra – structure and social facilities of areas. These material gains depend upon Community Associations adopting a community development role and being pro – active in terms of lobbying local authorities, campaigning for improvements and making grant applications to local and national bodies. In the case of the BCA I would estimate that since the 1980s the Association has, either directly or in partnership with other agencies, been involved in attracting over £2 million of capital improvements and grants for projects and in Lye Valley and Wood Farm.

The social capital generated by community centres relies heavily on face – to- face interactions between individuals and groups. In 2020 and 2021 the impact of COVID 19 severely restricted the opportunities for these interactions. During the lock downs many community centres had to close for months and when they attempted to reopen ‘social distancing’ regulations placed tight constraints on the numbers who could attend meetings and events. Social capital is slowly built up over many years and the lock downs are likely to have fractured networks and relationships. Apart from the erosion of social capital Community Associations have also lost a considerable amount of income, because of the impact of the lock downs on lets. Some Community Associations may not survive. Re – building community resources will be a challenging task and this task

cannot only be left to the volunteers who manage community buildings. Investment in local communities by national and local government will be needed.

Well over a century from their origins in the travails of the post 1st World War period Community Associations and Community Centres still have a role to play in delivering services, creating opportunities to socialise and providing a voice for the felt needs of residents. Currently these often forgotten and under - valued assets face an uncertain future. Place and locality remain important in the lives of many individuals and groups.

“It is hard to contemplate a world without community spaces providing social events”. (Community Matters, 2021)

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