



# CASE STUDY | Oxford County:

## Leveraging a Community Sustainability Plan to Tackle Poverty

On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, Oxford County Council approved a Resolution that committed the County of Oxford to achieving Zero Poverty. This resolution connects Oxford County's sustainability plan to a goal of eliminating poverty in their community and affirms the need for local government support, and we encourage communities to consider sustainability plans specifically, as a leverage point for local, community-based poverty reduction priorities.

### INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Canada, along with 192 other UN member states, signed on to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This 15-year global framework is centered on an ambitious set of [17 Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#), including no poverty, zero hunger, gender equality, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, and sustainable cities and communities. Canada's 2016 [Federal Sustainable Development Strategy](#) recognizes that "Climate change affects our ecosystems, our livelihoods, our safety and security, and our health."

Dovetailing on commitments like these, municipalities are beginning to take an active role in developing triple-bottom line community sustainability strategies. These strategies align strategic outcomes that will lift people out of poverty, drive economic development, and ensure environmental sustainability.

Oxford County is a Cities Reducing Poverty member that has made significant headway in developing their Community Sustainability Plan. Creating meaningful and broad-sector engagement for a place-based poverty reduction strategy is a challenge for many communities.

This case study will explore how Oxford County used a community sustainability plan approach to simultaneously address multiple community challenges.

#### Future Oxford: Community Sustainability Plan Goals:

1. **Community Goals**
  - i. An Oxford that is accessible for all citizens
  - ii. A knowledgeable and equitable Oxford
  - iii. A creative Oxford
2. **Economy Goals**
  - i. A thriving local economy
  - ii. A local economy that supports and fosters community sustainability
3. **Environment Goals**
  - i. Oxford is recognized within and by the world as a leader in environmental action

## OXFORD COUNTY

Located in the heart of southwestern Ontario, Oxford County has a population of approximately 110,000 residents. Oxford's tagline is telling; "growing stronger together". They live this through their long-term partnerships with residents, businesses, the County of Oxford, and the eight area municipalities: Blanford-Blenheim, East Zorra-Tavistock, Ingersoll, Norwich, South-West Oxford, Tillsonburg, Woodstock, and Zorra.

Oxford County is a leader in Canadian agriculture. Key crops include corn, soybeans, wheat, and hay. Rural Oxford is also home to almost 73,000 m<sup>2</sup> of greenhouses growing fruits, vegetables, and flowers. Major fruit crops include apples and strawberries. The County is also known as the Dairy Capital of Canada for the quality of its cows, and its vibrant milk and cheese industries. These local assets are factored into the Community Sustainability Plan through action priorities such as:

- Supporting companies that can process Oxford-based agricultural products (e.g. dairy, soy, corn, market vegetables, and fruit).
- Developing an Oxford job strategy that stimulates the sustainable economy, including an inventory of sustainability related jobs.
- Incentivizing and encourage local restaurants and grocery stores to use or sell local products.

The Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan, adopted by County Council in the fall of 2015, recognized that addressing poverty in this community was a critical element to community vitality and enhanced community wellbeing.

## POVERTY IN OXFORD COUNTY

Spanning eight municipalities, the experience of poverty in Oxford County varies. Women and children living in Tillsonburg are more likely to have a low income, while people living in Woodstock are more likely to have an income too low to cover basic needs ([Oxford County Community Health Report, Issue 2, 2017](#)). 61% of Oxford County's total vulnerable populations are considered working poor.

According to Stats Canada, working poor is defined as individuals with an after-tax income below the Low Income Measure (LIM-AT) and earning an annual working income of over \$3,000. In 2010, a working poor person earned more than \$3,000 but less than \$15,982 (LIM-AT for a single adult) (OCCHR, Issue 2, 2017).

One in ten Oxford County residents' income is low when taking into consideration the spending power of households after tax transfers and adjustments (10.8%; 11,835 people). Amongst

### Poverty in Oxford County (2015)

- 1 in 10 Oxford County residents, or 11,835 people, live in poverty (LIM-AT)
- Approximately 3.4%, 1 in 30, or 2,620 people were "working poor"
- 4.3% or 4,720 residents were considered to have an income too low to cover basic needs (food, shelter, clothing)
- 4.8% or 1,140 youth (0-17) and 5.5% or 425 children (0-5) were considered to be living in a family with an income too low to cover basic needs

Source: Oxford Community Health Reports, November 2017

children 0 to 17 year olds (3,260) , 13.7% were living on a low income. This percentage was even higher among 0 to 5-year olds (15.8% or 1,225 children).

Perspectives of individuals living in poverty were telling; highlighting a need for more work to be done on increasing food security, as well as shifting perceptions of poverty in the Region. Excerpts from citizen interviews in the [2014 Food Security Policy Development Report](#) by Oxford County and Healthy Communities Oxford highlighted “a desire for increased education and training on healthy eating and cooking in schools, and for the population generally”. Two community churches and one food bank provide food to low-income families on a regular basis. Concerns were also raised about a perceived culture of “denial” prevalent throughout municipalities in Oxford. Such a culture may include a pervasive lack of awareness of, and corresponding policy gap to deal with, the link between poverty and food security, for example. Some felt that this denial impeded social justice for marginalized or vulnerable community members. Community consultation and engagement continued to be a priority throughout the plan development process, and continues to be so today, as this community works to develop their Zero Poverty plan.

## FUTURE OXFORD: CHANGE NEEDS A CHAMPION

Based on the information that came from community consultations, grassroots community organizations, and Public Health, the need to develop a community poverty reduction plan was evident. It is worth noting that the key champion for this work has been Oxford County Council. Council saw an opportunity for transformational change that could shape the vitality of their future economy, strengthen community wellbeing and steward the environment for future generations, and chose to facilitate this transformation through grassroots engagement. However, without the resources and political will to move forward, common agendas and intentions often get stalled. It was pivotal to success that the champion of this initiative has been the County Council who funded the cost of consultant expertise and supported community members’ inclusive and comprehensive community engagement process. Council continues to financially support the Future Oxford Partnership, which has evolved from the Steering Committee to a group of dedicated residents working with community partners to implement the sustainability plan.

One of the leads on the Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan is the County’s Chief Administrative Officer, who serves as the County’s primary liaison on the Steering Committee. The CAO’s involvement has been heavily supported by the County’s Director of Community Planning, the Director of Corporate Services, the Manager of Strategic Communications and Engagement and, most importantly, by a dedicated and active group of 15 Oxford residents who comprise the Steering Committee. These 15 residents were selected to represent the geographic diversity as well as the economic, community and environmental pillars of sustainability.

## INSPIRED BY BEST PRACTICE

Building on [best practices](#) from the Town of Halton Hills, the Cities of Kingston and Pickering, and global examples, the work to create a sustainability plan that integrated action to address the environmental, economic, and community challenges in Oxford County was intentional.

Halton Hills, Ontario developed a 10-year Economic Development Strategy that aligns with the

municipality's Community Sustainability Strategy. Pickering, Ontario put in place a requirement that 25% of new construction be affordable to households of low and moderate incomes. Kingston, Ontario has community partners co-managing a website that provides critical information to new immigrants and others considering moving to Kingston, as well as a welcome package for newcomers encouraging interaction with the community by providing a free ten-ride bus pass, a one month family-pass for Artillery Park Aquatic Centre, and a pass to a Grand Theatre show.

Copenhagen invested in the complete modernization of the city's sewage system to dramatically improve the quality of the water in the harbour, which led to job creation, increased revenue of local businesses, and supported the area to become one of the most popular spots in the city. Copenhagen's strategic urban planning process also models stakeholder commitment and collaboration between different sectors to ensure social, economic, and environmental factors are taken into consideration.

Integrating this learning with Oxford County's own unique assets, a well-established network of community groups and a wide array of community supports, the County has worked to develop creative ways to interact with the community and is committed to the implementation of the sustainability initiatives that arise out of the plan.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The development of the Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan was informed by a comprehensive community engagement campaign that took place between November 2014 and April 2015. A brief overview of community engagement activities that were organized and created are listed below:

### **Future Oxford Competition**

*This contest asked students and community members to step forward to 2030 and share a future scenario envisioning what life is like in Oxford County.*

### **World Cafés**

*Several World Cafés were hosted across the County with the intention of identifying existing efforts, organizations and projects underway in the County and developing a vision for the County's Sustainability Plan. World Cafés are a powerful tool to support meaningful small group discussions in a relaxed, inclusive atmosphere. These events were attended by a significant number of community members representing a broad cross-section of interests.*

### **Online Forum**

*An online forum was established, using the Ideascale platform, that encouraged community members to share innovative sustainability initiatives and actions, as well as vote on their favorite ideas*

### **Wiki Draft Plan & Workshops**

*A wiki is a website that allows collaborative editing of its content and structure by a population that is geographically distributed. Community members registered and made specific suggestions on the content of the draft Community Safety Plan using this on-line wiki.*

### **Kitchen Table Guidebook**

*To complement the wiki, a [kitchen table guidebook](#) was launched during the same time period. The kitchen table guidebook was developed for those County residents that wanted to comment on the draft*

*Community Sustainability Plan in paper format. Printed copies of the kitchen table guidebook were distributed to libraries and municipal offices throughout the County.*

### Ongoing Social Media Campaign

*Community members could also stay informed on the Future Oxford campaign by following the Future Oxford news and updates at [FutureOxford.ca](http://FutureOxford.ca), on Twitter at [@FutureOxfordca](https://twitter.com/FutureOxfordca), and on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/futureoxfordca](http://www.facebook.com/futureoxfordca).*

With release of the draft Future Oxford Plan in June 2015, comments were sought from Area Municipal Councils and the public was asked to submit comments through their on-line Town Hall “Speak Up, Oxford!” <http://www.oxfordcounty.ca/Your-Government/Speak-up-Oxford/Campaign-Details/ArticleId/3675/Future-Oxford>.

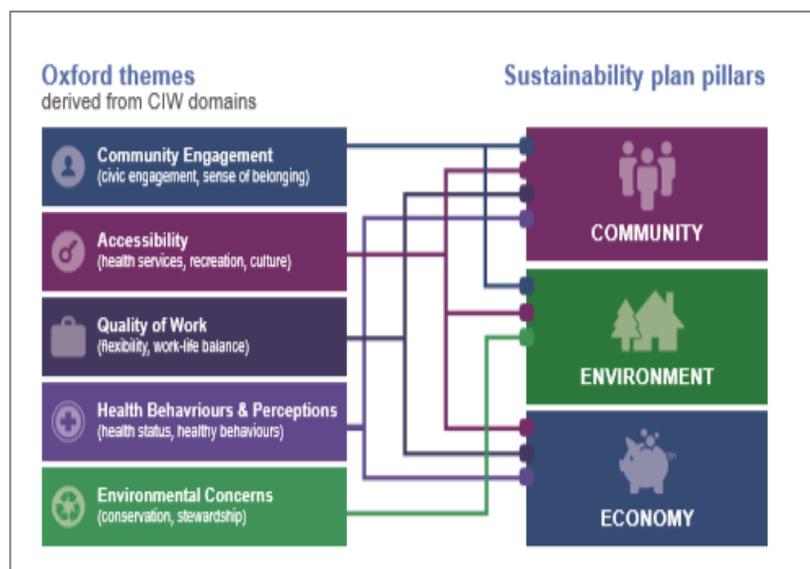
A Multi-Criteria Assessment (MCA) Tool was developed in conjunction with the sustainability plan to guide decision-making that is based on research and advanced practices. This tool has helped to integrate the Future Oxford priorities because it serves as a guide for weighing community, economy and environmental criteria to arrive at the most sustainable option for a decision point.

## COMMUNITY WELLBEING SURVEY

In the spring of 2016, more than 11,000 randomly selected County households were invited to participate in a Community Wellbeing Survey. Working with Bryan Smale of the University of Waterloo’s Canadian Index of Wellbeing, the Oxford County survey worked to measure community wellbeing outcomes with the analysis focusing specifically on five major themes related to wellbeing:

- Community Engagement
- Accessibility
- Quality of Work
- Health Behaviours and Perceptions
- Environmental Concerns

For the purposes of comparison, demographic information such as household income, age, household living arrangements, length of residency in Oxford County and geographical location were collected to focus in on the most vulnerable populations. According to the Community Wellbeing Survey, residents of Oxford County in the lowest household income category indicated the lowest level of personal wellbeing “on almost every characteristic compared in each of the five themes” (Living Wage Report, Social Planning Council Oxford, 2017).



The survey also identified that Tillsonburg and Woodstock measured the lowest levels of satisfaction and wellbeing. Financial hardship in covering basic living costs affected overall satisfaction and wellbeing on a larger scale than other wellbeing indicators. The sustainability plan pillars and themes for Oxford County's Community Sustainability Plan were validated through this survey process.

## GETTING TO ZERO POVERTY IN OXFORD COUNTY

In the fall of 2017, Operation Sharing, a faith-based community organization, hosted a Town Hall focused on poverty reduction. Dr. Lynn McIntyre delivered a keynote address entitled "If you tackle food insecurity, you are halfway to eliminating poverty". The event also included a panel of local community leaders who provided local context as they reflected on the key messages presented by Dr. McIntyre. The following day, a diverse group of local community leaders continued the conversation which was concluded by drafting a declaration on poverty elimination in Oxford County.

On November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, Oxford County Council committed by [resolution](#) to achieve zero poverty in Oxford. The zero poverty resolution was presented following the aforementioned community led Town Hall event, subsequent community delegation to Council and a staff report submitted to build the case. The report shared that "Eliminating poverty in Oxford County is the responsibility of the whole community. It recognized that the collective effort of all sectors, (municipal, private, health, business, education, social services and citizens) would be essential to address the long-term root causes of poverty." This resolution directs the County's Chief Administrative Officer and directors of Public Health, Human Services, and Community Planning to work with community partners on a Zero Poverty Oxford strategy.

The key elements of the plan will include action priorities on the following themes:

- **Housing:** Meet core housing needs
- **Income Security:** Basic Income and Living Wage will be two key pillars
- **Understanding:** Education on the realities of poverty
- **Belonging:** Social exclusion is a key factor contributing to the existence of poverty
- **Political Action:** Advocacy and action from all levels of government will be critical to success
- **Shift:** Altering perceptions and a relentless desire to affect positive and sustainable outcomes will be required
- **Dialogue:** Open and advanced conversation and discussion about why poverty exists in and how to address it
- **Change:** Transformational change, from solutions that address the symptoms of poverty, to pragmatic solutions that will eliminate poverty

As part of the Future Oxford team, the Zero Poverty Oxford action committee is currently working to develop its Zero Poverty strategy to drive action on these priorities. The committee comprises a group

of community stakeholders working in a variety of poverty reduction services in the community including:

- Canadian Mental Health Association Oxford
- Community Employment Services Oxford
- Thames Valley District Board of Ed
- Operation Sharing (service and faith community representation)
- Social Planning Council Oxford
- Workforce Development Partnership Oxford
- Women's Employment Resource Centre Oxford
- United Way Oxford
- Oxford County Community Health Centre
- Oxford Coalition for Social Justice
- Legal Aid Oxford

The Zero Poverty plan development is supported by an Oxford County staff team from Public Health, Community Planning, Strategic Communications & Engagement, the CAO's office, and Human Services staff. A first draft of the Zero Poverty Plan is expected in late spring of 2018, followed by a community consultation phase. The goal is to see a Zero Poverty strategy in place by the end of 2018.



Poverty reduction in Oxford County is achievable and will strengthen well-being for all. It's the right thing to do. Through leadership, innovation, and the transformation of relationships, in working to eliminate poverty, Oxford County will deliver improved health and well-being for all residents and enhance community prosperity.



- *Oxford County community declaration*

This community's journey to get wide spread support for a place-based poverty reduction strategy took time, broad-consultation, and meaningful engagement with citizens. Oxford County's Community Sustainability Plan included a focus on poverty reduction from the outset, and will lead to a better resourced, politically sustainable, and community supported strategy.

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