



Measuring  
Rural Community  
Vitality



# OXFORD COUNTY COMMUNITY WELLBEING SURVEY

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RURAL ONTARIO  
INSTITUTE

# I INTRODUCTION

In 2015, Oxford County created and approved a remarkable community-based vision entitled the “**Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan**” (CSP). The plan set specific community, economic and environmental goals for 2020 and 2030. Oxford subsequently harnessed the University of **Waterloo’s Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW)** to establish a current baseline of wellbeing in the county and to inform what their priorities should be to achieve their vision. This was an important step in moving the aspirations captured in the CSP to concrete action in the community. The **Oxford County Community Wellbeing Survey**, based on the CIW was launched in March, 2016, having been selected by the **Rural Ontario Institute** to participate in its **Measuring Rural Community Vitality initiative (MRCV)**. The MRCV initiative offered funds to support the survey, and this report examines the impact of that investment.

The working definition for wellbeing as adopted by the CIW is, “the presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breadth of expression focused on but not necessarily exclusive to: good living standards, robust health, a sustainable environment, vital communities, an educated populace, balanced time use, high levels of democratic participation, and access to and participation in leisure and culture” (Ibid, pg.1).

# I NEEDS ADDRESSED

Communities spend significant time and resources developing plans to help their communities achieve their vision. In many cases, however, communities do not develop sufficient baseline data or key progress indicators to evaluate impact of actions and goals outlined in community plans. This often results in a lack of follow-through or an inability to monitor progress and accomplishment. Oxford County leaders recognized the need for a community-based vision, as evidenced in the CSP, and acknowledged the need for baseline metrics in their quest to achieve that vision. To do this, the County engaged in a Community Wellbeing Survey to collect such data.

# | SOLUTIONS PROPOSED

The Oxford Community Wellbeing Survey was developed with the support of the CIW to gather data on residents' quality of life in Oxford County and to assist leaders in measuring progress on the CSP. The goal of this data collection was to increase understanding of current wellbeing measures in the community and help county leaders and local service agencies work towards improving the life of current and future residents. The survey gave information on current levels of wellbeing, providing insight to local decision makers as they developed priority actions to advance toward the CSP vision.

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing is a national initiative supported by an independent, non-partisan group of national and international leaders, researchers, organizations and community members. It supports grassroots efforts to conduct research and mobilize knowledge leading to enhanced wellbeing outcomes for all Canadians (Future Oxford, 2016). Oxford County became one of nine in CIW's community of users. In partnership with Community Oxford, CIW took the lead in developing and conducting the survey as well as in evaluating and reporting on the results.

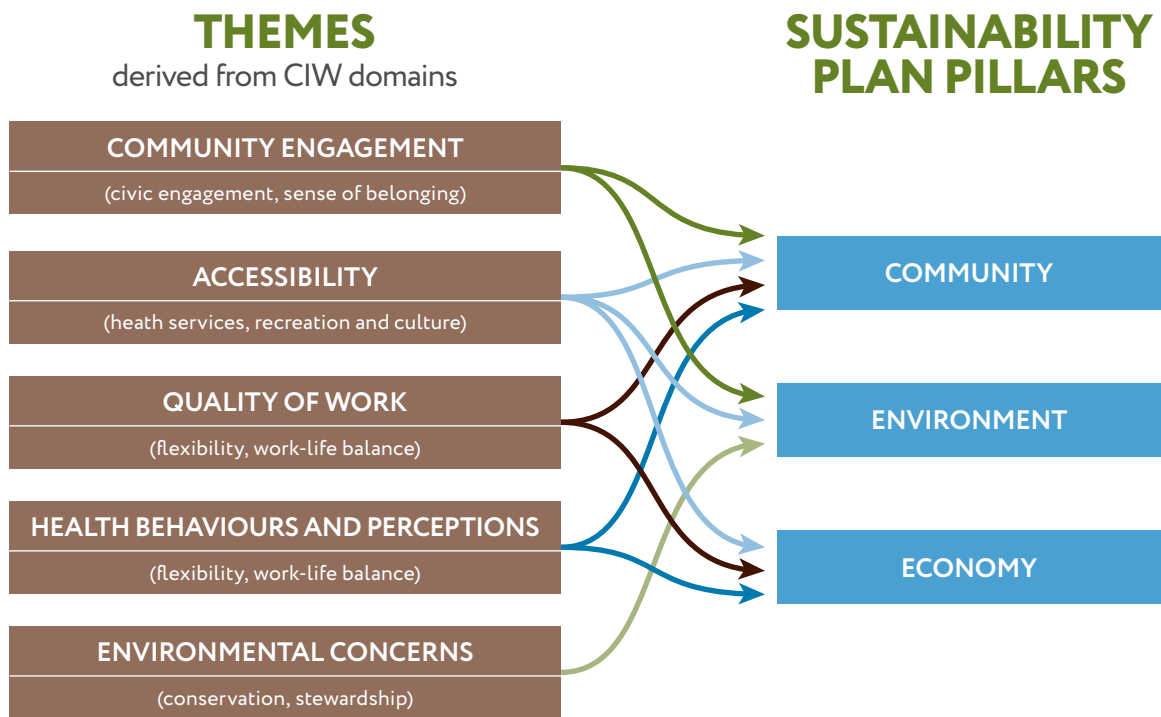
The Community Wellbeing Survey was administered to 11,335 randomly selected households in eight geographic areas, representing 25% of all households in the County (Hilbrecht & Smale, June 2016, pg. 3). This also included an oversampling of the rural areas within the County to ensure adequate representation of this demographic (Ibid). One person in each household, aged eighteen years or older, was invited to complete the questionnaire (Ibid).

The survey focused on eight domains measured by the Canadian Index of Wellbeing:

- Community vitality
- Democratic engagement
- Education
- Environment
- Healthy populations
- Leisure and culture
- Living standards
- Time use

These eight domains helped inform specific targets for the goals, objectives and actions outlined in the Sustainability Plan. These included ensuring high quality health care and social programs, improving access to education, developing intercommunity transportation, promoting volunteerism and increasing voter participation. The chart below shows the relationship between the CSP pillars of sustainability and the CIW domains (Hilbrecht & Smale, September 2016, Figure 1, pg. x)

**Figure 1:** Relationship of CIW-derived Theme Areas to CSP Pillars



From these eight domains, CIW worked in consultation with the Community Oxford Committee for further analysis: community engagement; accessibility; quality of work; health behaviours and perception; and environmental concerns (Hilbrecht & Smale, September 2016). These were areas specific to the needs identified in Oxford County.

## Timeline

The project included the following milestones:

### September 9, 2015

Council approved the plan and established the **Future Oxford Partnership** – a voluntary team of community members to oversee the implementation of the CSP.

### Spring 2016

Survey conducted over an eight-week period.

### July 13, 2016

First report entitled “**Oxford County Community Wellbeing Survey: A Profile of the Wellbeing of Oxford County Residents – a preliminary report for the Community Oxford Committee**” published and received by Oxford County Council.

### Fall 2016

Second report titled “**Oxford County Community Wellbeing Survey: A Comparison of Oxford Residents on Selected Aspects of their Wellbeing**” published.

### December 14, 2016

Future Oxford presented full report on Community Wellbeing Survey to Oxford County Council to help define goals and targets of the Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan.

### February 22, 2017

Special event report-back of findings to more than 100 community agency stakeholders, including roundtable discussion on desired next steps.

### June 12/13, 2017

Community Indicators Consortium’s (CIC) symposium “Engaging Values/ Effective Metrics: Rooting Indicators in Community Aspirations” held in Winnipeg, MB.

## Budget

The \$100,000 Oxford Community Wellbeing Survey budget was underwritten by the County of Oxford and further supported by a \$15,000 ROI MRCV grant, \$10,000 from the Oxford County Community Health Centre, \$5,000 from Community Employment Services Oxford, and \$5,000 from United Way Oxford.

Project expenditures included survey and workshop costs, quantitative statistical analysis, the CIW tool and promotional material, and hiring individuals to focus on the priorities identified. Community partners participated on the project steering committee and contributed toward project costs in various ways. For example, the **Fusion Centre**, a youth skills training centre, provided meeting space and catering, and an epidemiologist contributed expertise in public health.

**Oxford Community Employment Services** is a not-for-profit corporation that delivers employment and training for skilled workers. Their goal is to create employment for individuals to contribute to society and to ensure that community needs are met.

**United Way Oxford** is a not-for-profit, volunteer-driven organization that aims to promote community resources. Their goal is to help communities solve problems and to discover the root causes of issues that create distraction in people’s lives and communities.

**Oxford County Community Health Centre** works with people to create healthy communities throughout Oxford County, by providing health care, education and support to improve people’s lives.

# | COMMUNITY ASSETS

## Canadian Index of Wellbeing

The Canadian Index of Wellbeing was a major asset in the success of this initiative. The University of Waterloo staff working with CIW were highly supportive throughout the process and made the tool easy to navigate. CIW staff shared responsibility and helped Oxford County residents recognize their community expertise and assets to support the work being done. CIW provided guidance for the steering committee while encouraging them to self-identify the indicators most fitting for their community. The tool aligned with the CSP goals of community, economic and environmental wellbeing by going into further detail through eight domains. Using the CIW tool also served to create a unified language for Future Oxford and other stakeholders to discuss wellbeing. Their wrap-around support was a major contribution throughout the consultation.

## Momentum from “Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan”

This community consultation built on the momentum gathered through the “Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan”. This plan started a process of community consultation to set goals for the county’s wellbeing. By implementing their sustainability plan with a variety of stakeholders, Oxford County cultivated the political support necessary to develop a “grassroots based” sustainability plan.

## County Support

County Council allocated funding to undertake the Oxford Community Survey, to support Future Oxford Partnership operations, and to provide logistical and communications support. This support was vital to engage the community through various media including paid advertisements, postcards, successfully obtaining survey coverage in the local newspaper and radio and reaching out to residents through social media. The resulting community awareness level alleviated concerns about response rates. Project leaders look forward to building stronger relationships with smaller townships and municipalities in addition to harnessing County support.

## Funding and Partners

Partners were significant contributors to the success of this project. United Way Oxford, Community Employment Services, Oxford County Community Health Centre, and Oxford County Council were primary partners for the Oxford Community Wellbeing Survey. These partners contributed skills, time and financial resources.

# | RESULTS

The Oxford Community Wellbeing Survey achieved significant response rates and community support. Data collected from the surveys was analyzed in two reports. The first Wellbeing Survey report entitled, “A Profile of the Wellbeing of Oxford County Residents: A Preliminary Report for the Community Oxford Committee”, presented a snapshot of the County’s status on wellbeing. It focused on the eight CIW domains, while making intentional links to the CSP (Hilbrecht & Smale, June 2016; Oxford County, 2016).

The second Wellbeing Survey report entitled “A Comparison of Oxford Residents on Selected Aspects of their Wellbeing” was done in collaboration with the Community Oxford Committee. This report sought to provide a deeper understanding of five CIW-derived theme areas in relation to CSP (Hilbrecht & Smale, September 2016). The five themes were: community engagement; accessibility; quality of work; health behaviours and perceptions; and environmental concerns (Ibid, pg. 3). This report focused on the five themes and population subgroups, identified by the Committee, as priorities in relation to CSP wellbeing goals (Ibid). Breaking down population subgroups was an important step towards better understanding the needs of marginalized populations in the County (Chessell, 2016). This report provided an in-depth analysis of Oxford’s wellbeing with the intention of supporting County leaders and local service agencies in making informed decisions to move their community towards CSP’s vision of wellbeing (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2016; Oxford County, 2016).

Overall, the project lead stated that survey results validated existing sentiments among stakeholders while challenging assumptions about community wellbeing. The survey was viewed as an energizing experience for many, generating excitement for the future of Oxford County. The data produced was deemed relevant for many groups and organizations in addition to county leaders. The project as a whole underscored that sustainable wellbeing involves everyone in a community.

## LESSONS LEARNED & ADVICE TO OTHERS

Several members of the Community Oxford Committee documented their reflections on the project. The following list includes some of their thoughts and lessons learned from the project:

- Staff at the Canadian Index of Wellbeing offer significant support in helping make the tool manageable and easy to use. Nurturing an ongoing relationship with CIW opened other doors and created new opportunities in Oxford County. The CIW is a highly recommended tool for assessing community wellbeing.
- Developing data to compare against baseline measures in a sustainability plan is most effective when a group builds on momentum gained through a sustainability plan's development and promotion.
- Support from County Council is imperative if a plan is to be adopted and implemented. Working with council members throughout the process facilitated their engagement and ownership.
- Ensure communication strategies are clear and convey a broad definition of sustainability. Many residents relate sustainability to environmental concerns without understanding the concept's application to community vitality.
- It is important to include all voices in a stakeholder consultation, including youth and a variety of marginalized populations.
- Establish a Steering Committee including leaders from existing partnerships before beginning work on a sustainability plan.

## CONCLUSION

The Oxford Community Wellbeing Survey allowed the County to take initial steps moving aspirations of wellbeing to action. The survey supported the community-based vision presented in the Future Oxford Community Sustainability Plan. While the CSP provided direction for the County, the survey offered baseline data on the current quality of life and identified priority areas for advancing towards CSP's vision of community, economic and environmental wellbeing (Hilbrecht & Smale, September 2016).

The CIW tool was used to develop and conduct the survey, as well as to analyze results through CIW's eight domains for wellbeing. The data collected has been praised as relevant and beneficial to all community stakeholders as it gives a comprehensive understanding of residents' insights, desires and ambitions for the community (Chessell, 2016). The experience from this survey will inform future consultations, including a potential follow-up project to follow-up on CIW metrics expected in 2021.



# | CHECKLIST

## Key Ingredients for Success

Considering doing a similar project in your community?

It may work well if your county/organization...

- Has internal capacity including staff support and funding to adapt the Canadian Index of Wellbeing.
- Is willing to engage cross sectorial partners and leverage skills and expertise.
- Is able to advocate for an intersectional understanding of sustainable community wellbeing.
- Has county financial, staff and communications support.
- Can develop a dedicated committee with staff support that can invest significant time and effort.
- Has or is able to hire staff with research and data analysis skills.
- Recognizes residents as experts of their own community and provides them with opportunities to share opinions and insights to inform the work through surveys, interviews and direct participation.
- Uses a common language to facilitate the engagement of agencies across various sectors.
- Is willing to invest time to deliver a final product that is useful to the community.

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The Rural Ontario Institute provided information gathered and summarized by Dr Suzanne Ainley of Ainley Consulting to Platinum Leadership to describe the community projects. All such descriptions have been reviewed and approved by the relevant community contacts.

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