

Voluntary and Community Action

HOUGHTON REGIS NORTH 2 (THORNE & BIDWELL) COMMUNITY ACTION PROJECT

Introduction

Voluntary and Community Action has developed considerable expertise in the development of new sustainable communities and is seeking to utilise this within the new housing developments that are planned across Central Bedfordshire, an area where substantial housing growth will take place over the next 20 years.

Building a new community is not just about erecting hundreds of new dwellings. It must have regard to the people that will make up that community by empowering them to develop and sustain new social networks, activities and community groups needed to shape and create a strong sense of community, place and belonging.

The new developments at Thorn and Bidwell, north of Houghton Regis will build up to 1,950 new homes with an estimated population of 4,680 new residents. Each development will need to develop and sustain new social infrastructure. The Houghton Regis North 2 (Thorne and Bidwell) Community Action Project will build on the highly successful project delivered on the Sandhills development in southern Leighton Buzzard, during April 2011 to August 2016.

Social Infrastructure

Social infrastructure is the organisations and activities that enable people to create, run and sustain the voluntary and community groups, volunteering opportunities and social networks required for existing and new communities. It focuses on creating communities of people, complementing work to create communities of place. Social infrastructure includes:

- the voluntary organisations and community groups that operate in new (and existing) communities by providing services and activities
- the communities of interest, place and culture that exist in and across localities
- the volunteers and volunteering opportunities that exist within local volunteer-involving organisations
- the networks of people and organisations that provide contacts, links and association with one another
- opportunities for social action and community engagement
- social interaction between people, neighbours and communities
- capacity building activity to support new community groups
- the recruitment, development and support of community leaders
- opportunities for social inclusion, lifelong learning and community development.

To develop effective Social Infrastructure new communities need:

- a meeting place or a base that is available, welcoming and accessible to all;
- access to start-up funding/small grants to stimulate grass-roots activity and capacity building;
- access to support provided by workers with community development skills;
- a forum or network that is inclusive, open and participatory, which is owned by and accountable to the community (e.g. a community or residents association);
- access to appropriate learning and skills development opportunities to equip people for active involvement and to support their own groups;
- a pool of volunteers, from within the community, prepared to mobilise others and organise community action.

Houghton Regis North 2

The development is a mixed use urban extension that comprises six sites designated for residential development; one site designated for employment use and additional sites for a local centre, a school and formal open space. The area is bounded by the new A5-M1 Link Road to the north, Chalk Hill and the outer urban edge of Houghton Regis to the South, the A5 to the west, and the A5120 Bedford Road to the east.

The main development will comprise between a minimum of 1,500 and a maximum of 1,850 dwellings, subdivided into five areas, along with a local centre providing retail units, a Primary School, and a Community Centre. Open space will include a new park, sports pitches and a sports pavilion, three Allotment Sites, five Local Play Areas, one Neighbourhood Play Area and one Multi Use Games Area for young people

Development is expected to take 17 years to complete, from 2016 to 2033. It is understood that the first houses will be built in January 2018. Phasing has been determined but no timescales given. There are seven phases (some sub-divided), as follows:

Phase 1 – the first dwellings to be built are those immediately adjacent to the Local Centre, within the centre of the site, south of Thorn Road;

Phase 2 – dwellings on the east of the site, adjacent to Bedford Road;

Phase 3 – dwellings towards the east of the site, south of Thorn Road;

Phase 4(a) and 4(b) – dwellings towards the centre of the site, adjacent to the new park;

Phase 5(a) and 5(b) – dwellings on the southern edge of the site, adjacent to the exiting edge of Houghton Regis;

Phase 6(a) and 6(b) – dwellings to the north east of Thorn Road, adjacent to the new A5-M1 Link Road;

Phase 7, 7(a) and 7(b) – the last dwellings to be built are those to the north west of Thorn Road, adjacent to the new A5-M1 Link Road.

An additional 100 properties will also be built on a separate site known as Bury Spinney by a private developer.

With approximately 1,950 properties expected to be built, and an estimated population of 4,680 new residents, our research shows that 1,217 residents are likely to commit to formal volunteering (in organisations, groups or clubs) each week. 26 new community groups are expected to be formed.

It is unlikely that the Community Centre will be built until long after the occupation of the 500th dwelling. Similarly, the new primary school is not expected to be built until after the 1,500th occupation and is likely to be a *two year build*. The provision of retail units will be dependent upon commercial developers' interest in the site.

Project Core Values

There are six core values underpinning the project:

Social inclusion – a sense of belonging where people from different backgrounds feel valued for the part they can play in making their community a better place to live, as well as having the ability to network beyond their own neighbourhood.

Participatory governance – enabling citizens, individually and collectively, to identify their own needs and to have a greater say in decisions that affect their community's well-being.

Empowerment – individuals, groups and communities are empowered to take control of their future and are able to take action with reducing levels of external support.

Community self-help and support – building confidence and the capacity of individuals and groups to plan and deliver community-led activities and programmes to meet local needs through structures that are supported and maintained from within the community.

Partnership working – public, private, voluntary and community service providers are coordinated and there is a commitment to open, honest and effective communications between the community and service providers to build trust and effective relationships.

Learning – action research and other systems for monitoring, reflection, evaluation and learning provide evidence-based practice and outcomes that inform future delivery of social infrastructure.

Strategic Outcomes and Objectives

There are three strategic outcomes for the project:

1. Residents living at, or moving into, Houghton Regis North will have their information needs clearly identified and met so that they can access local services and improve their well-being.
2. Residents will feel less isolated or lonely as a result of having participated in new social networks, activities or other services offered at the Community House.
3. Residents will be more actively involved in their community as a result of being able to participate in new community activities, forums and groups, and through local volunteering opportunities.

These outcomes are underpinned by six objectives:

1. To utilise the Community House as a base for developing a programme of activities and other services, designed to reduce the social isolation of residents and enable them to become actively involved in their community, which is planned, organised and delivered in partnership with residents and local service providers.
2. To identify and meet the information needs of new and existing residents, increase their knowledge of local services, including those delivered through the project; and enable residents to access local services and improve their well-being.
3. To enable residents to take an interest in, and engage with, local issues affecting them or their community through local forums, consultations and other media.
4. To promote and develop volunteering, and enable residents to access local volunteering opportunities.
5. To empower residents to lead, create, develop and sustain new social networks, cultural activities and community groups.
6. To manage the project in a way that makes best use of the resources available.

Identifying Needs

The project starts with a set of presumed needs and will work towards needs clearly identified by residents. The presumed needs (identified from research on the development of new communities) recognise that people living in, or moving to, a new community:

- do not know other residents and are at risk of social exclusion, so there is a need to facilitate social activities and provide opportunities for residents to get to know others in their community
- do not know the availability of local services, so there is a need to provide information, advice and guidance on a range of local services, including, retail, travel, health and council services, community groups and volunteering
- do not have opportunities to associate with others or influence local decisions, so there is a need to create, develop and run local community groups and activities, and enable residents to actively participate in these

- may have increased feelings of isolation, insecurity and mental stress caused by 'new town blues', so there is a need to empower residents to shape, create and develop a strong sense of community, place and belonging.

The underlying presumption is that long term sustainable change is really only possible if people themselves recognise the needs addressed as their own, along with the methods used, the actions taken, and the institutional frameworks developed.

To enable residents to be the architects of services that meet their needs, Community Development workers will assist residents to articulate and share their needs; identify appropriate solutions; and develop, deliver and commission services for themselves.

Community House

There is a need to provide a base for the project. Known as *the Community House*, this innovatively designed facility will be invaluable to residents as a meeting point and a focus for activity, as an information hub, and as a vital resource base with access to community workers and other service providers.

Within *the Community House*, a large reception room will provide space for informal social gatherings and events; there will also be space for a community café and a room for community group meetings and training sessions; other rooms will be used as offices for partner agency staff and community workers. There will also two toilets (including baby changing facilities and a disabled toilet); an interview room; a kitchen; and a room for 'soft play'. Outside facilities will include a pram park, cycle racks and a small car park; artificial grass and a patio will provide 'spill-out space' from *the Community House*.

We have yet to identify suitable premises for use as *the Community House*. Consideration will also be given to whether a mobile facility should be utilised.

The Project Team will initially include a Programme and Partnerships Officer (provided by Voluntary and Community Action), local volunteers, staff and volunteers from partner agencies. Three further staff will be employed as the project develops: an Administrator, a Community Mobiliser and a Community Café Coordinator. Together, they will:

- run the Community House, including a Community Café;
- welcome new residents;
- provide information and advice on local facilities and services;
- facilitate opportunities for people to meet, socialise and organise themselves through new community groups;
- promote and facilitate access to local volunteering opportunities; and
- identify and support local community leaders.

Partnership Working

Inter-agency working is crucial to the efficiency and sustainability of service provision within local communities. However, it is also clear that such inter-agency working is difficult to achieve, primarily because of the necessity for specialised nature of different agencies' approach and target groups. The success and sustainability of local services will be highly dependent upon a well functioning and well integrated multi-agency approach.

Partnership working will therefore be crucial to ensuring the long term sustainability of the community. To achieve this, a Programme and Partnerships Officer will work closely with partner agencies and service providers in order to understand what their services are, and to work on their

behalf to inform and advise residents of local facilities and services. Partner agencies will also work with project staff and residents to develop a range of community activities and events.

Developing Effective Community Action

The project will use a community mobilisation approach – an innovative way of supporting communities to engage directly with the issues that affects them the most. There is a strong emphasis of working alongside rather than providing services for residents. This requires much more involvement of local residents, not only in providing, but also in instigating, planning and resourcing community based activities.

The Community Mobiliser will work alongside people, enabling them to do things for themselves and bring about sustainable change. They are an activist, not a provider, who responds to the particular needs of the area and is committed to community participation, empowerment and mobilisation as a response to the problems and issues identified by residents. They will work with residents to help them:

- identify the problem or issue they want to address or the need they want to meet
- clearly identify the outcome they want to achieve
- to involve others
- scope and plan what it is they want to do
- acquire the resources they need: volunteers, funding, equipment, premises etc
- acquire and develop the knowledge and skills needed through bespoke training and access to courses put on by other agencies; some may want to get involved in formal qualifications
- plan, publicise and organise the activity or event
- review and evaluate what they do
- develop and sustain the activity, for example by setting up a community group.

Volunteers will be crucial to the success of the project. Volunteers will welcome new residents, deliver promotional material to residents, help run the community café, organise social events and create, develop and sustain new community groups. New residents interested in taking up local volunteering will be provided with information and advice on local volunteering opportunities.

Social Value

A Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation of the highly successful Sandhills Community Action Project found that the community development approach adopted by Voluntary and Community Action was a crucial factor that led to important outcomes experienced by residents who engaged with the project, including:

- reduced isolation and loneliness leading to better mental and physical health;
- improved well-being through a wider circle of relationships and local contacts; and
- improved relationships at home.

The study also found that young children were better prepared for the big step of going to school.

The net ratio of return for the project was £8.22 for every £1 invested. This SROI analysis demonstrates social value returned at a level of not two or three or five times the investment but in fact over eight times. This is remarkable and demonstrates the extent of benefits accruing to engaged local residents that was solely attributable to the work of this project.

Project Management

Voluntary and Community Action has considerable experience of managing a project such as this, along with direct experience of working with groups on new housing developments. Current activity to bring the project to fruition includes:

- identifying suitable sites for the location of *the Community House* or the adaptation of an existing building
- seeking in-kind support from local businesses and landowners for the provision of *the Community House*
- working with Houghton Regis Baptist Church (and their partners) to build relationships with key partners, organisations and opinion formers to gain support for the project
- applying to grant-giving trusts and social capital investors to secure capital funding of up to £300,000 for premises, fixtures, fittings and equipment for the Community House
- applying to grant-giving trusts and social capital investors to secure revenue funding of £540,000 to run the project, initially for five years (staff costs, community activities, marketing and utility costs etc.)
- preparing a detailed specification for the building and fitting out of the Community House.

Further Information

For further information on the project please contact Gina Croxford, Community Engagement Manager at Voluntary and Community Action, Bossard House, West Street, Leighton Buzzard LU7 1DA; by email to gina@action-centralbeds.org.uk, or by telephone on 01525 850559.