

Voluntary and Community Action

CLIPSTONE PARK AND CHAMBERLAINS BARN 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 Clipstone Park and Chamberlains Barn developments, which are located to the east of Leighton Buzzard, and partially in Eggington Parish, will build 2666 new homes with an estimated population of 6,400 new residents. Each development will need to develop and sustain new social infrastructure. The Clipstone Park and Chamberlains Barn 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.

Clipstone Park

Clipstone Park is a mixed use urban extension that comprises six main sites designated for residential development; two sites designated for employment use and additional sites for a neighbourhood centre, two schools and formal open space. The area is bounded by Vandyke Road to the north and Stanbridge Road to the south. The site is divided in two by Hockliffe Road.

Clipstone Park, including the adjoining site known as The Stearn Land, will provide 1,480 new dwellings, to be built in six phases between 2017 and 2031:

Phase 1	North of Hockliffe Road	276 dwellings
Phase 2	North of Clipstone Brook	236 dwellings
Phase 3	South of Vandyke Road	227 dwellings
Phase 4	South of Hockliffe Road	137 dwellings
Phase 5	North of Egginton Brook	334 dwellings
Phase 6	Stearn Land, South of Hockliffe Road	270 dwellings

This will provide a population of 3,552 new residents, of which 924 are likely to commit to formal volunteering (through groups, clubs or organisations) each week. 20 new community groups are expected to be formed.

A Neighbourhood Centre comprising retail units, a public house, a multi-purpose hall, a GP surgery, offices, a children's nursery and a care home for 70 older people will be developed south of Vandyke Road.

A community hall and retail units will be built at Hockliffe Road. A new lower school and a new middle school will also be provided, along with land for the expansion of Vandyke Upper School.

The site will also benefit from a new park, along Clipstone Brook; allotments; new sports pitches and changing facilities; a cemetery; two neighbourhood equipped areas for play; four locally equipped areas of play and two multi use games areas

Employment sites, a Renewable Energy Plant and a Recycling Facility will be built south of the main housing sites, north of Stanbridge Road.

Outline planning applications have been submitted to, and approved by, Central Bedfordshire Council. The developer is currently seeking house builders, who will need to submit Reserved Matters planning applications covering the detailed design of their site(s). Building work is expected to commence sometime in late 2017, with the first houses occupied in April 2018.

Chamberlains Barn

Chamberlains Barn is a mixed use urban extension that comprises five main sites designated for residential development; with additional sites designated for a new lower school, a convenience retail outlet, and formal open space. The area is bounded by Cotefield Drive to the north, Vandyke Road to the south, Heath Road to the west and Shenley Hill Road to the east.

Chamberlains Barn, including the adjoining site known as North Chamberlains Barn, will provide 1,186 new dwellings, to be built (in phases yet to be determined) between 2018 and 2031.

This will provide a population of 2,846 new residents, of which 740 are likely to commit to formal volunteering (through groups, clubs or organisations) each week. 16 new community groups are expected to be formed.

The site will also benefit from a new country park at Shenley Hill; allotments; orchards; one neighbourhood equipped area for play; two locally equipped areas of play; and a new halt for the Leighton Buzzard Narrow Gauge Railway (which runs along the northern side of Vandyke Road on the site's southern boundary).

The developer is currently undertaking land reclamation works and will, in due course, seek to sell off parts of the site to house builders, who will be required to submit Reserved Matters planning applications covering the detailed design of their site(s). A spine road will then be built through the site, in sections; the marketing suit is expected to be built in August 2018, with house building commencing soon after.

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, Clipstone Park and Chamberlains Barn 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 dependant upon a well functioning and well integrated multi-agency approach.

Partnership working will therefore be crucial to ensuring the long term sustainability of Clipstone Park and Chamberlains Barn as a 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*
- building 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.