Voluntary and Community Action

THE SANDHILLS COMMUNITY ACTION PROJECT – A NEW APPROACH TO COMMUNITY MOBILISATION

Introduction

The Sandhills Community Action Project forms part of the Southern Leighton Buzzard Partnership. The Partnership covers the Southern Leighton Buzzard Urban Extension, a new community within the parish of Leighton-Linslade.

This paper sets out the values, strategic outcomes and objectives for the project, the delivery framework and a 'new approach' to community mobilisation. The project started in April 2011 and will conclude in April 2016.

Community mobilisation is an approach that was first developed by Milton Keynes Development Corporation and was subsequently adopted by Milton Keynes Council. The model set out here draws on some of this work and has been further developed by Voluntary and Community Action for the purpose of this 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, Sandhills will have their information needs clearly identified and met so that they can access local services and improve their well-being.

2. Sandhills 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. Sandhills 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 the following 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.

7. To identify the lessons learned from evidence-based practice and outcomes to inform the future delivery of social infrastructure and support the development of new sustainable communities within Central Bedfordshire.

Identifying Needs

We first need to be clear about, and have an in-depth understanding of, the needs of local residents. In due course we will also understand the links between who identifies these needs and how they are expressed. We start 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.

At the core is the prevention of social exclusion. This carries ideas about what it is that should be prevented and presumptions about who would be 'at risk' of whatever it is that is being prevented. A preventative approach thus identifies groups or individuals *at risk of social exclusion*, thereby marking them as *in need* <u>before</u> this really manifests itself. This raises several issues, many of which we will seek to address through residents' empowerment and participation in the project. Educating people not only to be, but to feel and identify themselves as socially included, is a long term activity.

Encouraging and enabling residents themselves to identify their own needs is a key element of the project. This is achieved through:

- residents' surveys
- focus group discussions
- informal discussions with residents in a community café setting and at activities located in the Community House
- informal discussions with residents travelling on the Sandhills bus
- residents' involvement in the Southern (Leighton Buzzard) Residents Group and in the project Steering Group
- interactive website and social media.

However, no amount of consultation and needs identification can overcome the problem that external parties – not the people themselves – have decided that there are needs to be had and met in the first place.

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, a Community Development Officer assists residents to articulate and share their needs; identify appropriate solutions; and develop, deliver and commission services for themselves.

Who are we working with?

In short, everyone who is a resident at Sandhills. But it is worth defining some of the target groups we want to work with. There is no census data available for the area so assumptions have to be made about the population, based on anecdotal evidence and observation.

The challenge is to reach all residents. Those who are quite confident, who may work or who have been on committees or contributed to community groups before may be the first to come forward. It can be very easy to work with people who feel engaged, feel empowered and who work within their own social community. The challenge is to work with those who do not feel engaged, empowered or involved; those who are isolated, hard to reach and who may need the most support need to be involved too.

Sandhills provides for mixed housing with residents living in, for example, four bedroom detached houses or in one bedroom apartments provided through a social landlord. It doesn't matter if people are well off or not; financial standing should not affect whether individuals get involved. There could be people who are well off, with a lovely house, and everyone in the family getting on well together but they have nothing to do with their neighbours, nothing to do with the community and their children don't play with other children in the area. Social isolation and lack of engagement can occur whatever people's social background or income.

There is expected to be a higher than usual number of new and young families, perhaps with one parent (usually the mother) staying at home, and often isolated, during the day. It is understood that there is a higher than usual number of young children.

Residents and families who are too shy, who lack confidence; will be difficult to meet or involve. Adult males as a group will be a particularly hard group to reach and motivate.

Parents and other adults may sometimes make it difficult for us to engage with children. Yet getting children involved can often be much easier than engaging with adults, as they are not tied down with issues, are keen to learn and want to discover new things.

Experience from elsewhere suggests that although a fair number of residents may well benefit from activities, it is still a small number of people who engage in initiating and running activities.

We will need to take care when working with active members of the community to ensure that they do not unwittingly come to form a barrier to wider participation from others in the community. Cliques can start to form if people get a bit too comfortable with one another; this can result in others feeling they don't want to come and join in and then we are effectively restricting access. We must recognise the strengths of everyone in the group and be open to welcoming new people, recognising their strengths and using them in the group's endeavours.

Partnership Working

It is often widely acknowledged that inter-agency collaboration is crucial to the efficiency and sustainability of service provision within local communities. However, it is also clear that such inter-agency collaboration is difficult to achieve, primarily because of the necessity for the 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 is a very important step to ensuring the long term sustainability of Sandhills as a community. To achieve this it is important for partners to:
- clearly understand the purpose of the project
- coordinate provision and participation across the community
- manage expectations, especially where different agencies have different ways of working
- address any lack of transparency and communication between different agencies and with the Community Development Officer/Partnerships Officer
- clearly understand and accept the roles of the Community Development Officer and the Partnerships Officer, recognising that brokerage, sign posting and referral, and linking agencies together is a key part of their role
- trust other service providers and acknowledge the importance of their work
- avoid service duplication
- recognise that each partner may have a different ideological and methodological outlook
- meet their own objectives and targets and to recognise that others will also have their own targets to meet
- share their experiences and learn from one another.

Public agencies will find it much easier to engage with the community through the Community Mobiliser who is working with local residents and can act as an interface with the community at large.

Some agencies will work as providers with a discourse or culture of control, while community mobilisation aims to transfer power to local residents, which often means 'letting go' of control and responding continuously to changes on the ground.

The Partnerships and Programme Officer and the Community Mobiliser will need to understand the services offered by other agencies so attendance at staff meetings and training opportunities will enable them to signpost effectively and ensure that other agencies are aware of their role. They will also be much better placed than other providers to fulfil the crucial role as broker, facilitator and mediator; not only between service providers, but also between service providers and service users.

There are a range of partner organisations involved with the project, each providing an important and unique contribution to the project; they include:

Voluntary and Community Action – project co-ordination and management; provision of key staff, including the Partnerships and Programme Officer and the Community Mobiliser; community worker management and support, support to emerging and new community groups, the promotion of volunteering and support to those seeking to volunteer.

Central Bedfordshire Council Planning – liaison with developers and house builders on the development of Southern Leighton Buzzard, including planning applications and agreements; wider involvement in the growth of southern Central Bedfordshire as the local planning authority; looking to develop community participation in local planning structures.

Central Bedfordshire Council Adult and Community Learning – provision of personal, social and community development activities through informal and formal learning in the community.

Central Bedfordshire Council Library Services – provision of reader and information services, including community reading activities; as well as access to, and training in use of, IT.

Leighton-Linslade Town Council – knowledge and promotion of local services and facilities; as well as a wider involvement in planning the future growth of the town.

Leighton-Linslade Churches Together – volunteer engagement and the provision of social welfare and faith based activities, as well as opportunities for worship.

NHS Bedfordshire – provider of local health services; opportunity for health visitors to use the Community House for information sessions and to make referrals to local GP surgeries and other health service providers; wider involvement to ensure appropriate health services are planned for in future housing growth.

Bedfordshire Police – provider of local policing services; opportunities to raise issues around home security and community safety with new residents, facilitate diversionary activities for children and young people, and develop a neighbourhood or street watch scheme.

Leighton Buzzard Narrow Gauge Railway – tourism/leisure attraction, room hire and volunteering opportunities immediately adjoining Sandhills.

HomeStart Central Bedfordshire – provision of volunteer mentors to new and young families with children.

Linslade Children's Centre – provision of learn and play sessions for parents/carers and toddlers.

Leighton Buzzard Citizens Advice Bureau – provision of information and advice sessions for clients from Sandhills at the Community H
Southern (Leighton Buzzard) Residents Group –providing a voice for local residents to raise their concerns and lobby for improvements to community infrastructure.

Aldwyck Housing Group – provision of social housing and tenant participation activities within Sandhills.

Arnold White Estates – planning obligations to provide the Community House and to manage the Southern Leighton Buzzard Sustainable Travel Exemplar Project, which provides information, advice and guidance on sustainable travel and local services, and the Sandhills *Dash Direct* bus route.

Taylor Wimpey UK Ltd – provision of premises, design and build facilities, and some fittings for the Community House.

Persimmon Homes Ltd – provision of car park and garage for use by the Community House.

Community House

Developers have provided a four-bed roomed property for use as a temporary Community House, situated at 6 Plover Road, Sandhills, for five years or until permanent community facilities are provided (if earlier). The use of this innovatively designed facility is 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 itself, two upstairs rooms are used as offices for partner agency staff and community workers; there is also a room for local community group meetings and for training sessions. Downstairs rooms include a disabled toilet; an interview room; a kitchen providing catering facilities for those using the Community House and for use as a community café; and a large reception room provides space for informal social gatherings and events.

Floor plan for the Community House, although the actual layout is a mirror image of this.

The kitchen facilities are compliant with food hygiene regulations and are suitable for a small-sized commercial catering operation. A Real Time Information Screen (RTIS) and interactive information portal has been installed in the hall of the Community House. Spill out space is provided to the rear of the Community House; this can be used for BBQs or as the play area for a parent and toddler group.

Parking for six cars is available opposite the Community House for use by visiting staff and disabled users. Residents are encouraged to walk or cycle to the Community House. Cycle rings are available so that cycles can be safely secured. The downstairs facilities are fully accessible by users with a disability and by parents with buggies, babies and young children.

Encouraging residents to use the Community House is crucial; it needs to be available, welcoming and accessible to all. The community café is central to getting residents to use the facilities, to understand the purpose of the Community House and in getting to know the staff and volunteers who will work with them. It is a place where residents can drop in for information, for a chat, for coffee and cake (or something healthier!).

An extensive programme of activities is delivered at the Community House, which although a focal point, will not be the sole venue for community activity. The whole neighbourhood must be seen as an important resource for community activity.

Building Trust

One of the most frustrating, and the most difficult, issues to overcome of all the potential barriers to community mobilisation is people's reluctance to trust services. When people do not trust services it is first and foremost because many services are not sustained over a longer term. Communities loose trust and interest in services that come and go or where there is no long term commitment. Workers also loose job security, which may well result in frequent staff changes and loss of trust with residents.

Trust between local residents, project staff and other front-line service providers is absolutely crucial to the long term sustainability of the community. Such commitment and participation is only really possible if people believe in service providers' commitment to genuine longer term engagement. In other words, before you can even begin to talk about people's trust in themselves and each other, you need to have established trust in the services offered through the project and the Community House.

Without some degree of self esteem and mutual trust among members of the community the Community Mobiliser will have a hard time mobilising anything.

Empowering Change

Often, the most difficult challenge for any project such as this is identifying the taken-for granted presumptions about how specific actions will bring about the desired change. We need to be clear about the casual links between needs, actions and outcome. More precisely: how actions would work to change the situation, but also who would be working to bring about this change.

There could be apathy among some residents who will not value to importance of tackling social isolation. The project seeks to bring about a cultural change, where attitudes and values that rely on historical patterns of disengagement and disenchantment are replaced by more positive patterns of engagement and confidence.

It is about bringing about attitudinal and behavioural change in the community and amongst partners, transferring knowledge and skills, encouraging mutual respect and participation and learning and improving on existing knowledge and practices, and allowing the community to learn from its own trials and errors. If this cultural change is to have any lasting importance, it must emerge from and develop into grassroots action that brings about sustainable improvement. An important prerequisite of empowerment is that people are allowed to play to their strengths. Residents must be given the support they need to do things for themselves, the freedom and the opportunity to change their lives for the better.

Empowerment is not a straightforward process of progression. Empowering people can also create problems – or rather they make existing problems more apparent. When you make space for people to voice their opinions, needs, experiences, grievances and concerns, you will necessarily also make space for conflict to reach the surface and to be voiced.

If a community is genuinely mobilising itself it is more likely to become more critical and politically active. And with this also comes the potential for challenge and resistance. The Community Mobiliser may therefore find themselves more directly confronted than most with conflicting ideas about what empowerment entails and how far its consequences should reach.

Developing capacity within the community and transferring power to residents may not always be appreciated by workers in partner agencies where control remains firmly with professional employees and where the discourse is much more one of control. Local Councillors may also find themselves confronted with residents' concerns and calls for action.

Such processes of empowerment take time; they are gradual, painstaking and dynamic. The emphasis has to be, in the long term, sustainable change owned by local people, rather than on 'quick wins'. Short term quick fix approaches can be a real threat to genuine participation and community mobilisation.

Volunteering

Volunteers are crucial to the success of the project. A team of volunteers is being recruited to the project to welcome new residents, deliver our *House 2 House* newsletter to residents, serve in the community café and organise social events. Volunteers are also needed to create, develop and sustain new community groups, and to help provide services delivered by local service providers.

The identification of suitable roles, including the development of role descriptions and person specifications, is a key element to recruiting the right people to the right roles. Volunteering opportunities for the project, partners and new community groups are actively promoted to local residents. Recruitment and appointment processes are in place, along with arrangements to supervise, support and retain volunteers.

New residents interested in taking up local volunteering opportunities are provided with information and offered an informal interview to ascertain their skills, knowledge and interests so that a suitable volunteering opportunity can be offered.

The art and skill of Community Mobilisation

In many community projects, agencies and community workers will *put on* activities *for* people. Although this may be valued, it does not empower communities to do things for themselves.

Community mobilisation is quite different to this: it's a different style and approach. It's a very different way of thinking. It is not about putting on activities for residents, but about empowering residents to put on activities for themselves.

Community mobilisation is 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.

Community mobilisation is supported by a Community Mobiliser, who works along side people, enabling them to do things for themselves and bring about sustainable change.

The Community Mobiliser is an activist, not a provider. They respond to the particular needs of the area and are committed to community participation, empowerment and mobilisation as a response to the problems and issues identified by residents.

When engaging with residents to identify and address their issues, the Community Mobilser is able to identify, define and then contextualise each individual's needs within the context of their specific

social, economic, emotional, health, education, employment and other circumstances. They then need to be very efficient and competent in sign posting and referring to other agencies and specialised support, where appropriate. This requires a working knowledge of partners' activities and local services. The collation and dissemination of this information is an extensive task, requiring dedicated staff time from a Partnerships and Programme Officer who has the in depth knowledge needed.

Finding the best way to support emerging initiatives is a subtle task requiring the Community Mobiliser to model how things might be done differently. They support individual members of the community to become effective community activists and leaders by, initially, providing the glue that holds everything together, helping them look for other residents who can be involved, brokering things with them, helping them put on a course to learn for themselves or getting them trained and qualified if necessary, and building their skills and confidence to run the activity.

Residents do not simply attend activities; their participation shows a seriousness of purpose, a commitment to learning, as well as sense that they have a role in and responsibility for the activities they attend.

The Community Mobiliser initially *walks along side* them on a journey and then begins *taking a step back* whilst the community activist takes a step forward. New people come in and people move out; so the Community Mobilser may have to start again with some activities/initiatives/roles.

It is likely that the Community Mobiliser will get 'sucked in' to chairing meetings; this should be avoided if at all possible to allow them to do what they do best, that is working with local residents to build capacity. They help others to develop their chairing skills by planning the agenda with them, anticipating the discussions and key issues and assisting to develop robust action planning.

Capacity Building

Building the capacity of residents is the key task of the Community Mobiliser. They work with residents to help them:
- identify the problem or issue they want to address or the need that 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.

Community groups need help and support to address a range of issues to do with setting up, developing, running and sustaining them, including:
- governance issues and the need to develop a constitution
- recruiting, managing and retaining trustees and volunteers
- developing appropriate policies, such as safeguarding children, health and safety etc.
- marketing
- funding and financial management
- insurance, risk assessment and management
- action planning
- practical questions such as how to organise and provide children's arts and crafts activities etc.

Project Team

The Project Team includes local volunteers, staff and volunteers from partner agencies, and four part-time staff provided by Voluntary and Community Action:

Partnerships and Programme Officer – whose key activities are:
- Overall responsibility for the day-to-day management of the Community House
- liaising with partners to facilitate and coordinate their involvement in the project
- coordinating a programme of activities and events at the Community House
- identifying and meeting residents' information needs
- writing copy for, and updating, the community pages on the Southern Leighton Buzzard website, the RTIS information portal and for the Community House Facebook group
- preparing, publishing and distributing the *House 2 House* newsletter and other marketing materials to promote the Community House, local services, activities and events
- monitoring planning applications and other public policy issues likely to impact on the development of social infrastructure within the southern Central Bedfordshire growth area.

Community Mobiliser – whose key activities are:
- meeting, greeting and talking with visitors and residents about the project and encouraging them to attend events, join in and get involved in running activities, volunteering etc.
- assisting residents to identify and meet their own and the community's needs
- planning, organising and delivering social activities and events to attract residents to use the Community House and get involved in the project
- working with residents to help them plan, organise, deliver and evaluate community activities
- working with residents to help them plan, organise and sustain new community groups
- identifying and preparing volunteering opportunities for the project and partners
- providing, information, advice and guidance to potential volunteers on local volunteering opportunities
- recruiting volunteers, community activists and community leaders for the project and partners
- providing access to a range of capacity building activities.
- managing a team of volunteers to assist with the running of the Community House.

Community House Administrator – whose key activities are:
- collating and analysing data from residents' attendance at activity sessions, surveys, focus groups and other feedback
- ICT systems and database administrator
- facilities management, including room use by partners, residents and community groups; and accounts administration.

Community Café Coordinator – whose key activities are:
- coordinating the Community Café and the provision of all catering services required at the Community House
- planning the provision, preparation and organisation of food and supplies for the Community Café
- preparing, cooking and serving food to customers within the Community Café and at Community House functions.

Those working in the project team need to be able to:
- communicate with a range of different people
- be a people person, approachable and easy going
- be a socialite and able to talk naturally with people in the community
- get the message across about the work of the project
- know of and be known to everyone in the community
- work informally and flexibly with residents and partners
- motivate people

- demonstrate genuineness in their approach to people
- demonstrate effective information management skills
- think outside of the box
- respond to the diverse needs and wishes of the community and its residents
- help others to prioritise, plan and organise their approach
- feel at ease with knocking on people's doors to invite residents to activities/seek their help
- respect residents' issues and confidentiality
- mediate and negotiate with, and facilitate this between, others
- source and broker resources
- provide information, advice and guidance in an accessible way
- remain flexible and adaptive to the changing circumstances on the ground
- support the development of local capacity
- act as a catalysts within the community
- develop community based voluntary action and participation.

The Community Mobiliser is also able to utilise **Volunteering Advisers** from the Volunteer Centre to assist with the promotion of volunteering, and the provision of information, advice and guidance to potential volunteers. They also work with the **Funding and Development Team** at Voluntary and Community Action to facilitate and support the establishment of local community groups with advice on governance, policies, funding etc.

A **Travel Plan Coordinator**, managed by Arnold White Estates as part of the Southern Leighton Buzzard Exemplar Travel Project, provides local residents with information, advice and guidance on sustainable travel and local services, and the Sandhills D1 bus route.

Supporting the Project Team

Members of the project team care passionately about the community in which they are working and involve themselves in it, becoming members of that community. They may have a professional and a social role, where the two are almost blended together.

The community itself needs to recognise what the project team, in particular the Partnerships and Programme Officer and the Community Mobiliser, are there to do, including the fact that they are there only some of the time (their agreed working hours). They recognise the demands on their time, perhaps from members of the community who live and breathe that community 24/7, and are flexible in their roles, always seeking to maintain a balance that is not overstretched or confined. Supervision and support helps to achieve this balance.

In order to respond *on the hoof*, the Partnerships and Programme Officer and the Community Mobiliser have the freedom to make quick, ad hoc and sometimes executive decisions, as well as budget autonomy.

The work of the project team is not easy. Individual roles can be stressful and rather lonely. The isolation of the team members can be a concern if they are not actively supported. Having other colleagues and partners involved in delivering activities at the Community House is a way of breaking down the isolation experienced in other lone community workers. It is important to ensure that the Community Mobiliser, in particular, does not become isolated within the very role where they are to break others' isolation.

A team approach to community mobilisation enables the Partnerships and Programme Officer and the Community Mobiliser to work closely with partner agency staff so that they can spend time sharing experience and problems with each other. If they do not feel part of a team or a community, they are less likely to have the resources needed to establish strong sustainable collaboration and commitment within the community.

Roles within the project team are highly individualised and are ultimately based on the experience, skills, attitudes and qualities of the person fulfilling a particular role. These are crucial, both in appointment and subsequently in the success of each role. But these individualised skills are likely to be difficult to manage. Keeping team members on track can be a difficult task. Flexibility can turn in to unwieldiness. A strong individualisation of a role could make the role and its practices difficult to transfer or replicate; this is an important issue given that at the very foundation of these roles is the notion that the art and skills of community mobilisation are meant to be transferrable.

Regular and clearly focused staff supervision, training and development help to develop a greater sense of cohesion within the project team and a shared professional identity. Given the flexible nature of the various roles, their training needs are likely to be non traditional and sometimes unpredictable.

The challenges faced by members of the project team are such that there may well be a need for team members to call a colleague or their line manager during an evening or over the week-end. Their support in challenging situations will be crucial. To sustain this level of direct engagement with residents we need to develop/provide for non traditional support, given the personally challenging nature of their work. Independent supervision is provided, where they can offload any problems and issues as it is likely that some of their work will be heavy emotional work.

It is important for partners to put time aside to sit down and reflect on a regular basis with the Partnerships and Programme Officer and the Community Mobiliser to understand what's happening with the latest initiatives and what other things they need to touch base on.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Annual reports of the project and research findings are prepared and disseminated. These identify the lessons learned and good practice that could be adapted and used to support the development of new communities within Central Bedfordshire and elsewhere. They are also used to influence the policy framework for social infrastructure and to inform debate and decision making by local planning authorities and other agencies concerned with the growth agenda.

The reports seek to address specific issues in relation to the building of social infrastructure within new communities, including:

- the benefits (and difficulties) of using a Community House as a base for supporting the development of new communities;

- the range of community development approaches needed to engage with new residents;

- the resources, interventions and support needed to generate community activities for new residents;

- the range of the community activities undertaken and the levels of resident participation in community activities (both within the new community and existing communities);

- how new residents set about establishing new community groups to meet their needs and the resources, interventions and support needed to develop and sustain them;

- the resources, interventions and support needed to promote and develop volunteering opportunities;

- the extent to which volunteering helped to build and establish new social networks and community groups;

- the type of information provided (or not provided) to, and needed by, new residents when moving into new housing areas, how it should be presented and when it is needed;

- the methodologies, results and findings of surveys and consultations with new residents;

- the age groups and family structures of new residents.

Exit Strategy

Community mobilisation is not easy; it will take time, be gradual, painstaking and dynamic. As we have considered, the emphasis has to be, in the long term, sustainable change owned by local people, rather than on 'quick wins'. The project is designed to run for five years in order that it can achieve the desired change and ensure that residents trust those delivering the project.

As the project approaches the end of its planned life, efforts are being made to ensure that all the activities and services available at the Community House can be transferred to other venues and settings.

Further Information

For further information on the activities and services delivered at the Community House, contact us:
- by visiting the Community House at 6 Plover Road, Leighton Buzzard LU7 4AW, Monday to Friday, 9.30am – 4.00pm and at other times by arrangement
- by email to communityhouse@action-centralbeds.org.uk
- by telephone on 01525 374600
- through Facebook at Sandhills Community House Facebook Group
- through the community website: http://slb.uk.com/sandhills-community-house.html
- through Voluntary and Community Action's website: www.action-centralbeds.org.uk

You can also contact:
Gina Croxford, Partnerships and Programme Officer, by email: gina@action-centralbeds.org.uk or on 01525 374600
Jacqui Kennedy, Community Mobiliser, by email: jacqui@action-centralbeds.org.uk or on 07779 120672.
John Gelder, Director, by email: john@action-centralbeds.org.uk, or by telephone on 01525 850559.