

Voluntary and Community Action

THE SANDHILLS COMMUNITY ACTION PROJECT – AN OVERVIEW

Introduction

The voluntary and community sector has an important part to play in the development of new sustainable communities across Central Bedfordshire, an area where substantial housing growth will take place over the next 20 years. This involves advocating, creating and delivering new social infrastructure to address the needs of residents in new communities.

Building new communities is not just about erecting hundreds of new dwellings. It must have regard to the people that will make up those new communities 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.

To address these issues, this project was first conceived in August 2003. It took eight years to bring it to fruition. The project started in April 2011 and will conclude in April 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.

Sandhills – Its Geography and Growth

Sandhills is a residential development on the eastern side of the Southern Leighton Buzzard Urban Extension. New dwellings have been, are currently being or will be, built on restored sand quarries, known as Pratts Pit (Site 14) and Pratts Quarry (Site 15). The development is located to the east of Billington Road, one mile to the south of Leighton Buzzard town centre.

The residential development is known by most residents as Sandhills, but some may refer to where they live by way of the 'marketing name' given to the building phase at the time they purchased the property. We refer to the area as Sandhills; this is where the Community Action Project is taking place.

House building commenced in April 2003 and is continuing, as follows:

between April 2003 and June 2005 the first 407 new dwellings were built at *Kingswood Park* and *Sandhills* (on Site 14);

between May 2005 and December 2008 a further 549 new dwellings were built at *Pages Priory*, *Eden Gardens* and *Persimmon Court* (Phase 1) (Site 15A);

between March 2009 and June 2011 a further 121 properties were built at *Billington Grove* and *Willow Chase* (Phase 1) (Site 15B);

between January 2011 and July 2014 a further 230 properties were built at *Billington Grove*, *Willow Chase* and *Persimmon Court* (Phase 2), along with 68 lakeside properties (Phase 3) (Site 15D).

work on a further 220 properties commenced in October 2012 at *Billington Grove* and *Willow Chase* (Site 15C). This site is expected to be completed sometime during 2016.

A further 75 properties are planned for Pulford Corner (adjacent to Site 15C) and an additional 13 properties will be built on land currently utilised by the Billington Grove Marketing Centre and the Community House (on Site 15B).

With approximately 1,450 properties already built; and a further 231 properties currently under construction or yet to be started; the total number of properties on Sandhills will be 1,681, with an estimated population of 4,035 new residents. Our research shows that 1,049 residents are likely to commit to formal volunteering (in organisations, groups or clubs) and that such a population is expected to establish and sustain 22 new community groups.

Table 1 - The build up of properties, population, volunteers and community groups as development progresses				
Site	New Dwellings	Estimated Population (Note 1)	NEW Volunteers (Note 2)	NEW Community Groups (Note 3)
14 Kingswood Park/Sandhills	407	977	254	5
15A Pages Priory/Eden Gardens/Persimmon Court	549	1318	343	7
15B Billington Grove/Willow Chase	119	286	74	2
TOTAL by June 2011	1075	2581	671	14
15D Billington Grove/Willow Chase/Persimmon Court	230	552	144	3
15D Billington Grove/Willow Chase (Lakeside)	68	163	42	1
15C Billington Grove/Willow Chase/Persimmon Court	220	528	137	3
Pulford Corner	75	180	47	1
15B Billington Grove/Willow Chase	13	31	8	0
TOTAL when completed	1681	4035	1049	22

(1) Based on 2011 Census average household density for Central Bedfordshire of 2.4.

(2) Based on 2010 Bedfordshire Volunteering Survey: 26% of population in Central Bedfordshire undertook formal volunteering for at least 2 hours a week.

(3) Based on research by NAVCA that showed 5.6 voluntary organisations and community groups per 1,000 head of population.

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

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

Community House

Interim community facilities (the Community House) have been provided at 6 Plover Road (on site 15B) in the form of a four-bed roomed property. 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, two upstairs rooms are used as offices for partner agency staff and community workers; there is also a room for community group meetings and training sessions. Downstairs rooms provide a disabled toilet; an interview room; a kitchen with 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.

Developing Effective Community Action

The Project Team includes local volunteers, staff and volunteers from partner agencies, and four part-time staff provided by Voluntary and Community Action: a Programme and Partnerships Officer, a Community Mobiliser, an Administrator and a Community Café Coordinator. They:

- welcome new residents;
- provide information and advice on local facilities and services;
- facilitate opportunities for people to meet informally, socialise and get to know other residents;
- facilitate opportunities for people to get involved in community activities and organise themselves through new community groups;
- promote and facilitate access to local volunteering opportunities; and
- identify and support local community leaders.

The project uses 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 works along side 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.

The Community Mobiliser works 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 are crucial to the success of the project. Volunteers welcome new residents, deliver our *House 2 House* newsletter to residents, serve in the community café, organise social events and create, develop and sustain new community groups. 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 suitable volunteering opportunities can be offered.

Partnership Working

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 therefore crucial to ensuring the long term sustainability of Sandhills as a community. To achieve this, a Programme and Partnerships Officer works 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 residents to develop a range of community activities and events.

Project Management

Project co-ordination and management is provided by the Director of Voluntary and Community Action; who is a qualified Youth and Community Worker, with an MA in Community Education and direct experience of working with groups on new housing developments.

Work to design, build and fit out the Community House was undertaken between August 2010 and July 2011, with the House being handed over to Voluntary and Community Action on the 19 April 2011. A Community House Preview event for partner organisations was held on the 9 August 2011, followed by an opening event for residents on the 10 August 2011.

Current activity revolves around five key areas:

- **meeting and talking with residents** about the project, encouraging them to use the Community Café; participate in events; get involved in running activities, volunteering and setting up new community groups;
- **meeting residents' information needs** through printed materials, Facebook, website and RTIS information portal pages; and keeping residents informed of local issues and consultations;
- **marketing and communications** to promote the Community House, local services and a programme of activities to local residents through our bi-monthly *House 2 House* newsletter, which is distributed to every household;
- **promoting local volunteering** opportunities and **recruiting volunteers** and community activists to help run the Community House, community activities, local services and new community groups;
- **coordinating a programme of activities** by working with partners, service providers and residents to plan, organise and deliver an extensive programme of activities and events at the Community House.

It has cost £80,000 to fit out the Community House; this was funded through the government's Growth Area Fund. When the Community House was handed over in April 2011, there was only enough funding to run the project for the first year on a skeleton staff, thanks to The Tudor Trust (£35,000) and Leighton-Linslade Town Council (£10,000). It will cost £104,000 per annum for the next four years to run the Community House, provide the staff and meet the cost of delivering services. This has been funded by The Tudor Trust (£140,000), Big Lottery Fund (£190,626), s106 Developer Contributions (£70,000) and charges (£15,374).

Feedback from users/residents is obtained on an ongoing basis and through bi-annual residents' surveys. In 2014 we undertook a Social Return On Investment (SROI) evaluation with the help of a specialist SROI consultant. Ongoing evaluation also helps us to 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. It will also be 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 growth.

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 Sandhills Community House website: <http://www.sandhillscommunityhouse.org>
- through Voluntary and Community Action's website: www.action-centralbeds.org.uk