

## Meeting the Social Infrastructure needs of New Communities

As the voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisation covering South Bedfordshire Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire is taking a keen interest in the Milton Keynes and South Midlands sub-Regional Spatial Strategy (MKSM) and proposals to build 26,300 new homes by 2021.

We believe much needs to be done to build communities of people, as well as communities of place, and that all too often this is an after-thought when new communities are built in a physical sense. Creating new social infrastructure to address the needs of residents in new communities must be undertaken in step with growth, from day one.

*The objectives of the Sub-Regional Strategy [include]: .....to create sustainable communities by ensuring that ... social [and other] infrastructure needs are met in step with growth.*

Source: MKSM Sub-Regional Strategy [page 11], March 2005

The voluntary and community sector has an important part to play, and much to contribute, in the development of sustainable communities. The MKSM Strategy recognises the important role the sector can play in building the social infrastructure of new sustainable communities.

*Sustainable Communities will be achieved ..... through the implementation of development in accordance with the following principles [including]: ..... promoting and facilitating community development through the active involvement of the voluntary and community sector.*

Source: MKSM Sub-Regional Strategy [page 19], March 2005

The MKSM Strategy provides for 26,300 new homes being built in Southern Bedfordshire by 2021. We estimate that there will be a need to create and develop a total of 362 new voluntary organisations and community groups within the incoming population and that there will be over 27,000 new volunteers within the Southern Bedfordshire growth area by 2021. See Table 1 below.

## New Communities

Experience from the development of new communities in housing growth areas across the country shows that insufficient account is taken of the need for new social infrastructure and community development in the planning, early stages and throughout the development of 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. Those moving into a new housing development will include many new and young families; providing a need for parent and toddler groups, play facilities etc. Residents' groups, new community groups, volunteering opportunities, and opportunities for people to get together through a range of social activities are also needed.

People arriving in new communities will not know other new arrivals or the availability of local services, both public and community based. They need to be provided with information, advice and guidance on local services and enabled to create and participate in local community activities, clubs and societies.

All these activities contribute to the creation of a strong sense of community. If these facilities and services are not provided people will move away from the area, feel isolated, insecure and unable to contribute to civil society. Ultimately, it will create a failing community, rather than a sustainable one, causing further isolation, insecurity and low levels of volunteering and community activity.

The Government's Framework for Community Capacity Building (*Firm Foundations* published by the Home Office, December 2004) recognises that, if citizens and communities are to get the support they need to become actively involved, that support must be within easy reach.

Table 1

Growth Period	New Dwellings	Estimated population based on household density of 2.46	NEW Voluntary and community organisations based on 5.6 per 1,000 head of population		NEW volunteers based on 42% of population undertaking formal volunteering*	
			Growth Period	Average PA	Growth Period	Average PA
2001 - 2006	3,500	8,610	48	10	3,616	723
2006 - 2011	6,500	15,990	90	18	6,716	1,343
2011 - 2016	8,000	19,680	110	22	8,266	1,653
2016 - 2021	8,300	20,418	114	23	8,576	1,715
<b>TOTAL 2001 - 2021</b>	<b>26,300</b>	<b>64,698</b>	<b>362</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>27,174</b>	<b>-</b>
2021-2031[minimum]	15,400	37,884	212	21	15,911	1,591
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>41,700</b>	<b>102,582</b>	<b>574</b>		<b>43,085</b>	

\* Source: 2003 Citizenship Survey showed that 42% of people volunteered formally (through groups, clubs or organisations) (published December 2004, Home Office).

## 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 active citizenship and community involvement
- 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.

## **Building New Communities through Social Action Research**

Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire, in partnership with others, is seeking to address these issues (described above). It believes there needs to be some thorough research and preparatory work undertaken in advance of the implementation of the MKSM Strategy in South Bedfordshire. To achieve this it is to undertake a social action research project into the building of social capital, the creation of new community groups and the role volunteering plays in the development of new communities. The project will, initially, work in new housing communities that are already being built. As lessons are learned and good practice developed similar projects could be started in other new developments within South Bedfordshire and as the MKSM house building programme kicks in between now and 2021.

## **Sandhills Social Action Research Project**

The project will involve a range of local agencies and will focus on the residential development sites in Southern Leighton Buzzard, initially in the area, known locally as, Sandhills where new housing communities are already being built; these will expand considerably as new development takes place.

Between April 2003 and June 2005 Barratt Homes and Bryant Homes built some 445 new dwellings (on the site formerly known as Pratts Pit). In May 2005 George Wimpey South Midlands Ltd commenced work to build a further 219 new dwellings (on the adjoining Pratts Quarry site). This is expected to take about two years.

With 664 new dwellings the estimated population for Sandhills will be 1,633 new residents, of which 686 are likely to commit to formal volunteering. Such a population is expected to establish and sustain nine new community groups.

Development of a further 1,814 dwellings is planned on the Pratts Quarry, Grovebury Farm and Brickyard Quarry residential development sites. Consultants are currently preparing a development brief and further building is expected to follow in and after 2006. This will provide for an additional population of 4,462 new residents, of which 1,874 are likely to commit to formal volunteering. A further ten new community groups are expected to be formed.

## **Project Purpose and Outcomes**

**The purpose** of the project is to undertake social action research into the building of social infrastructure, the creation of new community groups and the role volunteering plays in the development of new communities. The research will contribute to the planning and development of sustainable communities within the MKSM growth area.

**The outcomes** of the project will be:

1. the establishment of a Community House as a base for developing and delivering social infrastructure activities within the new community of Sandhills, Leighton Buzzard;
2. identification of the resources, interventions and support needed to develop new community groups, promote and develop volunteering opportunities, and generate community activities for new residents;

3. the results of surveys and consultations with new residents that have moved into the Sandhills housing development to establish their views on what they believe is needed;
4. identification of how new residents set about establishing new community groups to meet their needs;
5. identification of the extent to which volunteering helps to build and establish new social networks and community groups;
6. identification of the information needed by new residents when moving into new housing areas (e.g. on local services, community activities, volunteering opportunities, leisure and recreation amenities);
7. identification of the lessons learned and good practice that could be adapted and used to support the development of new sustainable communities within the wider MKSM growth area.

## **Community House**

New communities need a base that will act as a meeting point and focus for activity but all too often the building of community facilities is left until much later. To address this the project will have its own *Community House*, providing immediate and accessible community facilities.

Upstairs rooms will be used as offices for community, health and voluntary sector workers and as meeting rooms for local community groups and activists. The downstairs rooms will be converted to include a disabled toilet; a kitchen will provide self-catering facilities for those using the Community House and could even act as a community café; and a large reception room will provide space for informal social gatherings. Spill out space will be provided to the front and rear of the Community House; this could be used for BBQs or as the play area for a parent and toddler group. The use of this innovatively designed facility will be invaluable to new residents and will provide that vital resource base for individual or collective activity and access to community workers.

## **Methodology**

A '*Community Mobiliser*' worker with the requisite community development skills will be employed to:

- 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.

Priority will be given to 'new arrivals' (residents moving into the George Wimpey development) as it is essential that such workers are in place from the start of a new development. The project will test the belief that, if new residents are to take an active part in their community, this needs to be facilitated from when they move in and even when they are considering the purchase of a new property. It may also be possible to test the extent to which this affects the (quick) sale of new homes, thus providing evidence for future developers' investment in social infrastructure.

The *Community Mobiliser* will also undertake work with 'recent arrivals' (those who have moved into the more recently completed dwellings) and with 'early arrivals' (those who moved into the first development and have settled into their new homes).

The *Community Mobiliser* will make contact with relevant local service providers in order to understand what their local services are and will work on their behalf to inform and advise residents. The worker will acquire a sound knowledge of:

- local facilities in close proximity to Sandhills and within Leighton Buzzard (e.g. retail and food outlets, leisure and recreation facilities etc.);
- relevant County Council, District Council and Town Council services (children's services, libraries, adult and community learning, refuse collection, council tax, benefits etc.);

- other relevant public services (e.g. health services, police, Job Centre Plus etc.)
- information and advice agencies (from the public, voluntary and community sectors)
- voluntary organisations and community groups; and
- local volunteering opportunities.

A team of volunteers will be recruited to the project to welcome new residents, deliver promotional material to residents, run a community café and organise social events.

Working with the Volunteering team of Voluntary and Community Action, the *Community Mobiliser* will promote and develop volunteering opportunities. New residents interested in taking up local volunteering opportunities will be 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 *Community Mobiliser* will also work with Development Officers from Voluntary and Community Action to facilitate and support the establishment of local community groups in response to local residents' needs and goals.

### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

A report of the research findings will be prepared and disseminated. This will identify the lessons learned and good practice that could be adapted and used to support the development of new communities within Bedfordshire and elsewhere. It will also be used to inform debate and decision making by Local Strategic Partnerships, Local Delivery Vehicles for the Growth Areas, local authorities, the Government Office and other agencies concerned with the growth agenda.

The report will 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.

### **Further Information**

If you would like further information on, or to discuss, the proposals set out in this paper please contact John Gelder at Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire, Bossard House, West Street, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire LU7 1DA, or by email to [john@action-southbeds](mailto:john@action-southbeds), or by telephone on 01525 850559.