

Building Strong Communities

Social Infrastructure for Sustainable Communities

Why social infrastructure?

Over the next 25 years many new communities will be created in the Milton Keynes and South Midlands growth area. Millions of pounds will be invested in new houses, roads, schools, health facilities and other public infrastructure. It is also vital that investment is made in building the *social fabric* of these new communities and enabling them to be successfully integrated with people living in or near the areas experiencing new development. This is 'social infrastructure'.

Plans are needed to build new communities into strong communities; those that are vibrant, where people feel a sense of identity, are actively involved in local community activity and where there is a culture of helping others and working together.

Social infrastructure means providing community development staff, supporting and funding new community groups, helping to organise volunteering, providing a place for people and local groups to meet, and developing community leaders. Through this investment the capacity of the community will be developed so that it has all the hallmarks of a 'strong community'.

This leaflet sets out the main features of social infrastructure, based on specially commissioned research and planning for the Milton Keynes and South Midlands growth area (see back page for details).



Social Infrastructure is defined as:
Building strong communities through the continuing development and delivery of activities, resources and support to strengthen the skills and confidence of people and community groups to enable them to take effective action and leading roles.

Components of Social Infrastructure

1. Community facilities

Access to a meeting place that is available, welcoming and accessible to all from day one and is owned and/or run by voluntary/community organisations.

2. Community development

Workers with skills to welcome new residents, facilitate community events and support communities in identifying and meeting their needs.

3. Groups and organisations

Support for the setting up of 'locally grown' organisations providing community activities and services and for a local forum or network that is inclusive, open and participatory, owned by and accountable to the community.

4. Grant funding

Grants will support the start up and early running costs of new community groups in new/ adjoining communities and the development of existing voluntary service providers to deliver their services in these communities.

5. Learning and skills development

Opportunities to equip people for active involvement in, and support to, their own groups and communities.

6. Volunteering and other mutual support

Access to volunteering opportunities and new volunteering programmes that support the recruitment, development and deployment of volunteers.

Guiding Principles for Social Infrastructure

1. Involvement

People in communities affected by new development will be involved in shaping this and will encourage potential bridge building to incoming residents. Local voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations will be actively involved in identifying and advocating the need for social infrastructure development.



2. Sustainability

Organisations developed in new communities will have their long term viability and development considered and planned for from the start (including provision of community assets); a detailed specification for facilities and assets to be funded (and possibly transferred) will be drawn up; the overall design of the development takes due account of long term maintenance needs and costs.

3. Coordination

Community facilities will be provided in step with growth; an initial community base will be in place at the same time as the first houses; an appropriate mix and style of social infrastructure will be developed; joint use of proposed community facilities and new ways of providing public services will feature in detailed planning discussions.

4. Support

There will be provision of people with appropriate expertise in community development; support for new communities will be tailored to their particular needs and feature training and development opportunities for

those potentially or already in positions of community leadership; technical support (e.g. on Section 106 agreements and the planning system) will be made available to community groups.

5. Communication

There will be an early commitment to open, transparent, honest and effective communications between the community, developers and public bodies to build trust and effective relationships.

6. Inclusion

Social infrastructure investment will ensure that all sections of the community are communicated with and their particular needs are considered, whether through their shared location, or because of common experiences or interests.

7. Empowerment

Appropriate social infrastructure investment will be provided to help develop individuals, groups and communities to enable them to take control of their futures and be able to take action with reducing levels of external support.

8. Learning

Action research and other systems for monitoring, reflection, evaluation and learning from investment in social infrastructure will be developed, which enable strategic and local planners to adjust and develop future plans and investment.

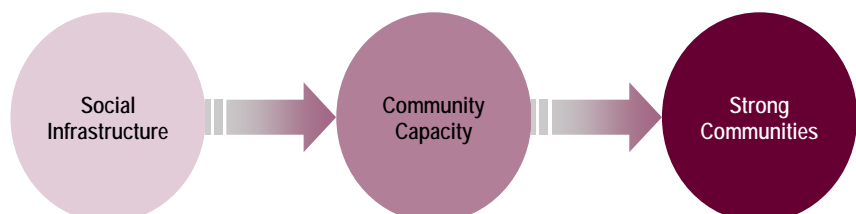
9. Collaboration

Social infrastructure investment will encourage mutual support and action between groups and organisations in existing communities and associated new developments.

10. Comprehensiveness

Social infrastructure investment will cover all residents in a new and associated existing community and not be focused on a particular group; e.g. social renters, a particular ethnic or cultural group etc.

Investing in social infrastructure increases community capacity and builds strong communities



Planning Social Infrastructure

A plan for social infrastructure has been drawn up, which sets out the types and levels of investment needed for development in the growth areas over the next 15 years. This is likely to see over 420,000 new residents in over 180,000 new homes.

By looking at the different types of social infrastructure needed at different stages of a new development (see diagram opposite) and applying costs to these, a model for investment has been created. This proposes that the majority of the costs of local social infrastructure are met by those organisations developing the new housing (as a 'tariff' or levy on the new development), with a contribution from public sources. Some further public funding is needed to set up the structures and systems to plan and deliver social infrastructure.



Social Infrastructure in Practice - Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire

Planning for a substantial new development (of around 4,000 dwellings) is underway and Voluntary and Community Action saw the opportunity to develop an action research project on the provision of social infrastructure services to new communities. Their proposals have now been included in the Development Brief. They include provision of two 'community houses' as meeting places and a base for the project; 'Community Mobilisers' (workers) to welcome new residents and work with them in the development and provision of social activities, the promotion of volunteering and the formation of new community groups, and a small budget for 'start up' grants.

Six Steps to Sustainability

The process of building strong communities through social infrastructure

1. Shaping

Community information and consultation work with existing communities, consideration of mix and design of the development, 'Social Infrastructure Impact Assessment' for inclusion in Development Briefs and Local Development Frameworks.



2. Planning

Continued community consultation, detailed planning of further Social Infrastructure and agreement of investment through 'planning obligations' and from other sources.



3. Engaging

Information/signposting as part of a 'welcome' service. Provision of initial community facilities, community development work with linkages to voluntary and community sector infrastructure support and start up grants for new community groups. Support to/from existing communities to 'build bridges' to new residents.



4. Growing

Further provision of community facilities, community development work, identification and responses to community support/service needs, building of community organisations. Development of learning and volunteering opportunities and availability of project grants.



5. Consolidating

Development of community groups; community development work; volunteering develops; grant funded projects helped to develop where appropriate; community services/support established.



6. Maintaining

Community-run services and support to meet existing and new residents' needs. Development of long term Social Infrastructure facilities/reserved site(s), including income generation and other social enterprise opportunities. 'External' community development support reduces.



Social Infrastructure in Practice - Blackthorn Good Neighbours, Northampton

The project was established in 1998 to support and assist the development of residents living in the Blackthorn neighbourhood of Northampton. The project ran for six years. Its aims were to address some of the social problems on the estate through volunteering and local action; to foster a sense of belonging and to engender a feeling of community. A prime objective was to address the issue of social exclusion and in so doing improve social cohesion.

Much of the early work involved working at a very personal level with people, addressing problems, providing support and slowly gaining trust. Gradually the project workers engaged with local people, introducing the idea of volunteering to provide their own services and then supporting those activities.

Social Infrastructure in Practice - Milton Keynes Community Foundation

The Foundation is an independent grant-making charity, providing total grants of £5 million since 1987 for projects that benefited the whole community. It promotes philanthropy through personal and corporate giving. The Foundation also holds property assets, gifted from the previous Development Corporation, some of which are let and provide income (the majority of the tenants are voluntary and community organisations who receive a subsidised rent); other assets include 'community reserve sites' - plots of land for long term leasing to voluntary and community groups able to develop them for community benefit. Fifteen of these sites have been developed or are in the process of being developed, six of which by faith organisations. Most sites also provide facilities and services to the immediate community.



This leaflet includes extracts from research commissioned by the Social Infrastructure Group, a recognised working group of the Environment and Quality of Life (EQOL) sub Group of the Milton Keynes & South Midlands Inter Regional Board. The report of this research includes a Plan for planning, implementing and resourcing the development of Social Infrastructure across the region. Copies of the report, **Strong Communities**, can be viewed and downloaded on www.voluntaryworks.org.uk.

The work was undertaken by Nigel Boldero of *Community Renewal* and funded through the *ChangeUp* programme for the East of England. Contact details, including members of the Social Infrastructure Group, can be found in the report and on the website. Further information on the Social Infrastructure Group can be obtained from your local Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) or John Gelder at Voluntary and Community Action South Bedfordshire (Tel: 01525 850559; Email: john@action-southbeds.org.uk). Further information on EQOL can be obtained from Louise Johnson at the Environment Agency (Tel: 01536 385216; Email: louise.johnson@environment-agency.gov.uk).