

BUSINESS CASE FOR LONG-TERM FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY ACTION BEDFORDSHIRE

1. Introduction

This paper sets out some thinking from Community Action Bedfordshire (formerly Voluntary and Community Action) on the continued need for infrastructure funding and explores the outcomes from this work and the contribution made by Community Action to the development of Stronger Communities in Central Bedfordshire.

There is concern among many that the diminishing funding currently provided to Community Action by Central Bedfordshire Council (£55k pa down to £zero by 31 March 2019) will seriously put at risk the valuable work the organisation undertakes in supporting and coordinating the voluntary and community sector; promoting, developing and supporting local volunteering; enabling people to get involved in local communities; and its work with local communities on social isolation, the development of local Timebanks and on expanding social networks.

We have always taken an innovative approach to what we do and have moved away from the traditional support activities of local infrastructure organisations to one that is active in communities addressing social isolation and informal volunteering, for example. Although alternative funding has been sought and obtained (in some cases) these have proved to be uneconomical and unsustainable. In short, the organisation could close or, at best, significantly reduce activity and staff to provide only very limited support, with no capacity to take on additional activities or respond to requests for additional information, promotion or support activities from January 2019.

We acknowledge that re-instating funding to the 2015/16 level of £125,133 pa may not be possible, but including £98,133 pa (2016/17) into the Council's four-year rolling Budget would go a long way to ensuring that Community Action Bedfordshire (and its partner organisations) continue to deliver these important functions and activities in Central Bedfordshire.

2. About the Work we Do

We are a voluntary and community sector support organisation that develops, enables, promotes and supports local voluntary and community action (including volunteering) across Bedfordshire.

Local community action provides a powerful force for change, both for those involved and for the wider community. Everyday Community Action Bedfordshire, along with local voluntary organisations, charities and community groups, make a vibrant and effective contribution to the quality of life of all who live and work in Bedfordshire.

The voluntary and community sector has an important part to play in the development of healthy and sustainable communities across Central Bedfordshire. This involves advocating, creating, delivering and supporting new and existing *social infrastructure* to address the needs of residents in local communities; and empowering them to develop and sustain new and existing social networks, activities and community groups needed to shape and create a strong sense of community, place and belonging. Community Action Bedfordshire helps this to happen and delivers its own projects to achieve these outcomes.

Community Action is the licensed Volunteer Centre for Central Bedfordshire. It is also able to develop the capacity and skills of voluntary organisations, community groups, volunteers and community activists. It works in partnership with others to increase the quality, quantity, contribution and accessibility of local community action, so that:

- people are inspired to volunteer, have the opportunity to do so and have excellent volunteering experiences;

- local communities are able to do more for themselves by creating, running and sustaining the community groups, social networks and cultural activities needed to develop strong and vibrant communities;
- residents feel less isolated or lonely and are better connected with other residents, community groups and local services;
- community groups have the people, skills, knowledge, systems and resources to meet the needs of their residents/service users, achieve their aims and recruit, retain and manage volunteers;
- voluntary organisations, community groups and residents have a strong voice and an active involvement in influencing the decisions that shape their community;
- those who are socially disadvantaged are able to participate more fully in society.

3. Objectives

Our work is underpinned by the following objectives:

1. To empower residents to lead, create, develop and sustain new and existing social networks, cultural activities and community groups.
2. To enable local communities to design and deliver activities and services that reduce the social isolation of residents and enable them to become actively involved in their community.
3. To enable people to be better informed about local services, social networks, volunteering opportunities, community activities and community groups in their area; how to access them and improve their well-being.
4. To support communities in creating, developing and managing local forums and networks that are inclusive, open and participatory, which are owned by and accountable to the community.
5. 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.
6. To support communities in creating, developing and managing meeting places that are sustainable, welcoming and accessible to all.
7. To enable the provision of information on, and access to, start-up funding/small grants to stimulate grass-roots activity and capacity building.
8. To enable the provision of, and access to, appropriate learning and skills development opportunities to equip people for active involvement and to support their own groups.
9. To promote and develop volunteering; including the recruitment, retention and management of volunteers; and volunteers who are prepared to mobilise others, organise and deliver community action.
10. To promote and develop a culture of 'informal volunteering' and 'neighbourliness' where people do something to help someone in their community and/or share their skills informally with others.

4. Outcomes

Strategic Outcomes from our work:

- (1) People are better informed about local services, social networks, volunteering opportunities, community activities and community groups in their area, and how to access them.
- (2) People are able to meet socially/informally with others through social activities or other services offered in the community.
- (3) People are actively involved in the community through their participation in community groups, forums, activities or volunteering.
- (4) People are actively involved in leading, planning and/or organising community groups, forums and activities.

- (5) People feel less isolated or lonely as a result of participating in social networks, volunteering, community activities and community groups etc.
- (6) People have increased fulfilment/satisfaction as a result of being able to help others and/or share their skills with others.
- (7) People are able to, individually and collectively, have a greater say in decisions that affect their community's well-being.
- (8) Community groups have the people, skills, knowledge, systems and resources to meet the needs of their residents/service users, achieve their aims and recruit, retain and manage volunteers.

Possible Outcomes for Individuals:

As a result of their participation in Community Action's programmes, the individual

1. Improved health and well being

- 1.1 Feels their mental health has improved
- 1.2 Benefits from an increase in exercise/active living
- 1.3 Has increased confidence and self-esteem
- 1.4 Feels less isolated or lonely

2. Independent living maintained

- 2.1 Receives help with shopping and daily activities
- 2.2 Receives help with house and garden maintenance
- 2.3 Obtains needed services or goods that they would otherwise not afford
- 2.4 Is better informed about, and has been able to access, local services
- 2.5 Knowing their neighbours and being able to call on others increases their feeling of safety and security

3. Increased participation in the community

- 3.1 Develops new social networks
- 3.2 Gives and receives help through a Timebank
- 3.3 Gains satisfaction from sharing their skills with others in the community
- 3.4 Participates in community activities, groups, forums or formal volunteering
- 3.5 Feels increased personal fulfilment/satisfaction from their participation in the community
- 3.6 Feels less isolated or lonely

5. Evidencing the Value of our Investment

An external Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation of our work found that the main outcomes experienced by service users who were unemployed *were improvements in the quality of their lives through joining with others and being supported in job search and work-related training. This began with experiences of feeling less alone and isolated gaining in confidence and motivation and hence being able to increase work aspirations and gain better job seeking skills.* The study found that for every £1 invested in the project there was a social return of £10.47, which was considerably higher than many other employment support projects.

A SROI evaluation of our work with residents in Leighton Buzzard found that common needs among residents were the issues of isolation, the need to engage in new relationships outside family and home and the need to have more engagement with the local community. The impact of the project was that, as a result of their participation in the project, residents had:

- reduced isolation and loneliness leading to better mental and physical health.
- decreased stress and anxiety
- improved well-being through wider circle of relationships and local contacts
- improved relationships at home
- increased feelings of safety and security
- improved personal development
- increased opportunities to help others
- access to reliable local information.

87% of residents surveyed stated they felt they had been able to make friends and felt less isolated or lonely as a result of our interventions. The relationships residents formed *gave many a lifeline to a better quality of life and they attribute this not just to the existence of the facility but also to the staff who work there.* The study found that for every £1 invested there was a social return of £8.22, which is considerably higher than many community projects of this type.

6. Links to Central Bedfordshire Council Priorities

Our work actively promotes, support and develops the Council's Five Year Plan, which identifies Stronger Communities as or where

- people build successful lives; everyone has the opportunity to fulfil their potential
- people and organisations have the opportunity to do more (for themselves)
- people are supported to help themselves and others
- volunteering creates opportunities for people of all ages
- there is a greater sense of place
- people participate in local affairs and services
- reducing social isolation; promoting social inclusion

CBC Adult Social Care, Health and Housing identifies that customers and carers are

- safe and secure
- able to live independently at home
- participating in the community
- not socially isolated or lonely.

7. Impact of Reduced Funding in Central Bedfordshire

Impact of reduced or zero funding of local VCS Support Services

- No means for local residents to find a route into volunteering.
- No support to local volunteer-involving organisations, including CBC and other public sector organisations, in developing and promoting local volunteering opportunities and programmes.
- Reduction in residents' involvement in volunteering, local affairs, active lifestyles and community life, resulting in increased reliance on public services when help is needed.
- Increased pressure on Council services from residents needing non-clinical solutions that will improve their social, emotional or practical needs; enable individuals to take greater control of their own lives; and support their health and wellbeing.
- Much more difficult for public sector to energise communities into doing more for themselves.
- Increased risk of local groups having poor governance, insufficient 'know how', volunteers and other resources needed to provide effective and trusted services.
- Loss of intelligence and data about local voluntary and community services (4,000 organisations across Bedfordshire).
- Reduced visibility for local charities and groups as national ones take centre stage, drawing resources away from Central Bedfordshire.

5. Strengths and Opportunities

Community Action's experience shows that residents are keen to address their own social isolation and loneliness if they are given opportunities to do so in a supportive environment where there are trusted people who can help them make the links and 'broker' opportunities with them. Some also welcome the opportunity to volunteer formally (through organisations and community groups), often to help others, but lack information and networks to do so. Informal volunteering and 'neighbourliness' enables residents to help others or contribute to informal networks. More and more people are attracted to ideas around reciprocity with activities such as Timebanking.

As the only licensed Volunteer Centre for Central Bedfordshire, we have the skills, knowledge and experience; backed by quality accreditation from NCVO and the matrix standard; to deliver, promote and support local volunteering. Community Action also has the energy, skills and experience to imagine new ways of doing things; to adapt our delivery methods and to really focus on the challenges, strengths and opportunities of addressing social isolation and loneliness, volunteering and building stronger communities.