

# Welcome to **the future**

A local model for building socially sustainable communities



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# Introduction

Over the next 20 years Gloucestershire will see a significant increase in new housing, with projections indicating that over 49,000 new homes will be required by 2031, to meet demand\*.

We know from experience that creating successful and sustainable communities requires more than just building houses and hard infrastructure. Using best practice from the county and beyond, we have created this introductory paper, which sets out a number of ways in which we can work together to create sustainable new communities. Many of the principles apply to existing communities too.

The paper is intended to be an introductory resource for all those involved in planning, designing, developing or managing housing. There is of course much knowledge and good practice already embedded in planning processes and established guidance. That material is not duplicated here – the focus instead is on understanding the essential building blocks of communities that are vibrant, inclusive and socially sustainable.

\*Gloucestershire Strategic Housing Market Assessment Update (2014)

## What is 'Social Sustainability'?

"A process for creating sustainable, successful places that promote wellbeing, by understanding what people need from the places they live and work. Social sustainability combines design of the physical realm with design of the social world – infrastructure to support social and cultural life, social amenities, systems for citizen engagement and space for people and places to evolve." Social Life (2012)

BARNWOOD TRUST

Cheltenham Borough Homes  
Shaping Stronger Communities  CBH

Bromford.



# New housing or new communities?

The largest new single development in the county, Elms Park in north west Cheltenham, will see the creation of 4285 new homes alongside new schools, health facilities, parks and 500 hectares of new employment land. This dramatic increase in population will bring with it new challenges and opportunities for community cohesion and sustainability.

Before a brick has been laid, at Elms Park and elsewhere, we have a unique opportunity to think differently about how we develop new communities and how we tackle those challenges. Learning from the past, what can we do differently to ensure these new communities thrive long into the future? The Social Sustainability Framework outlined later in this paper highlights the need to invest resources and time in building amenities and social infrastructure, particularly in the early phases of a new development. It also highlights the importance of giving communities voice and influence, allowing space for growth and developing the social and cultural life of the community.

This paper provides examples from Cheltenham, Tewkesbury and elsewhere, which demonstrate a range of successful approaches to the creation of socially sustainable communities. By planting the right seeds, and with the right support, it is possible for communities to thrive and flourish, enhancing the wellbeing of those who live there.



# Learning from the past

We all want to live somewhere that has a strong sense of 'community'. Equally we can all think of examples of places, neighbourhoods or estates where the community has failed to thrive. Sometimes this is due to wider social problems such as anti-social behaviour or long term unemployment, and sometimes it's down to poor design. Research in the UK and overseas has also identified the need for good quality social infrastructure and the provision of structured support for community development: opportunities to meet neighbours, build local networks and share social experiences. Without these social supports, new settlements struggle to become cohesive, vibrant communities with a sense of place, belonging and identity.

The St Paul's area of Cheltenham has seen extensive physical redevelopment and regeneration. Cheltenham Borough Homes, the Borough Council's social housing provider, fully embraced the concept of social sustainability throughout the life of the redevelopment process. A full range of support mechanisms were put in place to lead existing residents through the physical and social changes. Local people were also fully engaged in the design process of both the new homes and the wider site layout and as a result had greater personal ownership of the area.







# Towards social sustainability

*“Planning for hard infrastructure alone would never build a community... it would only be done by a matrix of formal and informal opportunities or supported activities.”*

*Cambridgeshire PCT (2007)*

Whilst traditionally we recognise the importance of physical factors such as good housing and transport connections, non-physical factors like strong social networks and personal wellbeing make the real difference between a community flourishing or not. Although economic and environmental sustainability are recognised in mainstream planning and development practice, the concept of ‘social sustainability’ is less understood.

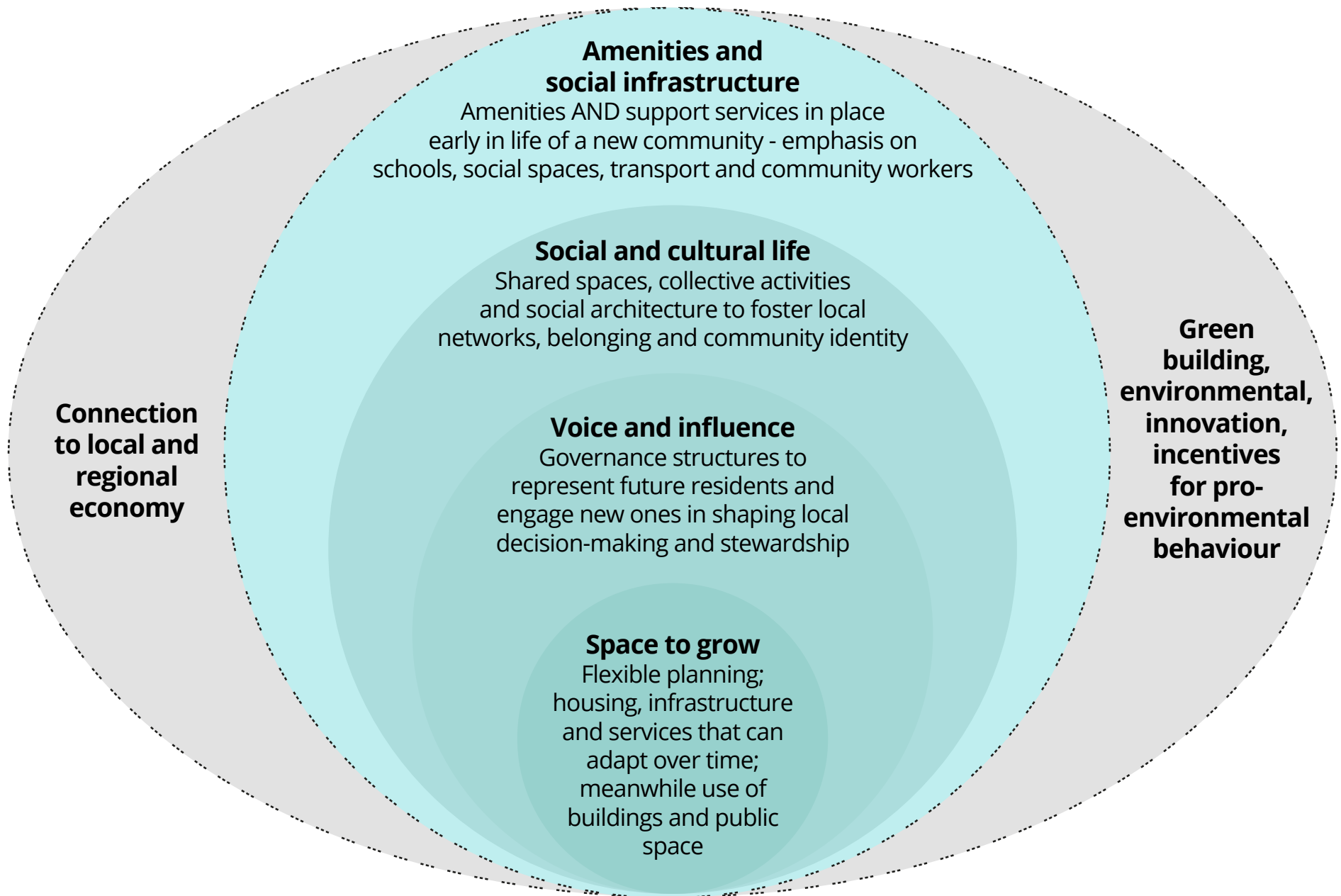
The urban research consultancy ‘Social Life’ has designed a framework to help developers and planners understand what makes a community ‘socially sustainable’. The private developer Berkeley Group have adopted this framework in measuring the ‘social sustainability’ of their new developments. The measurement tool, developed by Social Life and University of Reading from a wide evidence base, consists of 13 indicators proven to support the growth of successful new communities.

Social Sustainability Framework:

*“A process for creating sustainable, successful places that promote wellbeing, by understanding what people need from the places they live and work.”*

Social Life, Design for Social Sustainability:

A practical framework for building new communities





# Wellbeing: the importance of belonging

The links that bind and connect people within communities (sometimes described as 'social capital') provide a source of resilience that is critical to physical and mental wellbeing. A key finding in the Marmot Review\* of public health was the need "to develop healthy and sustainable places and communities" by improving "community capital" and reducing social isolation.

Research in Gloucestershire\*\* confirmed that amongst the main drivers of personal wellbeing were 'social contact and interaction' and 'having something worthwhile to do'. People who felt a sense of belonging in the places where they lived had higher levels of overall life satisfaction and higher levels of mental wellbeing. The key characteristics of 'a good place to live' were identified as: community and social networks; amenities, transport and green space; and feeling safe and secure.

The message is clear: giving attention to building communities to which people have a sense of belonging pays dividends in individuals' health and wellbeing.

\* Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review (2010)

\*\* Wellbeing in Gloucestershire: Barnwood Trust (2015)



# An approach to place making

What role can local stakeholders, community partners and the voluntary sector play in laying down the foundations for successful, socially sustainable communities?

Approaches to new development are changing and one of the keys to success is a shift from a passive relationship, where communities have things imposed upon them to one where they have greater control over the design and management of their own neighbourhoods. This relationship is central to the concepts of 'voice and influence' and 'space to grow' identified in the Social Life framework.

There is a range of practical examples within Cheltenham, Tewkesbury and beyond of how to build and support new communities to become socially sustainable. They are often small in scale and require limited investment, but have the potential to make a significant difference. They nurture the strengths and capacities inherent within communities, and build social infrastructure. We believe that this approach can apply irrespective of tenure and socio-economic status.



# Growing new communities

Based on experience, we have identified examples of approaches we know can help to grow and sustain new communities:



**Community space and space to grow:** Places for the community to meet and interact, including small scale spaces at an early stage, ('meanwhile spaces') and space to allow for later growth.



**A community builder:** To welcome people to the new neighbourhood, build connections and empower people to use their skills to build the community. Costs could be covered through s106 payments.



**Connecting the partners:** Creating an 'accountable body' of community and statutory stakeholders to support and assist new communities to flourish, by providing oversight and support to the community building process.



**Community chest:** A neighbourhood-based small grant scheme that can be accessed by residents and community groups to improve their area and bring people together: from parent - toddler groups to community gardening projects.



**People driven neighbourhoods:** Supporting residents to take greater control and influence their physical and social environment. A housing management approach that builds strong relationships with new customers, building their community networks and empowering them to shape their own community.





# What does a thriving community look like?



This illustration gives examples of resident-led activities and initiatives, which could be encouraged and supported by community-building input.

# Case Study

## St Paul's Community Hub

Cheltenham has an ageing population that is set to increase by 56% by 2030. If not properly planned for this will inevitably create significant pressure on local health care services and residential care places. Two of the key challenges facing older people are loneliness and social isolation; yet at the same time older people have strengths, skills and experience to contribute. In addressing these issues Cheltenham Borough Homes decided to establish two 'community hubs' within the Borough, which act as focal points for all age groups within the local community. They provide a welcoming environment where older and younger generations engage and connect.

The community hub concept promotes cohesion, enables social networking and reduces isolation. Residents have access to support and signposting to other services when needed. These shared community spaces are welcoming places where residents of any tenure can access social or health and wellbeing activities, training, information and support. They have provided significant social value and the lessons learnt in their establishment will, we believe, be valuable in supporting the formation of other new communities.





# Case Study

## Stoke Orchard Village

Tewkesbury Borough Council worked with Stoke Orchard & Tredington Parish Council using the Section 106 process to identify the needs of both the existing population and the new population arising from a development of 124 homes in Stoke Orchard, near Tewkesbury.

As a result of the parish council engaging with the community it was recognised that there was a need for a community hall, village shop and play area, to enable the community to have places to interact and grow. These facilities were not available in the village and residents had to travel to Tewkesbury or Bishop's Cleeve, several miles away.

Working with the developer, a carbon neutral community facility was designed and built in 2014, incorporating a village shop, 'Orchard Stores', within the community centre. The community centre is managed by the parish council and includes activities ranging from Pilates to toddler groups. The hall is now at capacity during peak times and the village shop is successfully run by a manager and team of volunteers. The community centre, shop and play area offer excellent opportunities for the local community to meet, be active, stay healthy and form bonds.





# Case Study

## Community building in Cranbrook

Cranbrook is Devon's first new town for over 100 years. Over 6,000 homes are to be built in the next 10 years. Recognising the scale and ambition of the new town, developers and local partners including Sovereign Housing Association employed a local community builder to grow and nurture the embryonic community.

Partly funded through section 106 agreements, the community builder was based in a local 'grass-roots' organisation that was skilled and experienced in community development.

The role includes:

- working with the community and local agencies and to ensure that community infrastructure has the residents at its core.
- identifying and addressing new needs and contributions that have not previously been considered; and
- building community capacity to ensure that the new community is sustained appropriately.



# Case Study

## A strengths based approach to neighbourhood management

Being a Bromford customer is about far more than having a home and paying rent; the Bromford community is all about helping customers to help themselves and each other. Bromford starts its relationship with its customers by focusing more on what they can do – their skills and talents – than on what they can't do. The aim is to support customers in achieving their goals and aspirations.

Bromford believes that a sound tenancy acts as a springboard to enable customers to realise their goals and achieve more. This could be living independently, getting into training, volunteering or employment, or owning their own home. Customers are supported to access new jobs and training, develop their own community enterprises and improve their neighbourhoods. This new approach has now been in place for three years and the benefits are becoming tangible and measurable.





# Case Study

## Barnwood Trust: You're Welcome

Barnwood Trust has invested in inclusive community building and provides Small Sparks Grants, to support people to do things together, in communities across Gloucestershire. This has led to a host of examples of people benefitting from new social networks and enhanced wellbeing. These have arisen not through new services or the involvement of agencies, but through the development of community connections and individuals engaging with community activity.

You're Welcome is about enabling communities to do things themselves, including everyone and making use of everyone's strengths and skills, with low levels of financial input or external resources. There is also a website which people can use to share information, exchange ideas and find out what's happening in their area.

A socially sustainable community is one where everyone is valued for the part they can play; and 'everyone' includes disabled people and people with mental health problems. Experience shows that building inclusive communities requires initial coordination and individuals may need encouragement and support to get involved, but it pays huge dividends in the longer term.





# Case Study

## Governance structures

An important element in developing social sustainability is the involvement of local residents in the ongoing stewardship: giving people greater control over where they live, through helping them establish their own governance and land management structures. An 'accountable body' will also be needed to hold funds and be responsible for overseeing agreed outcomes, which needs to be resident-led and have no financial interests in the development. However it could use the services of an existing organisation to avoid re-creating costly governance and administrative structures.

'Thrift for Soham', in Cambridgeshire, is a Community Land Trust, a legal mechanism that can be used to ensure ownership remains in community control, for the benefit of future generations. The Trust acts as a steward for any assets developed, which means that any income will be reinvested directly back into the community. It has an independent Board which represents local residents, a critical factor in long term viability.

At Caterham Barracks in Surrey, a Community Development Trust was established following a series of working groups with local people. It now manages assets on the site, including green space, a skatepark and an arts and recreation centre, on behalf of the community.



# Building a thriving local economy

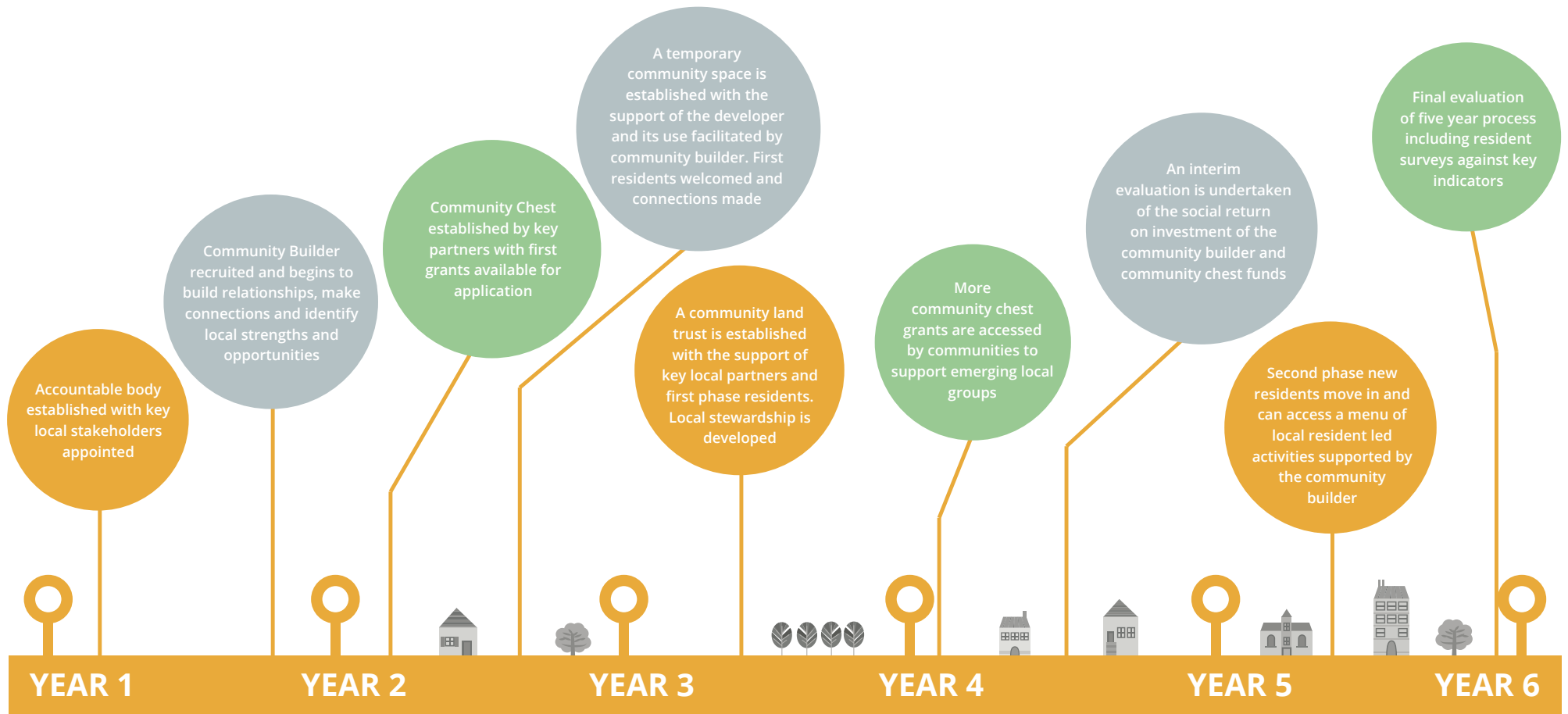
A critical part of a socially sustainable new community is a thriving local economy that can provide the financial security that communities and families need in order to prosper.

New settlements provide a unique opportunity to nurture employment and enterprise initiatives, using existing and planned resources in innovative and smart ways. A strategic alliance with the Gloucestershire Local Enterprise Partnership and the proposed accountable body will be the first step in developing a shared vision and outcomes, as well as providing resources and helping to maintain momentum.

New developments could make spaces available for new employment initiatives to develop, along with houses specifically designed for home working. Enterprise hubs, digital spaces and even a designated 'Tech City' zone to promote digital and internet start-ups could also be considered. Additionally links could be forged with secondary schools and the further education sector to create skills, training and enterprise opportunities for children and young people.



# Example timeline for a new development



Phase one of construction begins with first homes built, including temporary community space

Phase two of construction begins including more permanent community spaces



# Summary

## Taking a long term approach

It is possible to build communities that thrive, by taking the right steps at the beginning of the process. This report highlights the need to invest resources and time in building amenities and social infrastructure, giving communities voice and influence, allowing space for growth and developing the social and cultural life of the community.

The **key actions** we suggest to support the development of a socially sustainable community include:



A Community Builder at an early stage to welcome and connect individuals and facilitate the formation of new local groups



A 'Community Chest' - seed funding to support new resident-led activity



Community spaces and 'meanwhile spaces' where people and informal groups can meet and interact informally



Bringing partners together to ensure stewardship of the approach



Support to establish resident-led stewardship and governance



# Partners

The partners that have contributed to the development of this paper include:

## BARNWOOD TRUST

Barnwood Trust is a charitable foundation dedicated to creating the potential in Gloucestershire for people with disabilities and mental health challenges to make the most of their lives.



An esteemed social housing landlord that builds and develops new communities in Cheltenham.

## Bromford.

For 50 years Bromford have been building and developing communities, unlocking potential and helping them to be the best they can be.

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