

Saffron Lane, Leicester

# The next steps

Recommendations for community engagement and consultation



*A report for*  
**Saffron Lane Neighbourhood Council**

*By*  
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*On behalf of the*  
**Building Community Consortium**

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## **1. Introduction**

This report has been prepared for Saffron Lane Neighbourhood Council (SLNC) by Nick Wates Associates (NWA) as part of the Building Community Consortium (BCC) support for communities and neighbourhoods in planning funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG).

It is based on a reconnaissance visit by Jane Freund, Professor Mike Gibson and Nick Wates of NWA on 21 November 2012. The team spent four hours discussing the project with SLNC Community Development Worker, Neil Hodgkin (NH), and toured the proposed development site and the immediate neighbourhood.

The brief was to 'help with engagement techniques and consultation planning' in connection with the development of a brownfield site for 50 straw bale homes.

## **2. Context**

The Saffron Lane Neighbourhood Council manages the Saffron Resource Centre (SRC) and has been working with the local community for many years, providing a range of community welfare services. The mainly low income neighbourhood includes a mixture of private housing and council housing and has only a very small ethnic minority community. More information at [www.srcentre.org.uk](http://www.srcentre.org.uk).

The SRC's projects include the management of a farm with 500 allotments, which is approximately one third of a former allotment site close to the SRC. The project area is the rest of the allotment site which is now overgrown. The SRC has run summer projects for local kids on the site. The site is owned by Leicester City Council.

## **3. The eco-housing project proposal**

For the past twelve months NH has been developing a project for the redevelopment of what is technically a 'brownfield' site as an eco-housing project.

A concept design for residential development for 50 straw bale bungalows and associated eco-design features has been prepared by Redmak Architecture + Urban Design ([www.redmak.co.uk](http://www.redmak.co.uk)) with the East Midlands Architecture Centre Opun ([www.opun.org.uk](http://www.opun.org.uk)). A brochure with sketch concept drawings has been produced but has not yet been made generally available.

Indicative development costs have been prepared.

Straw bale construction was chosen for the housing because it is a low technology approach which maximizes the potential for user involvement – maybe to include a self-build element. There are also proposals for a pond with reed beds and wind turbines.

The scheme is seen as a potential demonstration or beacon project for low density eco neighbourhoods in urban areas with low land values.

The outline scheme has been the basis for negotiations and applications for funding to take the project forward. These include:

- Pro bono advice on capital funding for a scheme estimated to cost £6m – it is envisaged that £2m would be secured from the Homes & Communities Agency (HCA), £2m from sweat equity and a shares issue, leaving a bank loan /mortgage of £2m to be serviced from rental income/sales;
- Pro-bono advice on the type of organization that would be needed to implement the project – likely to include a land trust and a development trust;
- Discussions with Leicester City Council housing, planning and estates departments;
- Securing support from the local De Montford University architecture department;
- A bid for grant aid for development from HCA - £30,000 to £40,000 per unit;
- A bid to the Big Lottery fund for seed/project development funding.

## **4. Findings and key issues**

### **4.1 Community engagement**

The project development work to date has not involved the people living in the private housing and the council housing estates that are adjacent to the site.

Many properties have views directly overlooking the site and residents may well have concerns about potential noise, disruption and loss of amenity. There may well also be concerns about possible loss of property value.

There may be opportunities to incorporate facilities and amenities in the development which would appeal to surrounding residents and this should be explored.

A key decision needs to be taken soon about when and on what basis, the local residents should be engaged in the further development of the project.

Past experience has led SRC to the view that there is unlikely to be any opposition to the project from local residents who are mostly apathetic about community initiatives. But it is intended to involve known local leaders as soon as is practical.

The Localism Act will require a successful formal pre-application consultation process.

See:

[www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planningsystem/preapplicationconsultation/](http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planningsystem/preapplicationconsultation/)

### **4.2 Site acquisition and planning approval**

To comply with HCA funding requirements, it is thought the site will have to be transferred to the community by the end of 2012 for the proposal to go ahead.

The project has strong local political support, including the personal support of the Mayor of Leicester and the Chair of Planning (who is also a local councillor).

The SRC (and its development company) will necessarily be treated by the planning system in the same way as a private developer.

The planners have indicated a preference for a higher density (150 dwellings) and may need to be persuaded that the value of the proposal as an eco-neighbourhood beacon will offset the loss of units. NH indicated that they could go up to 75 units by adjusting the design without prejudicing the overall concept.

The department responsible for Leicester's community asset management may be reluctant to transfer the site at below market value. But government policy under the Localism Act is likely to overcome this long established local authority perspective.

The Housing Department wants to nominate tenants from the housing waiting list. NH argues that tenants need to be selected on the basis that they are willing to move towards the sustainable life-styles that will be congruent with the proposed low carbon development.

#### **4.3 The need to consolidate and formalize the development of the project**

Thus far the project development process has been driven by NH in his role as Community Development Worker. The project is essentially in Neil's head.

The development time-scale means that there is a need to move to the next stage, which will need a project development time-line. This will be the context for the development of a community engagement strategy, which will include the formal pre-application consultation process.

In order to engage maximum support it will be helpful to assess the feasibility of presenting it more fully in terms of its potential external impact as a beacon for low carbon development. This could include:

Local residents participating in the Green Deal programme to eco-retrofit their homes, which comes on stream in October 2012. See:

[www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/tackling/green\\_deal/green\\_deal.aspx](http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/tackling/green_deal/green_deal.aspx)

Developing the scheme and a Green Deal initiative as the basis of a green Neighbourhood Plan – the legislation introducing Neighbourhood Plans comes into effect in April 2012. See: [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/introductionneighbourplanning](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/introductionneighbourplanning)

## 5. Recommendations

Given the time constraints we recommend the development of an initial community engagement strategy with four core elements:

### **A. Stakeholder Participation Day – February 2012**

This would essentially re-convene the people who NH has already involved in the proposal to review progress, agree a provisional project timetable, and prepare for going public. A customised version of the timetable found at [www.communityplanning.net/useful/timetables.php](http://www.communityplanning.net/useful/timetables.php)

### **B. Residents' Process Planning Session – March 2012**

This would bring key representatives of the local community together to devise a public consultation strategy. See: [www.communityplanning.net/methods/process\\_planning\\_session.php](http://www.communityplanning.net/methods/process_planning_session.php)

### **C. Door knocking – April 2012**

This would broaden and deepen the engagement of local people by targeting those surrounding the site. [www.communityplanning.net/methods/door\\_knocking.php](http://www.communityplanning.net/methods/door_knocking.php)

### **D. Open house exhibition – early summer 2012**

Possibly on site in a marquee. This would be an open event for all where the proposals to date would be on display with opportunities for participants to comment and get involved. Ref: [www.communityplanning.net/methods/open\\_house\\_event.php](http://www.communityplanning.net/methods/open_house_event.php)