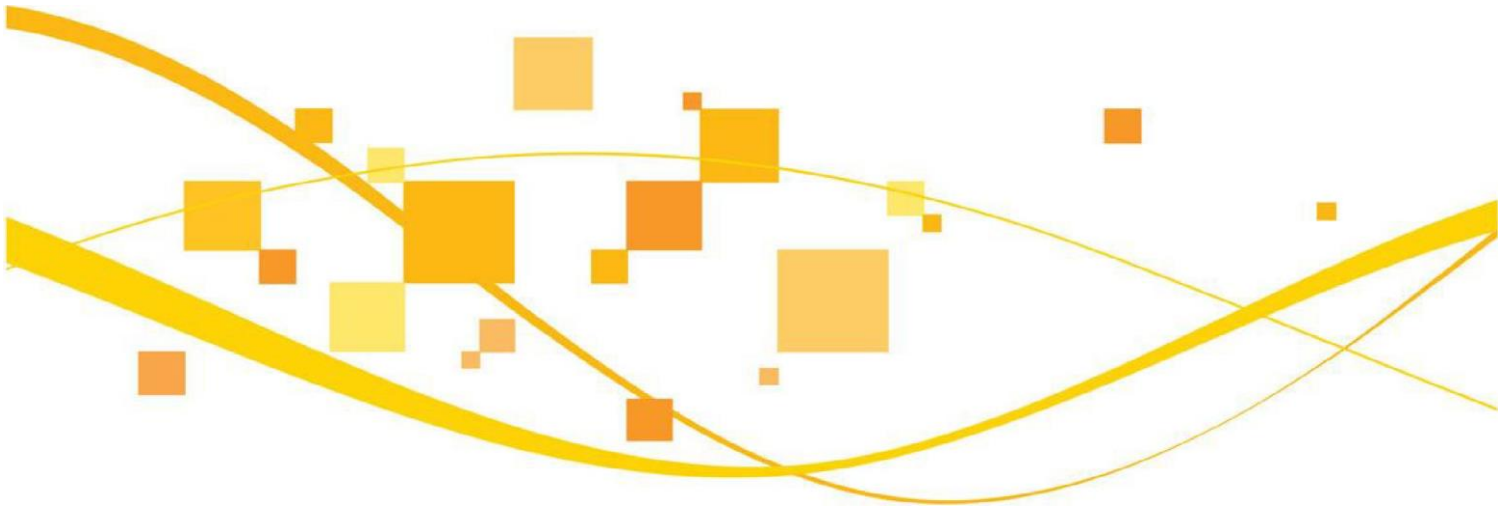


# Connected Communities Policy 2021 - 2026

*Policy Refresh - 2023*



## Key Information

Author:	Initial – Chelsea Roberts, Communities Manager Refresh – Millie Downes, Communities Manager
Section/Directorate:	Communities and Environment
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## 1. Introduction

This document identifies how Basildon Council can best work with and support communities, using insight from our work with the Basildon Community Hub and our Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) partners.

This refresh of the policy follows a mid-term review that was undertaken in the Winter of 2022/2023. This was an important exercise in order to ensure that the policy continues to align to the council's Corporate Plan and best responds to emerging and new considerations both locally and nationally.

Whilst the word 'communities' can mean many different things to different people, in this context we are referring to social groups that have something in common or a shared interest such as a neighbourhood, group, club or society. Further, 'Connected Communities' can be defined using the following vision statement;

*'communities feel that they have a strong connection to themselves, each other and the place in which they live'.*

Connection to themselves can be defined as having better self-awareness of strengths, interests and needs. Connected to each other is about building strong networks with those in your community and feeling accountable for supporting others. Connected to place is about residents using and engaging with community assets such as community centres, volunteering roles and clubs.

As a community leader, Basildon Council plays an active role in identifying ways it can support, contribute to and influence the development of community connectedness. Three focus areas have been identified in achieving the above vision statement effectively:

- Connected Neighbourhoods
- Connected Council
- Connected Partnerships

Collectively these focus areas help in creating 'connected communities'.

This policy sets out Basildon Council's vision for our work with and alongside communities. The policy will be supported by a strategy and work programme, which will be co-produced with VCS partners and will identify the opportunities to work together to achieve the identified vision.

## 2. Policy Statement

Basildon Council will work with our residents and partners to build strong and connected communities that are supportive, innovative and resilient. This will allow residents to feel more connected to the Council and its partners but also to each other and the place in which they live.

## 3. Context

### National

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on communities was unprecedented both nationally and internationally. Many communities stepped forward to support each

other by signing up to volunteer roles, setting up Mutual Aid Groups, checking on their vulnerable neighbours and showing gratitude and thanks to frontline workers. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported in April 2020, seeing a steady increase in community spirit through the pandemic<sup>1</sup>. Since the pandemic, communities are facing different national challenges, such as the rises in cost of living.

The Council therefore recognises that there is an opportunity to encourage communities to continue supporting each other in order to affect positive change in their local neighbourhood.

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) reported that the recent rise in cost of living is likely to reduce individuals' capacity to volunteer in a range of ways for example individuals are likely to increase their hours of paid work, which is a common barrier to volunteering. Simultaneously, VCS organisations are likely to face rising demand to support people facing financial difficulty and may require more volunteers, thus exacerbating the volunteer capacity challenges.<sup>6</sup> Partnership working is a key part of this policy and, though Basildon Council has been working in this space for some time, there are many opportunities to work together across sectors and services.

The 'Levelling Up Our Communities' report for government offers many suggestions to strengthen communities<sup>3</sup>. A key theme of the report is community power and government, in which local authorities move from a paternal and hierarchical service design and delivery system to a more collaborative and entrepreneurial approach. The idea is that this gives communities a role in the delivery of public goods and affirms the right of people to affect meaningful change in their neighborhoods. The report also focuses on embracing digital opportunities to effectively facilitate community participation in volunteering roles, which will make it faster and easier for residents to volunteer. This aligns with our policy vision, particularly around becoming a 'Connected Council'.

Many local authorities and community development practitioners have adopted an asset-based community development (ABCD) methodology to aid their community development work. The ABCD approach is about using the existing strengths and assets within a location, to affect positive change that is led by local people. Assets could be people, community buildings, volunteering opportunities, parks and much more. One of the world's leading organisations in ABCD, Nurture Development, states that the role of Local Authorities is to move away from doing 'to' and 'for' communities and move more towards doing 'with' communities or preferably enabling communities to affect positive change for themselves<sup>4</sup>.

Further, the Empowering Communities report<sup>5</sup> suggests that whilst community services should be widely available and accessible to all, resources should be focused on areas or communities in which they will have the greatest impact. This policy therefore focuses on empowering community leaders, connecting people to local assets and working within neighborhoods that have the greatest need.

<sup>1</sup> Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, 23 April 2020

<sup>2</sup> Groundwork UK, 12 November 2020

<sup>3</sup> Levelling Up Our Communities, June 2020

<sup>4</sup> Nurture Development, Bridging the Gap, Expert to Alongsider model, 26 October 2018

<sup>5</sup> Empowering Communities, January 2016

<sup>6</sup> UK Civil Society Almanac, October 202

## Local

The mid-term review of this policy has allowed the council to refresh and take stock of the changing community landscape from the initial policy, which naturally had a number of examples of priority work emanating from the Covid-19 restrictions and impactors.

The following section therefore sets out more recent examples of practice and emerging considerations.

### **Connected Neighbourhoods**

Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) practice underpins the Connected Communities Policy and can be defined as an approach to sustainable community-driven development. This approach builds on the assets that are found in the community which in turn, mobilises residents, voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations and statutory institutions to come together and develop their strengths in a system-based approach.

Funded by Sport England's Local Delivery Pilot, the council have worked in partnership with ABCD experts Nurture Development to deliver ABCD training to 23 system leaders and 27 community practitioners to embed this approach into our business as usual.

Putting this into practise, Basildon Council have worked with local partner Achieve, Thrive, Flourish (ATF) to establish two place-based community hubs. The first community hub was established in January 2020 at Briscoe's Primary School informed by a strength-based community discovery session exploring the local opportunities and challenges. The local residents identified three main focusses of the community hub being; meaningful participation, personal wellbeing and community connection. Since then, the community hub is thriving with activity run by the community, for the community, including mums fitness, ParkPlay, training courses, coffee mornings, gardening and cooking classes. Following the success of the first community hub, a second was established in Janet Duke Primary School in March 2022, following a similar community discovery day and operational model to Briscoe's Community Hub. Between both hubs, they have an average of 1,500 monthly engagements with the community and voluntary and community sector (VCS).

The community hubs also have strong relationships with local partners where there is value in collaborating to meet community need by connecting people to local assets. For example, Citizens Advice South Essex are present at the hub to support families and individuals where required. The biggest success of both community hubs is that, although the inception is led and guided by ATF, the hubs are now run by empowered community leaders whether as volunteers or paid staff, which ensures sustainability and longevity of the hub model.

The council has also been working with partners to provide opportunities for community development practitioners and VCS organisations to connect, network and share opportunities and challenges through the delivery of the Community Involvement Networks (CIN). The CIN is run by a collective group of passionate community development practitioners across the council, Active Essex, Basildon, Billericay and Wickford Council for Voluntary Service (BBWCVS), local housing associations and other local organisations. To date, eight successful events have

been delivered both online and in-person across the borough with an average of 60 practitioners in attendance at each event. This has resulted in better connectivity within the voluntary and community sector therefore leading to greater collaborative funding bids and co-production of projects and initiatives.

### **Connected Council**

As a priority of the Connected Communities Policy, the council is moving towards adopting openness and flexibility into the ethos of the council. As part of this work, the council continue to operate the Community Hub Response through the Customer Service Centre, providing a more comprehensive wrap-around response, rather than exclusively addressing the query in isolation and not offering support for other issues/matters such as loneliness, mental health, food banks etc. An extension to this work is the implementation of a Community Engagement team of officers working on the ground with residents to support with Revenues and Benefits related matters. This has been of great importance recently for residents effected by the cost of living pressures.

The Communities team have worked closely with the Economic Development team on initiatives such as Basildon's Big Idea, offering residents the opportunity to pitch to win kick starter funding for their idea and the Advice Store which houses multiple community partners supporting residents with access to jobs and employability skills.

June 2022 saw the celebrations for the late Queen's Platinum Jubilee, which brought together 25 individuals and/or local groups across five community-led Events Planning Panels covering each of the five towns in the borough. This allowed the council to step away from a paternal role and instead allowed the council to inspire and support individuals and groups to form their celebrations and make a positive difference in their community. This approach is now continuing in relation to the upcoming Coronation.

The council also participates in a number of forums such as, Community Diversity Council, Disability Partnership Board, Travellers Wellbeing Forum, Asylum Seekers and Refugee Forums and Livewell Domains, to ensure that the council is engaged with a variety of communities.

### **Connected Partnerships**

Strategic collaboration and co-production with cross-sector partners, including connecting major programmes of work and funding opportunities, is integral to achieving the priorities set out in the Connected Communities Policy. the Council currently holds a number of service-level partnerships with BBWCVS, Citizens Advice South Essex, Basildon Community Transport and Basildon Borough Twinning Association which supports the council to conduct business as usual, supporting communities and residents. The council has also entered into a partnership agreement with Basildon Side by Side.

In January 2022, the council entered into a partnership agreement with Essex County Council Youth Service (ECCYS) to provide a Basildon specific detached youth work team supporting local young people. Since the inception of the agreement, ECCYS have carried out 110 detached and/or mobile sessions in addition to their regular provision of targeted sessions, youth clubs and support services. Highlights of their work include the youth-led summer outreach series and the ongoing 'Winter Shield'

initiative which is a mobile provision helping families who are effected by cost of living pressures. The Winter Shield programme provides free freshly cooked hot meals, winter essentials, opportunity to connect with other young people and local services/groups. ECCYS are also developing strong partnerships with ATF, Citizens Advice South Essex, Bar n' Bus, The Advice Store and other local organisations to ensure a robust wrap-around provision for all young people to fulfil their potential.

Another key partnership and programme of work is Creative People and Places, who continue to work on exciting creative projects such as Young Pioneers, youth-led creative activity, and Open Labs, supporting innovative and creative community engagement projects within neighbourhoods and town centres.

The Local Delivery Pilot (LDP), in partnership with Sport England and Active Essex has been one of the largest community building partnerships with £1.3 million invested in the borough, attracting an additional £3.5 million of matched and/or external funding. This has funded over 50 large investment projects ranging from ParkPlay across seven of our parks and Street Tag gamifying physical activity to funding infrastructure such as staff roles to further embed physical activity into the system. Furthermore, 43 smaller micro-grants have been awarded to local groups to kick start and/or test their idea in the community. The council's partnership with Active Essex extends beyond the LDP as we support and contribute funding to 26 Holiday, Activity and Food (HAF) school holiday programmes offering up to 5,000 spaces for young people eligible for free school meals.

Although, Basildon Council works in partnership with Essex County Council's Strengthening Communities and Equalities and Partnerships team regularly, a particular successful recent partnership to highlight is the launch of Basildon's Community Supermarket in December 2022. A Community Supermarket bridges the gap between food banks and supermarkets, offering residents not only the opportunity to purchase affordable food and household goods but also a warm space to chat and have a hot drink. As of 7<sup>th</sup> March 2023, the Community Supermarket has 145 members and 405 beneficiaries. This partnership between Essex County Council, Basildon Council, Hope three 16, Billericay Street Pastors and Feeding Britain continues to work together to support the community-led growth of the initiative. The locations that the community supermarket operate from are looking to expand over the coming year.

### Council Priorities

Corporate Promises	Levels of Impact			
	High	Medium	Low	None
People	•			
Place	•			
Prosperity			•	

## 4. Outcomes and Priorities

### Outcomes

The three identified focus areas of the policy can each be defined using strategic outcomes as follows:

Connected Neighbourhoods



- Community leaders and groups are engaged and empowered to affect positive change in their communities.
- Communities feel listened to and as a result are effectively supported in their localities.

#### Connected Council

- Basildon Council is considered an open, flexible and accountable Council by the Borough's communities.

#### Connected Partnerships

- Partnership opportunities are embraced and encouraged in order to benefit the Borough's communities.

### Priorities

Within each of the three identified focus areas are various key priorities as set out below.

#### Connected Neighbourhoods:

- Encourage communities to continue supporting each other
  - Communities step up and make things happen when they are united around a common goal. We want to encourage communities to continue to support each other in this way and come together to achieve positive changes in their neighbourhoods.
- Intelligently allocate resources to particular neighbourhoods using insight
  - Working with communities to agree local priorities and co-delivery of action plans.
- Connect people to local assets
  - Working to support those that are feeling isolated and lonely through building local networks of people with shared interests, enthusiasm and ideas as well as increasing the impact of community infrastructure.
- Empower community leaders
  - Stepping away from a paternal role and instead seeking to inspire and support individuals to make a positive difference in their neighbourhoods.

#### Connected Council:

- Enhance openness and flexibility into the ethos of the Council
  - Reviewing Council processes that may discourage communities from working with us.

- Seeking opportunities to involve communities in decision making, commissioning and delivery of projects.
- Ensuring officers are available to support communities effectively.
- Embrace digital opportunities
  - Utilising the opportunities that the digital agenda offers to engage large numbers who want to participate in volunteering that aligns with the commitment they want to make, ensuring that they can do as little or as much as they like, fitting around their busy lives.
  - Closing the digital exclusion gap through identifying and embracing opportunities to improve digital skills and access to isolated communities.
- Engage communities to work with us
  - Ensuring effective engagement and messaging is used to have ever greater reach into our communities, sharing our work and engaging communities to work with us.

#### Connected Partnerships:

- Strategic collaboration and co-production with cross-sector partners
  - Using the council's community leadership role to collaborate and co-design innovate solutions alongside our strategic partners to ensure communities are positively impacted and are at the heart of this agenda.
- Support our VCS effectively to meet their emerging needs
  - Working collaboratively and effectively with the local VCS to promote their services, enhance their reach, advocate on their behalf, help them build their capacity and importantly to work together.
- Connect major programmes of work and funding opportunities
  - Identifying opportunities for key programmes such as the Sport England funded Find Your Active Basildon initiative, the Arts Council England funded Creative People and Places programme and the Integrated Care Partnership and Basildon and Brentwood Alliance, to work together to better serve communities.
- Co-commission activity with partners and communities
  - Working with partners and communities to commission relevant activity that meets identified needs and aspirations within communities.

## 5. Links to other Corporate Policies & Partner documents

Listed below are a number of existing Council Policies and key partner projects that have specific links to this policy:

- Health and Wellbeing Policy 2018
- Digital Inclusion Policy 2022
- Financial Inclusion and Resilience Policy 2020
- Corporate Plan 2021 - 2024
- Find Your Active Basildon Plan
- Creative People and Places Basildon Plan
- Social Value Policy 2022
- Leisure and Cultural Policy 2020

- Housing and Regeneration Strategy 2018

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