

White Paper

Can we plan better for community buildings?

Community buildings (which are available for use by the whole community, run for public benefit and are a focus for neighbourhood activity and involvement) are a key part of strong and healthy communities. They provide a touchstone for stimulating community activity and engender a sense of local ownership and pride. They help to bring people together, increasing community integration and reducing social isolation.

If well designed and managed, community buildings can provide for several activities including sports and fitness classes, community markets, parties, satellite-libraries, children's activities, games nights and meetings to name but a few. Community buildings have also been used to host remote services, such as medical checks and family advice services, allowing these services to reduce their property overheads whilst still being accessible to the local community. Community buildings help to address both physical and mental health agendas, and it is difficult to overstate their importance.

Raising funds for the construction and continuing operation of community buildings has always been challenging. Recent austerity measures have reduced investment in maintenance and new provision, as well as leading to the sale of community buildings. Increasing housing numbers in urban and rural areas places additional strain on remaining facilities. Developer contributions through s106 agreements and community infrastructure levy (CIL) are key funding sources for new community buildings, but evidence is required in order to justify any s106 contribution, and expenditure of CIL, in the face of competing demands.

But now, each of the three main political parties are promising greater funding for community buildings. The Conservatives have promised to establish a £150 million Community Ownership Fund to encourage local takeovers of civic organisations / community assets that are under threat (e.g. local football clubs, pubs, post offices), £250 million for improved civic infrastructure such as libraries plus £500 million for youth services. Labour have promised that libraries will be preserved for future generations, to build a national youth service to guarantee that every young person has access to local, high-quality youth work, and a £150 billion Social Transformation Fund. The Liberal Democrats have promised a £130 billion package of additional infrastructure investment which will include a £2 billion Rural Services Fund to enable the co-location of services in local hubs around existing local infrastructure, and £10 billion to make necessary investments in equipment, hospitals, community, ambulance and mental health services buildings. The arrival of these new funding streams is overdue but signals a positive change in direction for the community buildings sector.



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Strategic planning for community buildings

Planning strategically to improve the community building offer is crucial. To make the best use of existing and emerging funding sources, an evidence base detailing the current location and condition of community buildings is needed, in order to help identify where existing buildings can be improved and where new buildings should be provided. Consultation with the community is vital, to ensure that proposals reflect the needs and aspirations of the area. Planning also needs to take account of proposed growth, so that new communities can easily access community buildings, as well as capitalise on the potential for investment from developer contributions and other funding streams.

However, community buildings are often considered as part of wider infrastructure plans and not given a significant attention. In some cases, their planning is given a low priority, because infrastructure plans also consider schools and transport provision, which can be seen as a higher priority. The eligibility criteria for the funding sources proposed by the three main political parties are not yet known, so having a sound plan in place to demonstrate that proposals meet the widest number of objectives can put funding bids in a stronger position. Local authorities are well positioned to lead this planning work, as it ties in with local plan preparation and the related infrastructure planning requirements.

It is important to make best use of, upgrade or extend existing community buildings before considering whether it is necessary to provide brand new facilities. An understanding of their location compared to development allocations will enable this to be considered. Evidence bases should highlight specific sites for improvement of existing or provision of new community facilities. Temporary use of vacant buildings for community uses can help to support high streets, reducing vacant street frontage and providing for increased footfall. Flexible planning controls and responsive planning departments are fundamental to capitalising on such opportunities.



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Key design considerations for community buildings

An accessible location, sufficient space and flexibility of use are the most important considerations when designing community facilities. The greater the range of uses that a building can provide, the more likely it is to be able to serve the community's needs over a longer period. Co-location with other community services such as schools, libraries and health centres can offer a more efficient built form and capitalise on increased footfall.

Flexibility of design can allow community buildings to diversify income sources. Planning conditions should be flexible to allow for a variety of use classes to help buildings expand and adapt to suit changing demands. Assets left in trust to help maintain community buildings, for example, rental income from associated property, can provide a reliable income.

When delivering new community buildings as part of a new strategic scale development area, it is important that the community building is delivered at an early stage; thereby enabling new residents to begin building their new community as soon as possible.

How can LUC help?

LUC has considerable experience of planning for community and faith buildings for local authority clients in London and across the country. This includes assessing quantity and condition of existing buildings, consulting with community organisations, and determining future standards of provision to inform planning policy and supplementary planning guidance. We have also



advised on the role that local authorities can play more generally to help the community building sector and engage with faith communities.

Additionally we have significant experience of the planning application process for community and faith buildings, resulting in positive outcomes and satisfied clients.

If you would like to learn more about the services we can offer, please contact Stuart Langer at stuart.langer@landuse.co.uk or on 0117 929 1997.

LUC

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