



Micro guide for developing sustainable communities



Introduction

Are you looking to make a positive change to your community?

From established initiatives, to more 'informal' models of local organization, ordinary people are increasingly coming together and developing their communities in positive and sustainable ways.

Why is this happening?

For many, it's simply about creating better and more enjoyable places to live. From improving social and economic opportunities to protecting the local environment, there are many reasons for wanting to take greater control over what happens locally.

For others, it's often a specific response to a controversial or unpopular plan. For example, a proposed change to a town or village can be a springboard for community action – as people start to seek more sustainable alternatives.

Whatever your motivation, this micro guide is designed to help you take the first step towards planning and developing a sustainable community. You'll find out how to mobilize local people, what questions you need to ask, how to measure your success, and much more.

Who we are

British Standards Institution (BSI) is the UK's National Standards Body. We produce world-leading standards that benefit UK society. Every BSI standard is the result of a highly rigorous process which captures the knowledge, understanding and experience of a wide range of specialist stakeholders and contributing experts.

This micro guide is an abridged version of the standard *BS 8904 Guidance for community sustainable development*. This standard contains additional advice and information on each of the steps outlined in this publication. To purchase the full standard, please visit shop.bsigroup.com/bs8904

Step 1 Creating a shared vision

How do you start building a sustainable community?

The first step is to stop, listen and understand what matters most to local people – the specific issues, concerns, hopes and fears that unite a community.

While every village and town is individual – and local people may have very different ambitions for their communities – there are likely to be some commonly held aspirations. These may include, for example:

- A sense of pride and belonging in the local community
- A desire to protect the local environment from permanent damage
- Respect for future generations who will live in the community
- Support for members of the community who could otherwise be marginalized.

Recognizing these aspirations can help you to identify the particular issues that are felt most acutely by the local community – and to bring these together into a shared vision.

Some of these may be individual grievances or preferences – which will be felt passionately, but not be shared by the community at large. It's only when an issue affects and resonates with a large proportion of local people that it becomes a matter of community concern.

Stop
Listen
Understand

These wider issues typically fall into one of three areas:

Economic	Social	Environmental
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local producers • Energy and waste costs • Fair trade • Availability of natural resources • Local business • Employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthcare • Fear of crime and anti-social behaviour • Education • Care for the elderly and disabled • Cultural and sports facilities • Quality and availability of housing • Public transport, roads, cycleways and footpaths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of climate change • Quality of landscape and townscape • Sanitation, waste disposal and street cleaning • Rivers, parks, green areas and other amenity spaces • Motorways, railways and airports • Land use and development

Step 2 Selling sustainability

Many social, environmental and economic issues are complex and interconnected. To address them, you'll need the backing of a committed and well-organized group of individuals. Step 3 will help you identify these individuals.

How do you convince local people to give their time, energy and enthusiasm to the cause? The simplest approach is to communicate the benefits of a more sustainable community. Advantages can include:

- Greater community strength and resilience – local people will be better at withstanding unexpected shocks or external changes
- Increased long-term employment opportunities in the locality
- Improved access to better-run local services
- Greater chance of finding housing locally
- More mutually beneficial relationships between local businesses and the community.

Positive power

Building a sustainable community isn't about stopping change or rejecting new ideas. A "no-campaign" may prevent a specific action, but it won't help you to build enthusiasm or progress a more fundamental and sustainable shift in local decision-making.

Instead, the vision for a sustainable community should be positive – empowering local people to enjoy greater influence over what happens locally, preventing unwanted changes and ensuring that any outcomes are truly beneficial to the local community.

Step 3 Building the right team

Who will stand up for local interests?

Your next step is to mobilize a representative group of people who will accurately and effectively promote the views of your community. The right balance of people will give your team the credibility, support and skills to succeed.

Who do you need to get on board?

Ideally, the group should contain representatives from all sectors of your local community. This should include businesses, local and national service providers, councils and government agencies.

Not everyone will want or need the same involvement. A local company, for example, may prefer to provide financial assistance or other in-kind support. Others may want to have informal representation on the group but not take on specific roles or come to all meetings.

Remember that you won't be starting from scratch. It is likely that many of your potential members will already have strong community connections – for example, through school parent-teacher associations, sports clubs and other interest groups. Local businesses may already be linked with one another through associations such as chambers of commerce and professional groups.

You may even find existing pressure or "friends of" groups that have developed in the past. They may have fought or championed a specific issue that affected the community at large (such as a hospital closure). These groups can be a great foundation on which to strengthen local connections, and to create a groundswell of support for developing a sustainable community.

By the time you've finished, you may have amassed quite a large group of people – with a variety of skills and experience, and wanting different levels of commitment. This is a good thing. Remember that developing a sustainable community will require a variety of skills, and considerable time and effort from the people engaged in the process.

From here, the next step is for the group to appoint a smaller 'steering committee' to define and manage this process. While it is important to bring together the right mix of members, remember that this committee will invariably evolve over time.

Empowering Local People

Step 4 Defining your principles

By now, you should know which issues matter most to people in your local community – the things they cherish and the changes they'd like to see to make the community more sustainable. By pinning down these “values”, you can define a set of principles.

From “affordability” to “feeling connected” or “being kind to the environment”, these principles will help to guide every decision you make.

As well as providing you with a clear framework for action, a set of well-defined principles will also help others to build a clear vision of the future. They can help boost support and confidence in what you're doing – and encourage people to come together and get excited about the potential benefits of developing a more sustainable community.



Step 5 Planning the route

How do you turn a set of principles into a clear plan for action?

The first step is to prioritize issues relating to your principles according to the order in which they will be addressed. Now you can ask the steering committee – or as many members as practical – to agree on how you'll plan to tackle them together.

This planning stage will include setting the timescales and allocating the resources required. You may find that sub-groups are needed to deliver particular aspects of the plan, such as for specific projects.

The next job for the steering committee is to map the skills and capabilities of those individuals within your group – and to match them to the likely tasks required. You then need to approach the selected members to check their availability and commitment. If you're struggling to find the right expertise, you may need to organize some training to “upskill” members.

As well as looking at skills and capabilities, you also need to consider anything that might jeopardize your plans. It's the steering committee's job to understand the likelihood of any potential risks occurring – and what steps you might need to take to avoid or address these.

Note: It's important to consider these risks now because serious hurdles that arise down the line – especially those that have the potential to stall or completely block your plans – could have a dramatic impact on local people's morale and their support for the entire project.

Once your steering committee has agreed a plan of action, it's a good idea to hold a public meeting. As well as enabling everyone to feel involved, this will allow a broader discussion of the proposals which may produce some interesting and useful insights. To ensure you're able to capture this feedback, the steering committee should set up a simple procedure for receiving comments and suggestions. You may also need to consider how you'll update any interested parties and get in touch with people who could help to solve any problems identified. This is where your facilitation skills will be important.



Step 6 Turning vision into reality

How do you put your plans into action?

In the early days, you may find that people are especially eager to be heard and to influence the future of their local community.

The best way to maintain this initial excitement and enthusiasm – and to keep everyone focused on an agreed plan of action – is to create a formal structure for the group and assign responsibilities. This may sound tedious but it doesn't need to be and is an essential part of the process.

What do you need to consider?

You should typically be thinking about writing a constitution, electing people to some key posts – such as a chairperson, board of governors and treasurer – and setting up a bank account.

At this stage, you should also know who is responsible for the following:

- Overall policies and key decision-making
- Detailed planning
- Monitoring progress
- Dealing with things that may go wrong
- Dealing with complaints and objections
- Liaising with the business community, local and national service providers and government agencies
- Finances and fundraising.

Managing expectations

Remember that local people's expectations of what you can achieve may be very (perhaps even unrealistically) high at first. And if they don't see positive changes quickly, their interest and commitment may wane.

That's why it's important to manage people's expectations: remind them that plans and campaigns might have to adapt as the community develops and changes.

To achieve this, it's important to identify who is responsible for reporting to the wider community – keeping them involved and engaged in your progress.

Internal communications

Similarly, it's also important to establish a simple and direct way of communicating with your members. Email and social media can be very effective at establishing strong personal relationships. They're a great way to share news updates, request feedback and appeal for help or financial support.

As you begin to turn your plans into action, don't forget to stay committed to the sustainability principles that you have agreed. For example, if you're making purchases or looking for funding, it's important to ask questions, such as:

- Is this product really sustainable? Is it produced locally or by fairly treated workers?
- Are these suppliers committed to working sustainably? How do they show it? Are they undermining small businesses?
- Is this 'in the spirit' of our original vision?

Step 7 Measuring success

How well are you doing?

What positive changes have you made to the local community?

These are the kinds of questions that you'll be asked by individuals and organizations, perhaps for many years to come.

Measuring your success is essential but it can feel quite daunting. First you have to decide what to measure. Then you need to be able to communicate your performance clearly, accurately and consistently.

The full version of *BS 8904 Guidance for community sustainable development* recommends basing any measurement on your principles of sustainability. This will allow you to see how sustainable you are being and how effective you are at carrying out your plan. It'll also enable you to capture the effects – or the 'legacy' – of your work on an on-going basis and suggest future direction.

This may prove to be very valuable information, for example if you need to keep the support of a funding organization or want to share your experience for others to follow.

A good way to capture all of your measurement criteria on one sheet is to use a development (or "maturity") matrix.

Example development matrix

Our principles	Key issues	Possible goals
Healthy for business	People use larger shopping centres	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Start local producers' market 2. Encourage local sourcing 3. Multi-use community buildings
Feeling connected	Poor local services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Save the Post Office 2. Travel sharing scheme 3. Community festival
Affordability	Only low paid jobs for young people	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Local survey of housing needs 2. Starter homes required in development plans 3. Encourage job diversity
Kind to the environment	Endangered wetlands	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Map 'at risk areas' and register status 2. Introduce new footpaths and buffer zones 3. Increase biodiversity of local species

Learning and building capacity

As you progress, you'll grow in understanding, expertise and confidence. It's important and rewarding to capture this new learning and to share it with others who are looking to achieve similar goals.

Once you've successfully tackled your first sustainable community development scheme, you may want to move onto another challenge. Remember that, no matter how experienced you are, each project will require a structured approach. You may choose to follow the steps outlined in this micro guide in a different order, but it's important to recognize that, taken together, they'll help you to achieve a positive and sustainable outcome for the local community.

More information

This micro guide is an abridged version of *BS 8904 Guidance for community sustainable development*, which contains additional advice and information on each of the steps outlined here. To purchase the full guide, please visit shop.bsigroup.com/bs8904

There's a wide range of additional standards and sources you can look at for further help and advice:

The generic guide for sustainable development in the UK is *BS 8900-1 Managing sustainable development of organizations – Part 1: Guide*. Further information can be found in *A Handbook for Guidance on Managing Sustainable Development*. These are available from the BSI Shop shop.bsigroup.com

Additional useful sources of information include:

Transition Towns: transitionnetwork.org

Portas Pilots: maryportas.com/portaspilots

Forum for the Future: forumforthefuture.org

Organizations that'll offer support or funding for sustainable community schemes include:

EU funding (contact your local authority for advice)

Local councils

Esmee Fairburn Foundation:

esmeefairbairn.org.uk/apply-for-funding/guide-to-applying

Ashden Awards: ashden.org

The Green Deal: gov.uk/green-deal-energy-saving-measures/how-the-green-deal-works

Community Interest Companies:

www.bis.gov.uk/cicregulator

Business in the community: www.bitc.org.uk

Tomorrow's Company: www.tomorrowscompany.com

The Prince's Trust: www.princes-trust.org.uk

UK Fundraising: www.fundraising.co.uk/

Social Enterprise UK: www.socialenterprise.org.uk



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