

# The Oakfield Story



A thoughtful approach to community engagement

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# Welcome to Oakfield





**Looking out across a stretch of derelict, unproductive land in Swindon, you'd be forgiven for struggling to see the inclusive, thriving community it could become. But that's what we saw when we chose the spot for Nationwide Building Society's first housing development in more than 100 years: Oakfield.**

Oakfield is a not-for-profit development of 239 quality, sustainable homes on a brownfield site no other housebuilder was prepared to invest in. Working with igloo, our development partner, our approach is rooted in engaging the communities surrounding the site. Genuinely involving them at each and every stage of

development to make sure we're creating homes people want and need.

This was particularly significant during the planning stage, where we reached out and listened to a broad range of people, some who often feel shut out from decision making.

**“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”**  
**Margaret J. Wheatley, organisational behaviour expert**

For us, this is about more than one housing development. We believe that bringing housebuilders and their partners together with communities is integral to providing the quality homes our nation needs. And our experience and learning with Oakfield has strengthened that belief.

We wanted to share our story so far to inspire and inform those embarking on a similar journey, those looking to improve how they involve communities, and other businesses like ours who may be considering using their social investment/CSR budget to look at creative ways to improve housing supply. So, we've created this blueprint to give an overview of how we're involving the communities the new neighbourhood will become part of. It captures our real experience and learnings as a newcomer.

Just like the development itself, this blueprint is a collaborative effort from the people – inside and outside of Nationwide – who are making Oakfield a reality. In their own words, they share



our successes, surprises and things we'd wish we'd known before...

It's an approach we're proud to support and promote – and one we want our communities to be proud of too. After all, ultimately, it's theirs.



# It takes a village...

**56%**

have never engaged  
with the planning  
system

**54%**

don't feel engaged in  
planning and housing  
decisions in their  
local area

**10%**

increase for support in  
housing developments  
after consulting  
residents

Source: Demos, People Powered Planning,  
[https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/  
People-Powered-Planning.pdf](https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/People-Powered-Planning.pdf)





**Rachel Smith, Senior Social Investment Manager, explains why the communities surrounding Oakfield are at the heart of our approach.**

“Listening to what people want and need from their neighbourhoods and getting to those who feel that they don’t usually have a say has been integral to our approach. And it goes beyond initial stages and first impressions. We’re laying the groundwork for the future community that will grow there, one that will mesh with and grow into the existing one.

“This was especially true for Oakfield. The surrounding communities are a mix of younger and older generations, social housing and private ownership. We wanted to make sure that we were

creating an inclusive, caring community that would integrate, not become an isolated mini-estate in the middle of the area.

“So we decided to do things differently to the traditional development process. Inspired by the practice of community organising, we hired Keith, a community organiser, so we could reach and involve every part of the local community. Two years before we applied for planning permission, Keith started his work: finding out who our stakeholders were, getting to know the local community and what’s important to them.

“When we were designing the playground, we visited local schools to show the children the different types of equipment they could have. To our surprise, they didn’t want the more modern and plastic structures, they

wanted natural areas to play around and scramble over.

“Involving these communities in a genuine and meaningful way is the foundation of our entire approach. It’s been there since the very beginning when we agreed our principles for public engagement and participation. Keeping us focused on community, replicability, sustainability, quality, trust, diversity and affordability.

“Of course, it makes commercial sense too. We credit the approach with helping

us achieve no formal objections to our planning application. Fewer objections mean a lower chance of extra costs and delays to adapt designs and plans.

“To put it simply, it’s the right thing to do. From a social perspective, for commercial reasons and, most importantly, for the communities we hope to help thrive. As the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has shown us, we’re stronger together. And being a good neighbour and helping to form tight-knit, inclusive and caring local communities are at the core of that strength.”

“*With planning reform on the horizon, now more than ever, developers and local authorities should be looking for new ways to genuinely involve communities. We can’t be afraid to open it up – having more people involved doesn’t mean more people objecting.*”

**James Rowlands, Lead Policy and Public Affairs Manager – Nationwide**



# Far and wide

We designed an approach to help us reach far out into the community

## Finding ways to reach new people

- 🏠 Door knocking
- 🏠 Informal conversations
- 🏠 To be easily reached by locals, Keith sets up an office in a local community hall Keith and the team attend existing community events, coffee mornings
- 🏠 Proactive meetings with parish councillors, schools, local businesses and community groups
- 🏠 Keith supports and develops community-led events



## Involving people in the planning process

- 🏠 Pop-up events at local amenities on different days/times
- 🏠 'Sharing the design' events every few months in different community spaces at different times. Including children's activities
- 🏠 Events promoted through local press, social media, local influencers, posters, flyers
- 🏠 Newsletters sharing detailed updates
- 🏠 Website with feedback facility for those not able to attend in person
- 🏠 Visits/calls to people not able to attend but keen to share their views



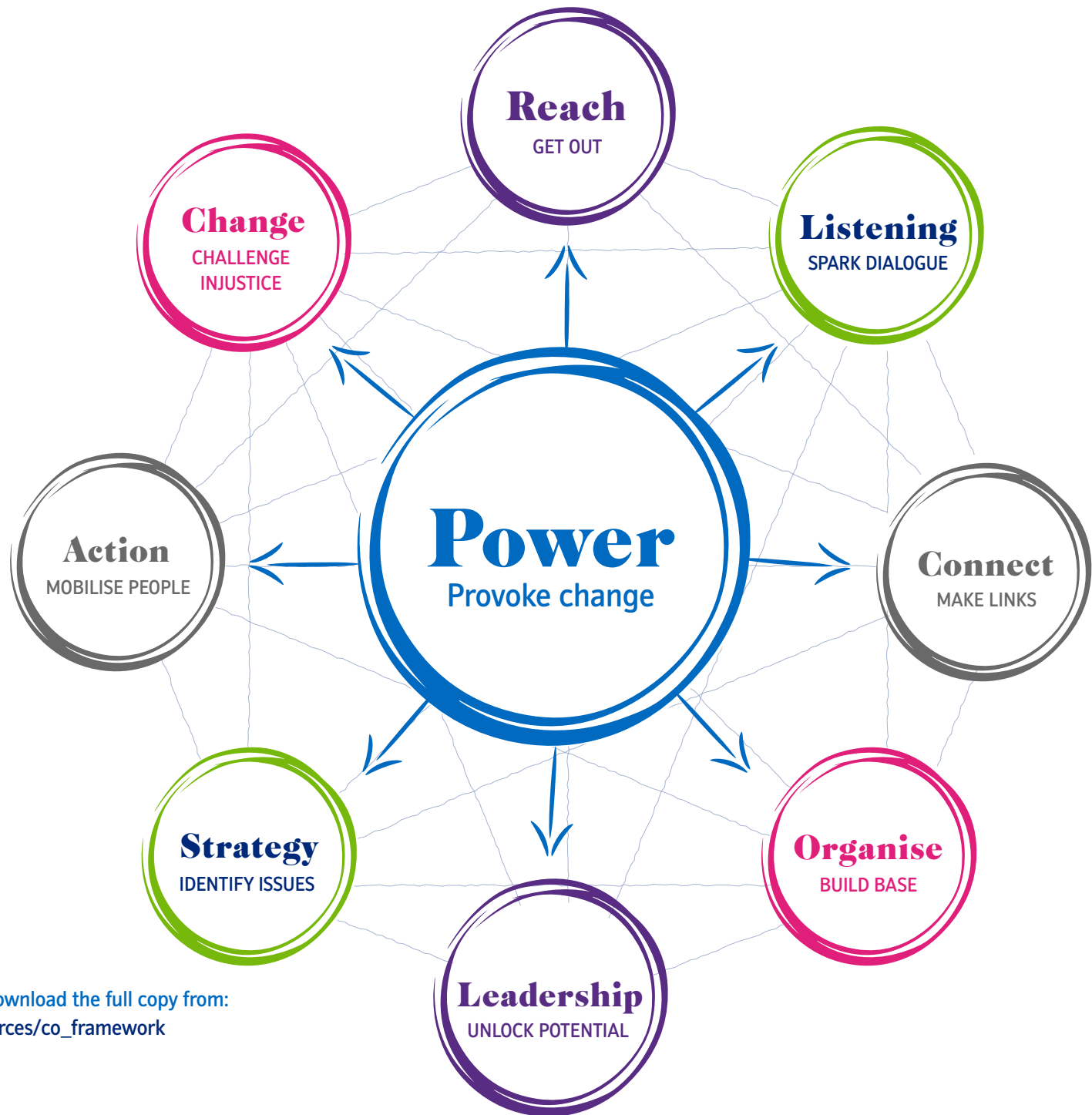
## Connecting people to the new neighbourhood

### Community engagement during the construction phase

- 🏠 Oakfield website and regular newsletters with community and progress information
- 🏠 Instagram shares community and progress information
- 🏠 Online surveys – in place of door knocking and events during Covid-19
- 🏠 Phone calls
- 🏠 Video conferences
- 🏠 Mi-space, our construction partner, keep local residents updated on progress through newsletters and a site noticeboard
- 🏠 Work and apprenticeship opportunities are shared locally



# What is community organising?



Adapted from the Community Organising Framework. Download the full copy from:  
[https://www.organisers.org.uk/training/learning-resources/co\\_framework](https://www.organisers.org.uk/training/learning-resources/co_framework)

# When Keith met the community

From 1930s Chicago to modern-day Swindon, community organising has always been about people. Keith Brown, Community Organiser, explains how the movement inspired our approach to Oakfield.

“One day I was handing out fliers on a towpath when a guy did a double take. At the time I was a self-confessed neighbourhood busybody in the narrowboat community, handing out fliers to find a community organiser to help us with a local project.

“‘Are you applying for this?’ the guy asked me. ‘No...,’ I said. ‘But this is you. This is what you do!’ And just like that, my life in community organising began.

“For those unfamiliar with the term, community organising is about bringing people together and supporting them to make the changes they want to see in their community. We want to connect people with shared interests, find common goals and create a strategy to achieve them – together.

“It’s an approach that’s been around since the 1930s, when members of one of the poorer areas in Chicago made sure they had a say in their community by forming the Back of the Yards Neighbourhood Council.

“Of course, community organising has adapted and developed since then, but its core purpose remains the same. In the last five years, thousands of people around the UK have trained in community organising, looking to help their neighbours and create change that benefits everyone in the community.”

## A new challenge

“So, why do I personally think community organising is important? For me, the big thing is getting unheard voices heard.



“Community Organising is the work of building relationships and networks in communities to activate people and create social and political change through collective action.”

Community Organisers  
[www.corganisers.org.uk](http://www.corganisers.org.uk)





There's so many people out there who feel like they don't have any power or agency in the world.

"I begin my work with making connections through door knocking. Building trust and creating mutual respect by really listening to people and letting them get to know me. I listen to find out what they care about and talk about that – not what I care about, not what is important to Oakfield. Then if elements of what they care about are relevant to Oakfield, I can ask if it's OK to share their feedback.

"The next part is inviting them to community events. Bringing people together to talk about their cares and concerns. It's a chance to check in with friends and connections, and answer any queries or dispel any rumours.

"It has been different working with Oakfield. When I first started

community organising, I belonged to the community I was working with. There's good and bad in that. On the one hand, I'd already made an imprint, people knew me and trusted me. But then with Oakfield, I'd never been to the area before, so there was no history and people didn't have expectations. I could be impartial and objective.

"And while community organising has been growing, we don't think it's been used by developers before to bring people together to shape their housing needs. So it's been interesting to see the value it can bring to these neighbourhoods."

### **Making connections in a remote world**

"As we find ourselves in a world much changed by Covid-19, our approach to community involvement naturally has had to change.

"We're still part of the community, but for the time being my office is closed and we can't put on events or come to coffee mornings at the church hall. But we're still listening. We're using online surveys and video calls, sharing messages on the noticeboard at the construction site, and sending out our regular newsletters. And I use the phone a lot more now.

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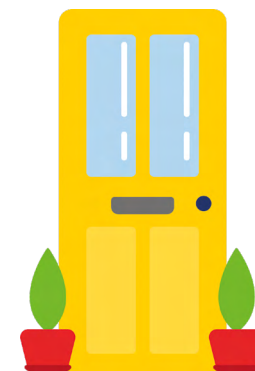
*Nationwide really chose to dive in on a community-guided approach – something that's central to igloo's sustainable investment principles. Oakfield is an example of best practice, and the community organiser was an interesting innovation that worked well here. But the key thing they did was to listen to people and take their views seriously. It's good manners but also makes commercial sense. We say it's about 'slow design; fast delivery'.*

**John Long, Development Director and joint Head of igloo Development Services (our development partner at Oakfield)**

"It's still about building relationships between people so they feel stronger together; we've just been doing it in new ways. For me too, it's been good to stay connected to people.

"We've also set up a fund for local charities and grassroots organisations who are supporting people in need during the pandemic. The Oakfield Community Response Fund is donating £100,000 through the Wiltshire Community Foundation to support local needs.

"I want to leave a legacy that will reinforce and continue our work. I'm available to support social action projects in the community and training local people in community organising. Giving



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them the same opportunity I had on that towpath all those years ago.

"Ultimately, I want to help people understand they can make changes – large or small. What they think and feel matters as much as everyone else."





### When the community met Keith

"I wasn't sure what to expect when Keith first knocked on my door for a chat, but I've learned a lot from him.

"I personally didn't see any sense of community in the area at the time, so it was nice to meet someone so passionate about the local area. He's inspired me to do something about my community and make it feel more close knit.

"Keith's been very supportive – he takes the time to ask questions and really listen, he talks me through things, and he lets me know when local events are happening.

"A while back, a lot of people around here wanted to talk about the impact of Universal Credit. Keith organised a time

and space for us to all get together, and I decided to cook for everyone. That kind of experience has really brought out my confidence. I've since got to know more people who live around here.

"I'd love to see other organisations follow what Nationwide has been doing, but they'd have to find another Keith! You need someone who's genuine and really cares about helping people. You don't see that a lot, but Keith has inspired me.

"Now I try to knock on doors every so often and check that people are ok. Especially with the pandemic, it's important to do that – even if it's just for a minute. There's definitely a greater sense of community here now."

Zamzam, local resident

# What we did

A step-by-step guide to our community-focused approach

## Planning phase



### Identify stakeholders

*Map out who you want to reach and why*

**What we did:** We mapped out the stakeholders in the area, drawing on residents' knowledge to make sure we had a good awareness of everyone we wanted to try to involve. We agreed how we'd keep people involved across a number of formal and informal channels.

### Reach out to people

*Use a community organiser to get to know the community, on their terms*

**What we did:** Before we started designing, Keith knocked on over 600 doors in the first 18 months before we submitted our planning application. He built relationships and opened up opportunities for people who'd felt left out of community matters.

### Listen first, design second

*Let the community drive the direction of the design through their needs and wants*

**What we did:** We held events to bring the community together with the architects and design team. We collated feedback on the neighbourhood design through online and offline channels.

### Evolve designs together

*Collaborate and be transparent about limitations*

**What we did:** Every few months, we brought the community together to show updated designs based on knowledge only those in the area had. We showed what we'd included, what we couldn't, and why.

### Ongoing community organiser activity to drive social action

*Listen to what the community want to achieve and support that activity*

**What we did:** Keith supported local community events to bring people together, and to help them identify what was important in their community and what they wanted to achieve.

## Construction phase



## Occupation phase



### Share updates

*Keep the community up to date and involved, encouraging two-way dialogue*

**What we did:** We started this phase at the beginning of the Covid-19 lockdown. We'd planned a 'Meet the builder' event but it quickly became apparent that it couldn't happen. So we needed different ways to communicate. We've used online surveys, social media and the site noticeboard. Mi-space shared updates and safety information for the site.

### Create meaningful value

*Create employment and training opportunities, work with local businesses*

**What we did:** Working with Mi-space, our construction partner, we've worked hard to create jobs and training opportunities by working with local contractors. And we're using local community facilities and catering companies for meetings and events.

### Connect communities

*Consider the best approach to bring new and existing neighbours together*

**What we'll do:** During this phase in 2022, we aim to encourage both new and existing members of the community to use facilities and community spaces together.

### Leave a legacy

*Set the community up for success so they can continue to thrive*

**What we'll do:** We'll set up initiatives that help residents to support and care for each other and the planet.

## Ongoing community organiser activity to drive social action

*Provide energy and resources to support action*

**What we did:** A passionate group came together who wanted to do more. Keith has been training them to become community organisers and supporting their group formation.





# From houses to homes

Community participation is about more than the planning stage, explains James Rowlands, Lead Policy and Public Affairs Manager. It's just the beginning.

"Engaging the community was integral to the early stages of the Oakfield development. We wanted them to understand that they would be genuinely involved in each step, so we could create something everyone was part of.

"It wasn't just a case of doing some enhanced community engagement to make the planning process as easy as possible. Local people were involved in the design of the homes, how the

neighbourhood will function and what it will offer. We altered the site layout to prevent traffic problems, raised the ceiling heights so rooms feel bigger and increased the amount of parking per property.

“We received no formal objections to Oakfield’s planning application, which we credit with the way the community so enthusiastically got involved right from the start. And it makes us feel confident that we’re doing something that will continue to be welcomed by those around it.

“But our work doesn’t end there. As the new development starts to shape, with our construction partner Mi-space beginning work on site, we’re talking to the surrounding communities about the impact it’s having on their daily lives. For example, residents told us about machinery noise in the early morning, especially during the groundworks phase. Getting that feedback through Keith and

our Oakfield email address means that we can listen, understand the impact and see what can be done to alleviate it.

“We’re working with our construction partner to see how we can benefit the local area. Whether that’s creating jobs and work experience for local people, or using local contractors to work on the project, and using facilities and businesses for events and meetings.

“And our social investment team is considering how we can support a connected community once the homes are built and people are living there. What can we put in place to help people get to know their neighbours? How can we encourage the development to become integrated?

“We think of it as creating a mutual village, where for example, everyone regardless of tenure, will have a vote as part of the management company that will oversee the estate.



“Then of course there’s the wider impact. We’re proud to support and promote a community-guided approach, and we want to get the story out there. We’re engaging with MPs, the House of Lords, civil servants, and think tanks, among others, to showcase Oakfield and explain it doesn’t have to be a one-off. And we’ve relished speaking to other responsible businesses that are considering doing something similar.

“We want to show that development can be done differently; that community engagement shouldn’t be a ‘tick-box’ exercise. Instead, we’re recommending that a community organiser is a required part of every project.

“Reaching out to those forgotten voices, learning from their needs and preferences, and – most importantly – listening to the people who will take these developments from house to home.”

“Remarkably for a scheme of this scale, and on a site that is close to established residential communities, no formal objections from local residents were received at the planning application stage.”

Swindon Borough Council



# What we know now

(and wish we'd known then)

It's safe to say that we had a lot to learn when it came to Oakfield – and continue to do so. Whether you're a seasoned part of the housing industry or just starting out like us, we'd like to find a way to all learn from each other. We're starting by sharing our biggest lessons so far...

## 1. Get yourself a community organiser

**Rachel Smith, Senior Social Investment Manager**

"Recruiting a community organiser made the real difference to this project. It allowed us to gather local insight and build trusting relationships with the local communities. I'd recommend choosing someone who's from outside the area – their objectivity is a really important factor."

"On reflection, I'd say that you could use your time more effectively during community consultation. We spent around 18 months on this phase, but you could certainly achieve it in a year. That doesn't mean we recommend that community

engagement is a year-long effort though! It's an ongoing commitment throughout the design and build process – and indeed beyond – to help support the community forming there."



## 2. Listen and learn from others

**Nick Spittal, Chief Commercial Manager**

"These first stages were so great because we had a wide range of external and internal input. From community members

## What we know now

to schools, local authorities to MPs, developers to charities.

“If you have a project like this in the hands of one or two people, you’re only going to get what they like, they think, they know.

“But we could put all of that experience, knowledge and understanding of the local area together to create something great that truly works for everyone.

“You also need to be flexible and prepared to go back to the drawing board. We’d included shared outside spaces into the design to encourage people to enjoy the outside. A local resident who was blind was concerned about the lack of raised curbs. So we met with experts and adapted the designs to meet their needs.”



### 3. Don't be afraid to try a new approach

**James Rowlands, Lead Policy and Public Affairs Manager**

“The housebuilding and planning system is dominated by big organisations and an established way of doing things. It’s daunting, and easy to think ‘It’s not worth taking this on’. But our experience shows

that it is; it’s worth trying a new way to help improve the system.

“At Nationwide, we’re part of a well-known organisation with a substantial support network and resources. But if you’re not, there are others you can reach out to for help. Look at charities, such as the Town and Country Planning Association, and make the most of the expertise in your local area. There might even be businesses and networks who can offer pro-bono support if you show them the advantage of operating in a different way.”

### 4. Put the community first

**Keith Brown, Community Organiser**

“So this is the hardest thing for me to do – you have to go at the pace of the community. You’re excited about your work, and the community is also excited, but at the same time a little nervous. You want to run, but they need to walk first. So remind yourself to slow down and go at the pace of the community. You can’t rush things.

“And if you’re hiring a community organiser or team, it’s important to remember that they are there to listen and support the community in what they care about. It’s about them, not you. The community organiser should have the liberty to concentrate on what matters to the community, not be focusing on a separate agenda.”



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*If you’re hiring a community organiser or team, it’s important to remember that they are there to listen and support the community in what they care about. It’s about them, not you.*

**Keith Brown, Community Organiser**

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### 5. Don't let planning system changes affect community involvement

**James Rowlands, Lead Policy and Public Affairs Manager**

“Government reform of the planning system may change how planning approval is given for housing developments, but community engagement will remain the right thing to do. I’d like to see developers putting

in more effort to establish what the community want, involve them early and keep them involved throughout.

“If you’re defining which areas to zone for development, it should be done in consultation with the community. Local authorities could also employ community organisers to make sure local residents have a say about plans for their area.”

## 6. Be transparent

**Kat Quigley, Social Investment Manager**

“We soon realised there was some suspicion in the community. Why did we want to know what they thought? I remember one person said she’d lived here for 25 years and this was the first time someone had asked her opinion on what she wanted her community to be like.

“We committed to being clear and upfront. At each event to share the updated designs, we included boards that showed what people were asking for. If it wasn’t possible to include an idea, due to constraints with planning restrictions or design, then we’d explain why. It’s helped to build trust.”

“We’ve always prioritised meaningful engagement with communities, but working with Nationwide gave us the opportunity to really push the boundaries. After going through the process, and seeing how well it’s worked, we’ve seen the huge value in the community organiser approach.

“Of course there’s a small cost to employing a community organiser, but that has been dwarfed by the value of the community support. It goes further than involving communities in what types of homes or facilities they do or don’t want.

“By helping communities understand that they can create positive social change by coming together, you can leave a legacy far greater than just the homes you’re building – and that’s what it’s all about isn’t it?”

## 8. More is more

**Kat Quigley, Social Investment Manager**

“Community involvement doesn’t end at the development. Look at what more you can do to support the local community. When a motorbike group that supported teenagers needed to move from the grounds we were going to build on, we were able to offer them our headquarters car park, just three miles away.

“A local school sells their ceramics to our colleagues once a term, and we’ve been supporting local volunteering opportunities too.”

## 7. Leave a legacy

**John Long, Development Director and joint Head of igloo Development Services**



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*By helping communities understand that they can create positive social change by coming together, you can leave a legacy far greater than just the homes you’re building – and that’s what it’s all about isn’t it?*

**John Long, Development Director and joint Head of igloo Development Services**

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# Join a new housing movement

Together we can increase housing supply through testing new approaches to create quality, sustainable neighbourhoods. Involving communities to create homes that people want and need.

## Getting involved

If like us, you feel compelled to do more, please let us know how you'd like to be involved.

It could be by:

- looking at your own business or organisation to see where you could support a development project
- helping to change practices across the wider house building sector
- connecting companies with strong social investment agendas to come together to look at new approaches
- sharing your learnings or considerations from other projects to provide valuable insights to others
- letting us know what areas of the project you'd like us to share information on.

## Get in touch

If you'd like more information on this approach, we'd be delighted to spend time talking through what we did and learned, and share resources to support your approach.

**Keith Brown,**

Community Organiser on **07825 832843**

**Katherine Quigley,**

Social Investment Manager on **07525 104332**

**James Rowlands,**

Lead Policy and Public Affairs Manager on **07525 104418**

or email us at [oakfield@nationwide.co.uk](mailto:oakfield@nationwide.co.uk)



