

Introduction

New residential areas are appearing throughout central England in response to housing pressures and government strategy for growth (DCLG 2006). While some are small developments, others consist of several thousand houses, with a lengthy build period, and a prospective population of over 10,000 – the size of a small town. Marketing materials offer an attractive way of life – with green spaces that offer opportunities for walking and cycling, and in which residents interact with their neighbours to build a brand new community. This article explores the question – what role do social media and physical community spaces play in enabling and limiting residents’ interactions with one another in the early years of such developments? Our broader research agenda is to identify how these major development areas develop community identity, and how voluntary and community action enables residents to contribute to their shaping and governance. The research adds to knowledge about the lived experience in England’s development areas (DCLG 2006). In the context of the UK government’s plan to ‘Fix our broken housing market’ (DCLG 2017), lessons learned will be useful for stakeholders concerned with building ‘community’ in future housing developments.

The article draws on the authors’ ongoing research in the major development areas of Milton Keynes; residential areas created at the edge of the urban town in what was previously rural space. A central concern for all stakeholders is how these areas develop a strong community identity, characterised by extensive and inclusive community activity. ‘Community’ is a contested and multi-layered concept (Taylor 2011; Purdue et al., 2000), conceptualised here in terms of social relationships, rather than simply as a descriptor of people living in a shared location. In research terms, ‘community’ is operationalised to understand how dense networks, a sense of solidarity, and emotional commitments arise between people who share place or interest (Chaskin and Greenberg, 2015, Curry and Fisher, 2013). This includes the building of connections through online interactions (Preece and Maloney-Kirchmar, 2006). The concept carries normative assumptions that densely-networked, long-term social relationships are desirable, meeting human needs and social purposes (Taylor 2011), and creating social capital (Putnam 2000), that in turn becomes a resource for community-building. For this practice paper, we adopt DCLG’s (2006) definition of a community of place:

‘a group of individuals living in the same neighbourhood, who have a shared identity around the place they live, the social infrastructure they use, and a place where ‘social capital’ is strong (social networks, neighbourliness, trust etc.)’.

We are interested in early signs of the development of social networks and neighbourliness that may become more formalised community-building activities over time.

The article explores the respective roles played by social media and physical community spaces in enabling interactions between residents. It highlights the challenges of increasing resident interactions and community activities in a context in which the area is still under construction, and argues that the creation of community spaces should be an early consideration for developers and councils – rather than a late addition. We define community spaces as physical locations that first are accessible to all residents, and second where activities take place that reflect the needs and preferences of local residents.

The article proceeds as follows. First we comment on the context of the research in two development areas of Milton Keynes. Second, we outline key insights from the community development literature that we draw on for this research. We briefly outline the methodology, then report findings regarding the role played by social media as an enabler of interaction between new

residents, and the continuing significance of physical space. The article concludes with key lessons for developing community identity in major development areas.

Context

Continuing expansion has been a feature of the 'new town' of Milton Keynes since its inception fifty years ago. However, the two current development areas (Area A and Area B) are particularly significant due to their size and position on the perimeter of the original city boundaries (Milton Keynes Council 2005). They have some significant differences from the town's original residential areas: the plans in many ways bear a greater resemblance to market towns, rather than to traditional urban expansion. Each will eventually constitute 4-6,000 houses, a mix of owner occupied and social housing. However, the initial build consisted of family-sized homes for purchase, and therefore the first residents are all owner-occupiers, who moved into an environment dominated by ongoing construction work that will continue until 2031.

Since 2007 the local voluntary sector infrastructure agency, Community Action: MK (CA:MK), has delivered community development work with the purpose of developing social infrastructure in these new spaces - initially in Area A, and more recently in Area B. As early residents arrived well before the building of planned community facilities, or completion of the physical infrastructure, social media has been an important mechanism of communication and information exchange.

Community development challenges

The article focuses on three challenges identified through a review of community development literature and practice, and describes how these challenges play out in the context of a new housing development. We outline these challenges briefly below, then return to them later in our discussion of the respective significance of social media and community buildings.

First, a key challenge in community development practice is to reconcile the tension between diversity and cohesion – to attend to and build on bonds of commonality, whilst also celebrating diversity (Taylor 2011 p.308). Social interaction tends to take place between people who are similar, and physical proximity is in itself insufficient to ensure interaction between people with different characteristics and lifestyles (Kempen and Bolt 2009). In social capital terms (Putnam, 2000), place has a recognisable social as well as physical dimension, and informal social interactions create a community asset alongside and interacting with physical capital assets (Arefi, 2014). Focusing attention on developing bonds between those with similar interests increases community activity in a location, and creates bonding capital, but may have the effect of excluding those who are different, leading them to deliberately 'absent' themselves from community activity (Curry and Fisher 2013). The challenge then is to balance the building of bonding and bridging capital in the endeavour to achieve social cohesion (Taylor 2011).

A second challenge is to address both informal and formal processes of community building (Taylor, 2011). Informal networking is at least as important as the formal processes that engage people in voluntary organisations (Gilchrist 2000). At the same time, formalisation through, for example, the processes of constituting and registering a growing community group as a charity, creates legitimacy in the eyes of external stakeholders, and enables access to external resources.

A third challenge is to nurture the development of community identity. Community identity may be catalysed by issue-focused activity (Crowther and Cooper, 2002), or promoted by 'neighbourhood organizations' (Chaskin and Greenberg, 2015). Community buildings may become a focus for this developing community identity (Taylor 2011). As a location for activity, they are a place in which

different elements of the community, with different interests and from diverse backgrounds, interact with one another. However, they can also be a burden, sucking in significant resources, poorly managed, and with little community ownership. Community centres can become the domain of a small group of people with the confidence and skill set to maintain challenging relationships with external stakeholders and to access funding (ibid). Furthermore, although the idea of community centres as a place for people from different backgrounds to meet is an attractive one, it is not always clear *how* this happens or how it leads to a more cohesive community (Kempen and Bolt 2009). A key task then is to nurture the development of a 'well-connected community' (Gilchrist 2000) with a collective identity, whilst retaining permeable boundaries that are open to new members.

Each of these challenges poses particular issues for community work in development areas. First, because targets to generate community activity may be more easily achieved by linking new residents with similar interests and concerns, rather than focusing on the challenging task of building bridging social capital between people from different backgrounds. Second, because resources in this context are necessarily limited as the physical environment is still being constructed. Third, because this is a crucial time in the development of community identity, and the likely impact of this early identity on the future of the community.

Methodology

The research programme is a partnership between a university-based researcher, who previously lived for five years in Area A, and a practice-based researcher. It draws on the latter's experience as manager of the community development programme in these two areas, commissioned by the local authority, funded by the building levy, and managed by CA:MK. This article reports on a small part of this ongoing engaged research project (Van de Ven 2007). The broader research constitutes two case studies that draw on multiple data sources, including field notes generated through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and secondary analysis of data held by CA:MK. For this article, we focus on two sets of interviews with twelve of the first forty households to move into Area B, exploring their experience in the first year of their residence, and on a group interview in which both authors explored the history of community development work in the expansion areas with a current and a former CA:MK employee.

The initial interviews took place shortly after residents' arrival in their new homes, and the second set twelve months later. Nine of the twelve households interviewed in the initial interviews participated in the follow-up (21 interviews in total). Author Two conducted interviews in participants' homes. Interviews were semi-structured and conversational in style, drawing on a topic schedule, but allowing informants to explore issues that were of importance to them in their perceptions of the opportunities and challenges of building community in a new residential area. This engaged research approach (Van de Ven 2007) allows us work with residents on the issues they face, rather than simply reporting on those issues, and key findings are taken forward into the management of the community development programme.

The initial set of interviews was analysed inductively to identify themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006) related to the issues that concerned new residents and the ways in which they were interacting with their new neighbours. This analysis highlighted the significance of social media applications for residents' communication with one another and with the community development worker. It also highlighted how the absence of shared community spaces limited their interactions in a physical environment dominated by building work. Although the sample was determined by which houses had been occupied first, we also analysed the data by gender, age, ethnicity, whether the individual

was single or in a partnership, the number of children, time in the house, and whether they had moved from Milton Keynes or further afield. As shown in table 1 below, the interviewees were largely white British, in a partnership and had children. Furthermore, all but one of the interviewees was between the ages of 25 and 40. This homogeneity is explained by the nature of the housing and is comparable with other development areas of Milton Keynes where the new resident population is dominated by young families.

Insert Table 1: Profile of participants:

The initial analysis informed the second round of interviews in which we explored whether and if so how social media and physical space continued to enable and constrain resident interactions.

Findings

Social media as community development enabler

Early residents arrived in Area B well before the building of planned community facilities, or the completion of the physical infrastructure. Having made a huge personal and financial investment in their move, they told us that they wanted to be connected, to know their neighbours, and be able to turn to them for help:

‘Friendly, social, kind of like desperate housewives – [I] want the street to become that. I would love it if one of the girls’ mums just popped over for a coffee, have a little gossip. Help each other – if I need sugar I can just knock on a door. That would be really nice...’

Community workers and residents created online spaces in which they began to interact. The first community workers had no physical base and community activities were delivered as outdoor pop-up events surrounded by building work. Social media (Facebook, email, and texting) therefore played a key role in informing residents about events, and keeping them in contact with at least some of the small number of residents who had moved in at this early stage. Residents created Whatsapp and Facebook groups to interact with other residents - building connections, asking for help, and organising informal activities. This enabled them to build informal networks with immediate neighbours or those who are at a similar stage of life:

‘[I] don’t need to be best friends with them, but then if there’s something going on can text some of the mums and find out. Have got a Facebook...[we] found each other through Facebook somehow... So little of us to start with, think a mum said is there anyone here to go for a walk with me and a baby in a buggy and a couple responded and then a group has been created about 8 people.’

The attractions of social media included its accessibility and immediacy, offering community workers and residents the means to interact quickly and informally, without dependency on external resources. In particular, residents identified and began to interact with others with similar interests and concerns. Young mothers identified one another and kept in touch through Facebook and What’s App:

‘one of the girls put a post there saying she’d like to get to know people...lots of people commented, and this meeting was arranged which was quite good, and I do speak to them...some of them have got small children.’

A Facebook site created by a resident linked together those residents experiencing building problems in their new homes. This enabled them to develop a shared voice and to challenge the building company. Similarly, the community worker communicated regularly with those residents concerned about an issue with the roads via Facebook and email, sharing information about the council's response, and the mechanisms for responding to council consultation.

Other residents saw social media as a way to 'meet' virtually and access information about the emerging area when they are unable to access pop-up information sessions due to their working patterns. For these residents, social media was an alternative to face-to-face engagement:

'A Facebook live would be ideal as you don't then need to attend, you could just watch on your phone.'

Our findings indicate that social media has the potential for enabling a bottom-up approach to community development. However, social media applications shift in popularity, and, even amongst our young professional interviewees, some residents chose not to engage due to negative perceptions or time constraints. In addition, due to the ongoing building work, some households encountered ongoing problems accessing a broadband connection. This meant that attempts to communicate online were not received by all. Finally, although most interviewees affirmed the important role played by social media in accessing information and building links with people with similar interests and concerns, they continued to assert the significance of physical space for extending those interactions.

Community space still matters

Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the importance of physical community spaces for the way they engaged and identified with other residents. They commented on two aspects of the built environment – the developing open spaces, and (at the time of the interviews) the lack of community buildings.

Unsurprisingly, the built environment had a significant impact on the ways in which people interacted from early stages in the development. At one level, this was simply about the ways in which footpaths, playparks and green spaces were integrated into the build, enabling residents to make use of the open space – or not. Continuing building work limited ability to walk and cycle around the area safely, but there was some evidence that the emerging green spaces enabled informal interactions beyond immediate neighbours.

At a further level, these developing spaces impacted on residents' emerging sense of community identity:

'[I]love it where we are. That's what I like - out there.' (Indicates behind back garden.)
'Little footway through it – it's idyllic, a little bit of green. That's the sort of thing that makes [the town] what it is more than anything else.'

'I have this idea, I quite like idea of running and cycle rides round the whole estate. Quite nice to see that developed and it being a nice place to walk around and things like that. Grassy areas...so you go there because it's a nice place to walk round...'

In addition, interviewees affirmed the importance of neutral community buildings: first, as spaces for activities that build on shared interests (from parenting to sports); second as providing future opportunities to encounter a wider group of people. In the meantime, with building work at an early

stage, residents travelled out of the area for leisure activities and to access services, building on pre-existing networks. This limited opportunities to build networks beyond their immediate neighbours:

‘[We need] somewhere to go to see people whether it be a pub, a shop, a community centre...you need your ‘vehicle’ – an excuse to see people.’

‘once you start going into these groups further afield, you hear about things that are further afield and suddenly you’re going backwards and forwards – half hour journeys, which when you’ve got a baby, it’s nice if it’s just walking distance.’

The absence of community buildings also limited the potential for more formalised community activity. In this first year, there was no venue for open residents’ meetings. Although residents hosted informal activities in their homes, including Christmas celebrations and discussions about building concerns, they were understandably reluctant to issue open invitations to people they had not met:

‘Not in my house! Even having everyone here [at Christmas], and not everyone came – it was enough’.

These informal activities had begun to build networks amongst homogenous groups (immediate neighbours, parents, or people with shared interests or concerns), but they are less likely to contribute to the building wider networks. Buildings were seen as a place to develop more inclusive, formal community activities:

‘If there was a community space, I would feel definitely open to playing a role in the running of that. We came from [another area of the city] which definitely has its identity and everyone is proud to be part of it...We knew that every year there would always be a firework display there and a barbecue in the summer, loads of events and people would go.’

‘If the facilities are there to allow people to organise things, then people will engage with that and try and get things happening round here.’

Furthermore, the significance of community spaces was perceived as symbolic as well as practical. Two examples illustrated this point. The first was a participant’s comment that there is no church building planned for the area. When asked, he responded that he does not attend church, ‘but they’re sort of things that bind the community aren’t they?’ The second example was that of a local pub, for which there is space allocated on the plans, but currently no provider. Interviewees suggested that they associated a particular kind of pub (where everyone can go, with good food) with the kind of community they hope will develop around them:

‘Would be really nice if there was going to be a pub here – needs to be quite a nice pub and to bring community together...’

Physical space is then both space for residents to interact and develop social capital, but also a symbol of emerging community identity. The absence of such space at the early stage of a new area limits the potential for activities, but also raises the question as to how community identity might develop without such activities in their midst. In the words of one interviewee,

‘It’s looking like most of the development, most of the stuff that brings people together isn’t happening for a good while. So, in 5 years’ time, I’m not sure how much it’s going to feel like you’re part of something or just being somewhere you live and come and go from.’

Conclusion: emerging insights and lessons for practice

Social media has played an important role in enabling early residents to interact with one another and share information, and in facilitating an emerging sense of community identity in this development area. However, our research to date suggests that social media plays a more significant role in building bonding rather than bridging capital, creating informal networks that are characterised by homogeneity rather than diversity, through residents' closed online groups. We suggest that a key task for community workers is to drive social media traffic towards open, facilitated forums that link together the *whole* community. This means engaging with all social media platforms and being alert to residents' shifting preferences for different platforms.

Physical community spaces have potential to create interactions between more diverse groups of residents, and our interviewees were aware of this. Residents saw community buildings (public and commercial) as providing venues for activities through which they could develop shared interests and build cohesive groups with like-minded people, but also interact with people with different interests and backgrounds. They offer the potential for new residents to encounter the wider community, hear one another's concerns and perspectives, and develop a more inclusive understanding of community in this new residential space. Furthermore, buildings and open spaces have a symbolic value for residents, contributing to their emerging sense of a community identity characterised by social interaction, or by its absence. For these reasons, we argue that it is important to construct physical community spaces at an early stage of the build process, rather than as a late addition.

This is not a unique finding from research in new development areas. A review of the development of a new village on the edge of Cambridge states, 'A new settlement... needs a place, like a community hall, for people to meet from very early on. And, importantly, it also needs more informal meeting places that can be accessed by non-joiners that are status and stigma free.' (Platt 2007). Similarly, a government review of the development of England's new towns in the 1950-70s concluded, that 'where these facilities were already in place when people began to arrive, the community came together and networks were formed more readily.' (DCLG 2006) Sadly though, research and experience confirm that in many development areas, community spaces are developed several years into the building programme.

The current research has informed priorities for community development work in the continually expanding town of Milton Keynes, including advocacy with the council for the early construction of community spaces in new development areas. We are encouraged to find plans for one further development area do include early construction of community buildings, similar to the provision of community houses in the town's earlier development. Integrating community space into the housing build ensures that it is not pushed back towards the end of the development schedule, and we recommend that community organisations lobby for this integration. As an alternative, we suggest that community workers identify alternative spaces for community use, and agree these early in the build process – for example use of sales buildings, or a temporary building. The alternative of holding community events out of doors inevitably constrains engagement to particular times of year, and times of day, and therefore does not reach all residents.

However, our research and longer experience in Area A raise key issues in terms of the ownership and management of community spaces, and the consequences for access and inclusion. In a political and economic context in which community services are increasingly outsourced by local authorities, the development and management of community spaces is impacted by market forces. Returning to our definition of community spaces as 'physical locations that first are accessible to all residents, and second where activities take place that are reflect the needs and preferences of those residents', we note three things in regard to the management of community spaces in this longer established area. First, that the privately owned pub has played a significant role in community development,

providing an accessible space for community groups and informal gatherings. Second, the two community buildings are managed by a national non-profit organisation under contract to the local authority; meeting spaces are charged for by the hour. Third, the green open spaces are managed by an independent trust that maintains green spaces across the city and that is funded by an endowment. While we do not intend to enter a political debate here, it is clear that these different ownership and management arrangements each pose their own challenges for access and inclusion. Furthermore, this suggests that priorities for community development work will change as a residential area is constructed, and decisions made about management of community spaces. In the early days, and in the absence of community buildings, enabling informal micro interactions between new residents is the key priority, but as the development grows, community work will increasingly need to address complex interactions between multiple stakeholders, ensuring resident interests are kept to the fore.

In conclusion, this research confirms findings from earlier studies, affirming that community space still matters, even though social media plays an important role in enabling new residents to interact in a new 21st century development area. However, as important as the construction of such spaces is, so too is the issue of how they are owned and managed to ensure that they bring new residents into contact with people who are different from themselves to build community that is both diverse and cohesive. We argue that facilitating the accessibility of community spaces, and ensuring they are spaces for diverse parts of the community to interact continue to be important challenges for community development workers in a digital age.

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