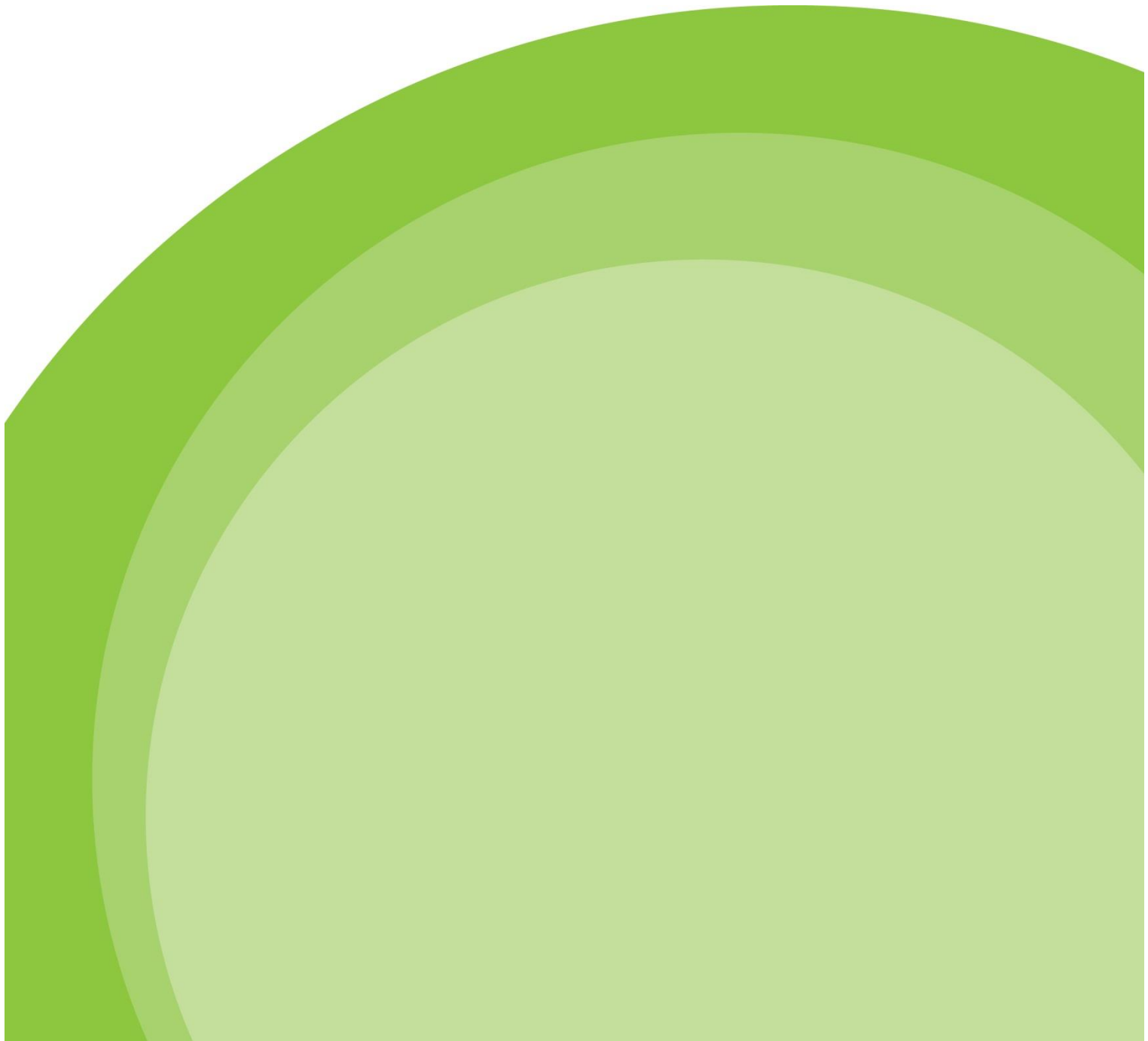




# **Outcomes of the scrutiny enquiry of Council responsiveness (2016)**



## Background

In February 2016 the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee (CROSC) agreed to undertake an enquiry to support the Council to deliver one element of the Five Year Plan relating to “responsive Council”. This priority relates to improving perceptions of the Council and more specifically the extent to which residents feel they can influence decisions affecting their local area and the extent to which residents were satisfied with the way any enquiries to the Council were handled and the outcomes that were achieved.

The enquiry involved Cllrs Duckett (Chairman), Chatterley and Kane and throughout the course of the review met with officers from a range of services including Communications, Knowledge & Insight, Customer Services and Partnerships & Community Engagement.

The review focused on two specific aspects of council responsiveness. Firstly a review of customer experience when contacting the Council. This included an analysing repeat callers, understanding where existing processes already worked well within the Council and site visits to the customer service centre to develop a understanding of the current practice.

Secondly the review focused on the extent to which residents could influence council decision-making for which the enquiry commissioned some independent research to be undertaken by Public Perspectives, the outcomes of which have informed and are cited throughout this report. Through the use of focus groups this research provided insight to understand resident experience in Central Bedfordshire their expectations, areas for improvement and helped to identify opportunities that have informed the enquiries recommendations.

## National context and performance

### Customer experience

Previous residents’ surveys tell us that about two-thirds of residents are satisfied with the way their enquiries were handled and the final outcome; that good quality, responsive customer services are important to influence perceptions of the Council; and that residents expect a quicker and easier resolution to their query when making contact through via email.

	Sep-12	Sep-13	Sep-14	Apr-15	Apr-16
Acts on the concerns of residents	39%	47%	44%	45%	55%
Satisfaction with council contact	71%	67%	68%	69%	70%
Satisfaction with the outcome of enquiries	60%	59%	62%	59%	63%

### Influencing decisions

The residents’ survey also tells us that approximately one in three residents in Central Bedfordshire feels they are able to influence the Council’s decisions. This is likely to be influenced by personal experience of a specific decision affecting their local community but there is also a direct correlation the extent to which residents feel the Council is well run, the extent to which residents feel informed and the extent to which residents feel the Council provides value for money.

	2009	2011	2014	2016	National (2009)
% who feel they are able to influence decisions affecting their local area	31%	34%	38%	39%	39%

## Findings of enquiry

### Customer experience

To better understand existing customer experience Members received a demonstration of the existing Customer Portal and the functionality it provided to track complaints that had been logged with the Council. There had been positive feedback from customers on the new online reporting system but Members felt more work was necessary to ensure that the portal was used for a range of services and that in particular it was used to provide localised updates to Members on the key issues and complaints underway within their wards.

Members were encouraged to see that mechanisms were being implemented that would allow tracking of customer complaints but were keen to see improvements in the timescales for rolling out this mechanism and that this should provide customers with regular update on progress. However in some services Members were concerned that auto-replies were provided to residents that set an expectation a response might not be received for up to 90 days, which did not present a very responsive approach to customers.

On meeting to discuss their conclusions Members discussed that several of these issues had now been resolved and recommendations that might have been provided were no longer necessary.

RECOMMENDED that the council invest in a mechanism through which customer intelligence and customer complaints can be recorded centrally and that this mechanism allows Members to follow progress in dealing with complaints. Whilst it was noted that this mechanism was currently being rolled out in some areas it was recommended that this needed to happen more quickly and in as many Council services as possible.

RECOMMENDED that the Council fully embed a set of customer standards and a customer charter, ensuring that customer contact is logged appropriately and that a consistent approach to call backs and auto-replies was undertaken so as to embed a more responsive culture. This process should enable the council to determine performance standards across the Council so as to address areas that were less responsive.

RECOMMENDED that the Council continue to provide localised updates to Members on the key matters and complaints underway within their wards and that this be rolled out for other council services where appropriate.

Members also specifically discussed the number of Council Tax and Benefits forms, many of which were made available online during 2016 as a result of engaging with partners to ensure a streamlined and joined up service. The enquiry were informed of some concerns with the quality of service that could be provided within customer services in relation to Council Tax and Benefits as a specialist response was often required. Queries were often prioritised within customer

services according to officer judgement and there were no set response timescales other those provided to respond to telephone queries.

RECOMMENDED that the Council ensure residents are made aware that they can get support to complete online forms in hard copy if needed.

Members discussed the existing telephony system within customer services and agreed that this was a positive, fiscally responsible, efficient method of managing call flow and that it was likely to support an improved customer experience. Members were made aware that a call-back service and online survey were to be introduced and welcomed this as a way of improving customer perceptions around influencing change. Members did however query the levels of expertise within contact centre and the ease with which residents could access specialist advice as there was a perception that delays were caused when calls were passed to front-line teams and responses were not provided.

RECOMMENDED that in the future the Council review the accessibility of experts in different departmental areas to customer services, whether that be within the customer services team or in the front-line teams.

Finally Members discussed engagement with the business community in light of concerns relating to the extent which businesses were able to influence council decisions. Members were advised that the Council liaised closely with businesses in order to improve engagement. A dedicated account manager had been appointed to focus on business plans, business needs and strengthening partnerships and the Regeneration & Business Directorate were promoting consultation on the budget setting process.

Due to the nature of the account manager approach that was already being implemented the enquiry did not feel any recommendations were necessary in this area.

## Influencing Council decision-making

To help Members understand the views of local residents and the factors that influence the extent to which people feel they can engage in Council decision making the enquiry commissioned Public Perspectives to undertake some detailed research into resident perceptions. The outcomes of this research relate to a number of key themes that were discussed by Members as follows:-

### Accessibility of the Council's Governance

Residents said that they felt the Council needed to do more to make residents more aware of opportunities to raise issues and get involved in consultations. Ultimately, participants said they felt the Council could and should do more to promote opportunities to raise issues and get more involved in decision making. There were also views that due to the formal nature of many of the Council's meetings there was a need to strike a better balance between the formal Committee meetings at which decisions were taken and the informal opportunities to engage people in the decision making process.

*"Can they create some sort of 'how to' guide to help you know how to get in touch and make things happen. That's my main problem, I don't really know where to start. They need to make that easier and clearer."*

*Central Beds resident*

From the perspective of residents providing opportunities to engage was more to do with the Council having a greater willingness to involve residents in decision making as oppose to the actual methods employed, which they considered fairly straightforward. However, it was noted that most participants said they did not want to see the Council spending a fortune on promoting opportunities to get involved, they wanted to see it done in a proportional way and making best use of existing resources.

*"You get the feeling that they sometimes don't want you to get involved, to know what's going on so that you can't try and influence their decisions. It's more about a lack of commitment to engaging residents, not about poor communications in general."*

*Central Beds resident*

The enquiry reviewed several examples of best practice at a government and local authority level of the ways that others make residents aware of the opportunities to engage in decision making in determining the recommendations below.

RECOMMENDED that the Council develop and consult on a clear set of guides to the Council's decision making and governance structures that can ultimately be shared on the website and with Town and Parish Councils and other existing local publications to promote the role of local members as advocates on behalf of their communities.

RECOMMENDED that a clearly referenced section titled "influencing council decisions" be added to the website that draws together information on public engagement in the Council's governance arrangements.

RECOMMENDED that the Council lead a bottom-up approach to agenda-setting by making use of annual surveys, community intelligence reports and MP/Councillor enquiries and that feedback be

provided to those who propose items by updating them on the way in which they have informed the agendas of Council committee.

RECOMMENDED that the use of online methods of communication and social media be enhanced as an informal channel to more proactively engaging with local communities on agenda items and matters of local concern.

RECOMMENDED that webcasts and social media be used more proactively as a means of engaging with residents in a formal setting.

### **Community engagement**

Several participants said they felt Central Bedfordshire Council was remote to them and their communities, both in terms of representativeness and geography. Similarly residents said that they felt their local Councillors should be more visible, accessible and do more for them.

*“I think the Council, and Councillors, should be more pro-active. They need to get out in to the communities and local villages. They could do roadshows, telling residents how to get involved and what hot issues are happening for them to get involved in.”*  
*Central Beds resident*

Residents also felt the Council as a whole should be more pro-active and get out into the community more, promoting current issues (including current consultations around major housing developments, infrastructure projects, budget and spending priorities) and ways to get involved.

RECOMMENDED that the Council Support Members to be leaders of their community by providing regular briefings that outline decisions to be taken and opportunities for residents to engage in council decision making as a way of sharing this information with the local community.

RECOMMENDED that council resources be enhanced to support Members’ engagement with the local community, including through the use of Joint/Partnership Committees, and to help Members to use online channels (social media, blogs, online debates/forums) as a way of engaging with the community.

RECOMMENDED that the use of social media and online channels be enhanced to encourage a more transparent way of undertaking community engagement.

RECOMMENDED that a greater number of formal and informal meetings take place within local communities as a way of engaging with residents on decisions that are important to their local area.

RECOMMENDED that the Council proactively identify opportunities for local or devolved decision making to stimulate community action and local resilience.

### **Creating a focal point with Parish/Town Councils**

Building on the feedback that some residents felt they were remote from the Council and the desire to increase the visibility of Councillors and the Council, some residents also said they felt Parish/Town Councils could do more for them. Several residents also provided examples of where their Parish/Town Council had acted very positively on their behalf and had been their voice in

engaging with Central Bedfordshire Council. Consequently, some residents said that this could be another way for local residents to engage with Central Bedfordshire Council.

*“I think the Parish Council could be used more. They’re required to raise issues with Central Beds Council and get a response. So I’d like to see the Parish Council engaging with local residents more and local residents using them more to raise issues. . . Central Beds have a role in that too, they could do more to build closer relationships with the Parish Councils and encourage and support them to go out there and be the voice of local people.”*  
Central Beds resident

Specifically related to planning and housing development consultations, participants said they wanted more involvement. In short they wanted planning and housing development to be community led. This means involving the community at the outset in trying to address the challenge of meeting housing need and placing community interests at the heart of the process.

RECOMMENDED that the remit of Joint Committees as a focal point for two-way information sharing, sharing ownership of matters and consultation on issues that directly affect the town be enhanced, rolling it out to other parts of Central Bedfordshire, encouraging parishes and smaller towns to collaborate and work together in clusters with clear links to the Council’s existing decision making committees and overview and scrutiny.

RECOMMENDED that further consideration be given to match funding for Joint Committees to stimulate local participation.

RECOMMENDED to encourage the use of community planning with the Council supporting Parish/Town Councils to use this as a vehicle to identify their aspirations for their local areas and influence overarching policy (through the use of *presentations and provision of officer support*) at a parish and a quadrant level.

### **Focusing on consultation and co-production**

Most residents said they wanted to be consulted as early as possible in any given process. This was mainly in relation to planning and housing development consultations, but the principle extended to all forms of consultation. Participants said that it often felt like they were being consulted late in the process, that decisions had already been made and that the consultation was a tick box exercise to rubber stamp a decision.

*“As a principle I’d like to be consulted at the start, when a decision hasn’t been made. It always feels like you’re getting involved late on in the process and the consultation is not meaningful. It’s like they don’t want you to get involved early on when the decisions are still to be made. They seem more happy to get your view later on, just so they can say they consulted.”*  
Central Beds resident

Participants strongly said they wanted more feedback about the outcomes of consultations and other forms of engagement with the Council. A lack of feedback both frustrated residents and meant they were not able to see if their involvement had influenced decision making. They also said that even if a decision went against them, that receiving feedback explaining the decision was important to provide for transparency in decision making and help them understand why a decision had been made.

*“Feedback is really important. It’s all well and good coming to an event like this [a discussion group], but what happens next? How do you know if you’re able to influence decision making if you don’t get feedback . . . I’ve been involved before in a consultation where they totally went against what local residents wanted, but they didn’t explain their decision. If they’d explained it then maybe we could have understood.”*  
*Central Beds resident*

Ultimately, most participants said they wanted to see the Council become more resident or customer focussed. This is more of a cultural/attitudinal change as oppose to doing anything specific. As mentioned, most residents said they currently feel the Council is not necessarily listening to them or on their side, especially when it comes to major housing developments. Consequently, they feel that consultations are not meaningful and that they are not able to influence decisions easily.

RECOMMENDED to invest in forward planning to identify big change programmes to provide the opportunity for co-production of change in a meaningful and timely way on the principles and direction of change with local communities, including both residents and Parish/Town Councils

RECOMMENDED that consultations manage the expectations of residents and make it clear the elements that residents can realistically influence.

RECOMMENDED the Council more proactively publish decisions and outcomes of its meetings including providing feedback on the reasons for decisions where there is significant public interest.



## Getting involved

The residents of Central Bedfordshire are Overview and Scrutiny's most useful resource for finding out what the key issues are. Residents, community groups, local businesses and others that live or work in the area can make valuable contributions to much of the work Overview and Scrutiny does.

The work programme of Overview and Scrutiny can be flexible, so if there is an issue that you would like to see tackled or if you would just like to find out more about Overview and Scrutiny at Central Bedfordshire Council please contact the Overview and Scrutiny team at the following address:-

Overview and Scrutiny  
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Monks Walk  
Chicksands  
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SG17 5TQ

0300 300 4634

[scrutiny@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk)

Alternatively you can suggest an item via the Council's website at the following address:-

<http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/council/consultations/overview-scrutiny-survey.aspx>

Details regarding forthcoming meetings, including copies of the reports and a list of future meeting dates can be obtained from the Overview and Scrutiny website at the following link:

<http://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/council/overview-scrutiny/overview.aspx>

All OSC meetings are open to the public and a list of future meeting dates is available from the Council's website. Residents are also welcome to come and speak and provide their views at meetings. If you would like to attend a meeting and speak please contact us in advance.



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**Contact us...**

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