
Meeting: Customer and Central Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Date: 14th June 2011
Subject: Community Engagement Strategy - refresh
Report of: Cllr David Hopkin, Deputy Executive Member
Summary: This report provides an overview of performance against Year 1 of the 2010 – 2013 Community Engagement Strategy (CES) and sets out the rationale, key drivers and timeline for a refresh.

Advising Officer: Ian Porter, Assistant Director Strategy and Performance
Contact Officer: Peter Fraser, Head of Partnerships & Performance
Public/Exempt: Public
Wards Affected: All
Function of: Council

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS

Council Priorities:

The strategy has implications for all five of the Council's strategic priorities

Financial:

Funding and dedicated staff resource is critical to the implementation of many aspects of the delivery plan. The 'Targeted Support' funding from Inspire East was used to support the implementation of Year 1 of the strategy. This grant ended in March 2011, but further funding has been secured from Central Bedfordshire Together (the local strategic partnership) to deliver the actions contained in Years 2 and 3 of the delivery plan.

Legal:

Implementing this strategy will help the local authority and its partners to deliver its community engagement obligations

Risk Management:

Risk management is a key part of the service delivery plan for the team and any risks will be managed through this process. Community engagement has been identified as an operational risk that could impact on the Council's reputation with residents, communities and town and parish councils. This is mitigated by the Community Engagement Strategy and the actions in the delivery plan.

Staffing (including Trades Unions):

The strategy comprises a dedicated staff post, which is paid for by partnership funding.

Equalities/Human Rights:

The impact assessment highlighted the importance of adopting a variety of inclusive and appropriate engagement practises and that all groups must be treated with dignity and respect. These issues have been addressed during the development of the strategy and subsequently in the delivery of Year 1 activity.

Community Safety:

Community engagement is and will continue to be a key element to tackling crime and reducing the fear of crime.

Sustainability:

The community engagement strategy will help to strengthen and empower communities to do more for themselves and relieve pressure on public services.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **That the Committee notes the progress made in the first year of delivery of the Community Engagement Strategy.**
2. **That the Committee notes the process, scope and timetable for the refresh of the Community Engagement Strategy.**

1. Background Information

- 1.1 The CES is a partnership strategy, which was developed by Central Bedfordshire Together (CBT) and approved by Full Council in June 2010.
- 1.2. The aim of the CES is to deliver greater added value to our citizens by understanding their needs and issues, and giving them greater involvement in the decision-making process and access to services.
- 1.3. A key feature of the creation of Central Bedfordshire Council was the opportunity unitary status brought to improve the way local public service organisations engage with local people. The CES seeks to address this by bringing local government closer to the communities it serves.
- 1.4. The CES also supports CBC's commitment to devolve some quality of life services to town and parish councils, where they want them and where there is a clear business case for doing so and there is no additional cost to the council.
- 1.5. The strategy has been measured against the National Framework for Empowering Authorities and is based on the following five key principles:
 - Giving more people more opportunities to influence decisions.
 - Enabling Ward Councillors to be leaders in and for their communities.
 - Enhancing the role of town and parish councils.
 - Building the capacity of local people to engage.
 - Ensuring a strategic and joined up co-ordinated partnership approach

2. Progress and Key achievements in the first year

- 2.1 The CES Delivery Plan sets out 21 specific actions for the first year and good overall progress has been made against each of these.
- 2.2 A performance management system is in place and is overseen by a sub group of the Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership. All of the actions have been completed or are on track except for one, which relates to how Parish Plans are used to inform local strategies policies and plans. This issue will be addressed as part of the planned refresh of the strategy to reflect emerging legislation in the Localism Bill relating to neighbourhood planning. The action to develop a handy guide to the third sector and COMPACT was superseded by a revised and much simplified COMPACT¹, and the action to develop three year funding agreements with voluntary and community sector organisations is unlikely to move forward in the short term.
- 2.3 Below is a summary of key achievements in Year 1 against each of the five principles of the strategy:

Giving more people more opportunities to influence decisions

- A successful pilot of seven Let's Talk Together meetings that provides a strong foundation for further conversation and collaboration with communities to tackle local issues, supports Ward Councillors in their role as community leaders and acts as a catalyst for a joined-up strategic approach to community engagement with other public service organisations.
- Introduced a quarterly Partnership 'Ezine' to communicate to partners what is happening within Central Bedfordshire Together. The ezine is sent to all partners and stakeholders by email in newspaper format, making it easy for them to target and link into stories of interest. Four electronic magazines have been published so far, and analysis shows significant growth in its usage.
- Established a stakeholder database to enable targeted communication and engagement with a wide range of community stakeholders, and which is used to distribute the Ezine to over 1,000 partners/stakeholders.
- The creation of a Social Media Network to engage with Central Bedfordshire residents, called 'Lets Talk Central'. Although take up of this has been somewhat slower than expected, the 'Let's Talk Together' community meetings are being used to develop the network and encourage an ongoing dialogue with and between communities inbetween meetings.
- Actively recruiting to a new electronic citizens panel.
- Key consultation and engagement activities planned by partners have been mapped to enable opportunities for future join up to be identified.

Enabling Ward Councillors to be leaders in and for their communities

- Organised a series of four Member briefings on topical issues to support them in their role as community leaders.
- Prepared and issued ward based profiles providing key information about each ward.
- Offered and provided regular support for Members in advance of their attendance at town and parish council meetings.

¹ The COMPACT is an agreement between local statutory organisations and the voluntary and community sector to improve and develop their relationships, and sets out the way they will work together to deliver real outcomes and improvements for people and communities. The Council is a signatory to the COMPACT.

- Provided a dedicated staff post, which is paid for by partnership funds, to support Members, CBC officers, CBT partners and town and parish councils with their engagement responsibilities.
- Provided bespoke Member briefings and de briefings pre and post each of the Let's Talk Together pilot meetings.

Enhancing the role of town and parish councils

- Two Town & Parish Council conferences held and a new relationship with schools through six School Governor Forums.
- Prepared a key contacts sheet, handy guide and direct dial number for town and parish councils to be able to locate the right service and member of staff.
- Revised terms of reference prepared and approved for Town Centre partnerships in Leighton Buzzard and Dunstable.

Building the capacity of local people to engage

- A draft volunteering strategy has been developed for consultation and refinement in Year 2 of the strategy
- Let's Talk Together meetings provided a vital opportunity for local people to engage with a range of public service providers and determine local policing priorities.
- Two 'Third Sector' Assembly meetings engaging community and voluntary sector groups representing the interests of local communities and interests in topical debate and discussion.

Ensuring a strategic and joined up co-ordinated partnership approach

- A successful bid to RIEP's Targeted Support Grant provided regional funding for Year 1 of the strategy, which ended on 31 March 2011. Partnership funding has been secured from CBT's performance reward grant to provide a dedicated staff post to support implementation of the next two years of the strategy (until March 2013).
- Let's Talk Together meetings provide a forum for joining up engagement activity with local public service organisations including the Council, Police, Fire, Health, voluntary and community sector, housing associations and town and parish councils.
- A forward plan of Let's Talk Together meetings has been developed for the next 12 months, which is available on the Central Bedfordshire Together website.

3. Issues

- 3.1 The CES is a three year strategy and CBT has committed to carrying out an annual refresh, which is scheduled to be presented at its next Board meeting on 5 July 2011.
- 3.2 Since the strategy was developed a new legislative framework has begun to emerge to build the Big Society. The Localism Bill is being created to support a shift of power away from central government to councils and local communities. A fundamental element of this is to empower local people to get involved with and direct the development of their communities. Whilst the existing strategy supports this, a refresh will ensure it is fully aligned with the latest national policy, and ensure our organisational approach is fully aligned to recognised governance within the council.
- 3.3 Other local and national drivers that will be addressed as part of the refresh include:

- A political desire to enhance our engagement with communities (ensuring meaningful consultation).
- Communities doing more for themselves and the need to proactively facilitate this.
- Service reviews and remodelling of delivery approaches, and overcoming obstacles associated with the transfer of responsibility for the delivery of local services.
- A cultural shift to embrace and mainstream wider involvement and engagement in what we do, for example from town and parish councils.
- The new Equality Duty to ensure we engage with all of Central Bedfordshire's diverse communities.

3.4 The refresh will focus on:

- reviewing and updating the strategy and action plan to reflect the latest national policy (including the new legislative framework) and local drivers;
- removing any actions already achieved or no longer relevant and adding new ones;
- refreshing the principles to ensure the key drivers are adequately embraced; and
- identifying specific and measurable outcomes to achieve through improved community engagement.

3.5 Partner organisations will be engaged in the refresh process through the Central Bedfordshire Together Board, the Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership and its Community Engagement Delivery Group (CEDG) – a briefing note from the CEDG meeting held on 23 May 2011 will follow.

3.6 CBC Directorates will be engaged via colleagues involved in partnership working and will be kept informed at every stage of the refresh process. The Head of Partnerships & Performance will work closely with the Deputy Executive Member.

3.7 The refreshed strategy will be presented to Executive on 23 August 2011 for approval.

4. Financial and Other Implications

4.1. There are no specific funding requirements to carry out the review and refresh of the CES. Any financial implications associated with its implementation will be managed within the existing budget allocation.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Central Bedfordshire Community Engagement Strategy and Delivery Plan 2010 - 2013