

Central Bedfordshire Community Engagement Strategy 2010 - 2013

REFRESH JULY 2011

1. Introduction

This strategy has been developed by Central Bedfordshire Together (CBT) the local strategic partnership, which comprises senior representatives of: the Council; Police; Fire; Health; Education; Business; Town & Parish Councils; and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

The Partnership's vision is for Central Bedfordshire to be "globally connected, delivering sustainable growth to ensure a green, prosperous and ambitious place for the benefit of all".

This vision is one of greater economic prosperity based on sustainable growth. We know that the only way we can achieve our vision is by ensuring that we continue to listen and respond to what our residents, businesses and communities are telling us. The aim of this strategy 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 public sector services. A complementary business engagement strategy will need to be developed as part of the next refresh.

The strategy addresses the national drive to shift power away from central government to local government, communities and individuals. It supports a local aspiration to work closer with communities in the design and delivery of public sector services. It also seeks to enable and facilitate communities taking on the delivery of some services for themselves.

The main statutory partners in CBT including Health, Police, Police Authority, Fire and Rescue Service and the Council have the individual and collective vision to place the citizen at the heart of everything they do. This strategy is designed to enable this and enhance the community engagement activities of other CBT partners including Town and Parish Councils and Voluntary and Community Sector organisations.

This strategy will enable partners in Central Bedfordshire to establish a new relationship with individuals and organisations and help communities understand the choices and decisions ahead. It will also allow partners to manage and respond to expectations about the service levels provided by the public sector in the future.

On 18th May 2010, the Government launched its programme for the "Big Society", which includes proposals to give communities more powers, and encourage people to take a more active role in their communities. The aim of this programme is to strengthen society by helping people to work with their locally elected representatives to achieve their own ambitions.

The Localism Bill, published in December 2010, provides the legislative framework to deliver the aspirations of a Big Society and includes new rights and powers for communities and individuals. This Strategy will support the Government's plans to enable citizens, communities and local government to come together to solve problems and improve their localities. Furthermore a range of proposed legislation such as the Health and Social Care Bill, a new Education Bill, the Equality Duty and the Open Public Services White paper will fundamentally change the way service providers engage with their communities, and these will also be embraced within this Strategy.

An equality impact assessment of the potential effects of this strategy was undertaken in 2010 to ensure effective engagement with all communities, including identifiable groups of people segmented by age, race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, religion or belief, as well as communities disadvantaged by deprivation and poverty. The impact of the new Equality Duty is a key driver for the refresh and its implications for the strategy have been captured in the revised document and supporting policy statements.

2. What we mean by community engagement

Community engagement is the action we take to inform, consult, involve and empower communities through ongoing relationships and dialogue. For the Council and its partners community engagement means we:

Inform: by providing solid, user-friendly information on how to access services and on how local services are performing;

Consult: by seeking advice, information and opinions about our strategies, policies and services, to inform our decision-making and design better services;

Involve: by working together to design and deliver our services, enabling people to be fully involved in the agenda-setting and decision-making process, and deciding together on future developments; and

Empower: by enabling individuals and groups to make decisions and deliver some services themselves.

3. The benefits of this strategy

- Involving communities in the design and delivery of local services helps to: improve the quality of service delivery; get it “right first time”; be more responsive and accountable; and deliver better value for taxpayers’ money.
- A joined-up strategic and coordinated partnership approach saves money, avoids duplication, and reduces engagement fatigue for our communities. It also ensures partners have ‘One View’ about what our communities really want, thereby enhancing joint decision-making.
- Supporting Members in their community leadership role ensures the views of local residents are known and considered by their elected representatives when making key decisions.
- Increasing opportunities to participate in local decisions helps increase trust in public bodies and interest in local democracy.
- Involving people in making decisions about how local money is spent gives communities a better understanding of the difficult prioritisations and trade-offs that have to be made, and a stronger sense of “ownership” over the eventual decision.
- Bringing communities and local decision-makers together to tackle shared concerns creates greater openness about decision-making and can help improve community cohesion.

4. The scope of this Strategy

This strategy applies to all methods and processes used by the Council and its partners to inform, consult, involve and empower residents. It raises the profile of community engagement within partnership structures and their work to strengthen communities.

The roles and responsibilities of those leading on the delivery of community engagement within CBT are set out below:

- Ward Councillors play a lead role as community champions;
- the Board of CBT provides the governance and strategic leadership;
- the Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership provides the operational leadership; and
- the Community Engagement Delivery Group coordinates the development and implementation of a joint partnership plan for community engagement.

Involving, engaging and empowering the community is the responsibility of every service and partner organisation. There are many well established mechanisms for engaging with service users across all of the Council's directorates and partner organisations. This strategy is not about telling services or partners how to engage. It is about ensuring that engagement activities are coordinated and opportunities for joining up and sharing resources, outcomes and learning are maximised. This helps to reduce the number of consultations and duplication of effort by all, and improve value for money.

It is clear that "one size does not fit all". Our model of community engagement is based around the issues identified by local communities themselves and these are the key drivers for our community engagement work.

This strategy aligns with and influences key strategies and policies that have an impact on public engagement directly or indirectly e.g. customer service strategies, communications strategies, consultation plans, budget strategies and business transformation strategies.

5. The new legislative framework

Open Public Services White paper

The overarching aim of the White paper, which was published in July 2011, is to give residents more freedom, more choice and more control over the services they receive. It proposes doing this through the opening up of public services. It is based on the following five principles for modernising public services:

- Choice – giving people more control over services and elected representatives more choice over who provides services and how
- Decentralisation – to the lowest appropriate level
- Diversity – breaking down the regulatory and financial barriers to open up the delivery of public services to a broader range of providers
- Fairness – targeting resources at disadvantaged groups
- Accountability – through choice, transparency and voice (by elected representatives and user involvement on decision-making bodies)

Public services are characterised into three different categories

- Individual services
- Neighbourhood Services and
- Commissioned Services.

For each of these categories there is a significant move to put power into the hands of service users and local councils at the neighbourhood level, and to encourage local charities, businesses, voluntary and community groups to bid to run public services.

Localism

The Localism Bill is an important piece of national legislation containing a raft of measures under the following headings:

- New freedoms and flexibilities for local government.

- New rights and powers for communities and individuals.
- Reform to make the planning system more democratic and more effective.
- Reform to ensure that decisions about housing are taken locally.

Of particular interest to community engagement are the elements that give new rights and powers for communities and individuals.

Equality Duty

The Act brings together all previous equality legislation in England, Scotland and Wales. It includes a new public sector equality duty, which came into force on 6 April 2011, replacing the separate duties relating to race, disability and gender equality. It requires public bodies to publish information about their engagement practices and processes to ensure that the interests of all communities are considered when making key decisions.

Health and Social Care

In response to new legislation for Health and Social Care, a new Health and Well Being Board will be established, and local HealthWatch¹ will ensure patients and service users are involved in the design and commissioning of services. The vision for adult social care reiterates the government's values of Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility by devolving power to communities and individuals; giving front line workers and carers the freedom and responsibility to improve care services and support people in new ways. Principally by:

- breaking down barriers between health and social care funding to incentivise preventive action;
- extending the greater rollout of personal budgets to give people and their carers more control and purchasing power;
- using direct payments to carers and better community-based provision to improve access to respite care; and
- providing challenge via the Health and Well Being Board.

Putting Patients and the Public First

This proposes a shift in power and puts patients and their carers in charge of making decisions about their health and wellbeing; "**no decision about me without me**". It enables a greater focus on personalised care which reflects individuals' health and care needs, supports carers, and encourages strong joint arrangements and local partnerships. Patients will become joint decision makers in their own care and recovery and will have access to the information they want to make choices about their care. There is also an extension of choice to include any willing provider, where appropriate.

Central Bedfordshire has already embarked on a personalisation agenda, which changes the relationship between professionals and service users. Care and support is user led and more customers are now self determining their care and support through the use of personal budgets. The Council is supporting NHS Bedfordshire's Personal Health Budget pilot to foster greater alignment between health and social care services. More emphasis will need to be given to empowering service users, working with GP Consortia to ensure systems and practices offer greater choice and control which is underpinned by robust information, advice and guidance for all those needing care and support, including self funders.

¹ The HealthWatch Pathfinder vision is to be an independent consumer champion and a powerful network to promote better outcomes in health and social care for adults and the community at large. It will work with community and voluntary organisations, as an 'Expert Information Broker', to become an effective means of influencing health and social care provision in Central Bedfordshire.

Education Bill

The Education Bill builds on the Academy Act 2010 and sets out an agenda that schools should be freed from Council control, and that the Council should adopt the role of champion of young people and parents. The Education Act will be informed by a number of Ministerial Advisory Groups which will advise on the new responsibilities for the Council in the future.

6. The Five Key Principles for successful community engagement

The strategy is based on five key principles, which are set out below:

I. Giving more people more opportunities to inform and influence decisions

To strengthen the link between decision-makers and local people by:

- giving a greater role to citizens or community representatives and service users in deciding how services are delivered in their area;
- providing mechanisms for engagement which are appropriate to the locality, issue and audience;
- identifying opportunities for local people to decide how specific budgets are spent in their community;
- responding appropriately to calls for community action on specific issues such as local referendums; and
- setting up partnerships and forums to enable people to inform and influence service planning and delivery.

II. Enabling Ward Councillors to be leaders in and for their communities

Councillors are provided with up-to-date, relevant community intelligence and information, training and officer support as well as specific engagement opportunities to fulfil their community leadership role. Councillors are:

- kept informed of all key activities in their wards;
- supported to efficiently resolve local issues as quickly as possible;
- supported to communicate and engage with their communities, including conducting ward surgeries and attending key community events in their wards;
- alerted to any feedback about community issues in their wards; and
- supported to collaborate and work together on local issues, share experiences and good practise.

III. Enhancing the role of Town and Parish Councils

To support town and parish councils in the delivery of local services that affect the quality of life of their community by:

- enabling residents to participate in setting the vision and priorities for their local area;
- working with town and parish councils to devolve budgets for 'quality of life' services to those who want them and where the service will be enhanced by doing so, and only according to the Council's agreed priorities; the case for devolving a service must include an Equality Impact Assessment and each application must also be supported by a robust business case that demonstrates improved value for money;
- supporting clusters of town and parish councils working together to resolve common issues;
- providing a key contact from the Council for each town and parish council, and ensuring appropriate representation in response to requests for Council attendance at town and parish council meetings; and
- involving town and parish councils in the planning and delivery of community engagement activities in their area, such as the Let's Talk Together community meetings.

IV. Building the capacity of local people to engage and to do more for themselves

To ensure that, where needed, we support our communities to have the knowledge, skills and confidence to get involved in decision-making by:

- helping people to form or join groups that are set up to inform and influence local decisions;
- supporting the development and implementation of a local Volunteering Strategy;
- facilitating / brokering community responses to local problems;
- facilitating and brokering community resilience; and
- seeking funding to help local people to acquire or improve their skills to enable them to play a greater role in their community.

V. Ensuring a strategic and joined-up, coordinated partnership approach.

Sharing opportunities, resources and learning with partners and across directorates saves money, avoids duplication, and reduces engagement fatigue for our communities. It also develops a better understanding of our communities – community insight. This supports and complements the work being carried out as part of pan public service delivery, building on the Total Place pilot. A role of the joint partner Community Engagement Delivery Group is to:

- coordinate community engagement at key community meetings and
- share appropriate data, intelligence and information and customer insight, including who we are engaging with.

7 Delivering the strategy

Below are the details of each of the actions for carrying out effective community engagement under the key principle they relate to:

Principle One: Enabling more people to inform and influence decisions

We want Central Bedfordshire's citizens to be able to inform, influence and shape local decisions. The actions below are aimed at strengthening community participation. Partners will be expected to use these engagement mechanisms as appropriate:

1 E-Panel for Citizens

Residents can register their interest in participating in consultations on specific services. By joining the electronic panel residents can take part in online surveys, online discussions and opinion polls on the services they are interested in. Topics are normally generated by partner organisations but e-panel members can also put forward ideas for discussion.

2 Petitions and E-Petitions: Citizens can raise a petition to generate activity in the community and influence decisions.

3 Scrutiny: The Council's Constitution enables residents to participate in and contribute to investigations by overview and scrutiny committees. The Overview and Scrutiny Toolkit encourages public participation. The aim is to have at least two investigations per year which involves significant public participation.

4. Specialist Forums and Citizen Governance: Key partners will use established forums, wherever possible. These forums should be mapped and rationalised to avoid duplication, reduce costs and make better use of the limited time available for those who take part.

New Forums will be established, such as HealthWatch, which will act as the consumer champion for local people regarding health and social care services. HealthWatch will take over the current role of the Local Involvement Network (LINK) with some additional responsibilities, such as providing complaints advocacy services and supporting people to exercise choice. As a statutory member of the Health and Wellbeing Board, the local

HealthWatch will have a key role in maximising local engagement and ensuring that the views and feedback from service users, patients and carers are an integral part of local commissioning across health and social care.

When a new forum needs to be formed it should be managed centrally to ensure a coordinated approach and to enable any Council services and partners to consult and engage with all sections of the community.

Vulnerable and minority groups are underrepresented in participation in civic roles and engagement and consultation. Groups, such as, older people, young people, women, black and minority ethnic groups, disabled people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and rurally isolated residents in Central Bedfordshire may fear discrimination and/or have specific requirements that prevent them from participating in traditional approaches. This strategy will establish a range of approaches including targeted techniques to specifically ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place to enable greater involvement of these groups, whilst the Equality Duty will require public bodies to publish information about who they have engaged with.

The Youth Parliament and Local Youth Forums influence decisions and services that impact on young people. These will be developed to enable young people to be even more active participants in designing services whilst further opportunities will be explored to establish greater links between young people and the democratic decision-making processes.

5. **Local Referendums:** This gives local people, councillors and councils the power to instigate a local referendum on any issue. Although non-binding, local authorities will be required to take outcomes into account as part of their decision making process. A referendum can be triggered if 5% of electors sign a petition stating the question they want asked regarding a local matter or a written request is received from elected Members.
6. **Neighbourhood Planning:** The Localism Bill introduces a new system of neighbourhood planning whereby local bodies will be able to request that councils have neighbourhood development plans containing policies regarding the development of a particular neighbourhood.
7. **Right to Veto excessive Council tax rises:** Anything set above the ceiling set by the Secretary of State and approved by the House of Commons will trigger a referendum of all registered electors in the area, where the council will have to prove their case to the electorate. This is intended to make councils more transparent and accountable to local people.
8. **The Sustainable Communities Act:** This Act allows Local Authorities to put forward proposals from local communities that require action from central government. Proposals can be submitted for any activities affecting the sustainability of an area which require central government intervention to remove barriers. Any proposals must be endorsed by a Panel of Local Representatives made up of residents from the local community and representative groups.
9. **Social Networks:** Social media is an increasingly powerful communications and engagement tool. Let's Talk Central has been established by the Council as an online discussion forum to engage with residents using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Further opportunities will be identified for expanding engagement through social networks

10. **Let's Talk Together meetings:** Partners are encouraged to use the Let's Talk Together meetings to actively engage with communities in the seven Safer Neighbourhood Team (SNT) areas in Central Bedfordshire on important local topics. They are a vital mechanism for consulting on proposals such as budget proposals, service delivery and planning etc. The seven SNT areas are:

- Cranfield, Marston and Woburn
- Sandy and Biggleswade
- Amphill and Flitwick
- Shefford, Stotfold and Arlesey
- Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Rural area
- Leighton Rural
- Leighton Buzzard and Linslade

Principle Two: Enabling Ward Councillors to be leaders in and for their communities

Involvement with local people is a key part of a Councillor's role and Councillors taking the lead on engagement activity in their wards is fundamental to this strategy.

Through surgeries, Let's Talk Together meetings and other contact with the community Councillors help in raising greater public awareness of the opportunities to engage in local decision-making and encourage more people to put themselves forward for civic roles.

In their role as community leaders, Councillors are provided with the following specific support:

11. **Ward-based intelligence, information and customer insight:** Ward profiles are provided annually to all Councillors. In addition, Councillors are provided with regular updates about what is happening in each ward. Council officers and key statutory partners ensure that Councillors are informed of issues, initiatives, changes and success stories relating to their ward or specific key responsibilities.
12. **Support for scrutiny, Councillor Call for Action and response to petitions and Local Referendums:** Central Bedfordshire is committed to a robust, collaborative, outward facing model of scrutiny for each of its committees – contributing to both policy development and performance management. Overview & Scrutiny provides Councillors with further opportunities to engage with the community and involve more people in influencing Council decisions.

Local people, councillors and councils will have the power to instigate a local referendum on any issue. A referendum can be triggered if 5% of electors sign a petition stating the question they want asked regarding a local matter or a written request is received from elected Members

The Councillor Call for Action (CCfA) gives all Councillors the powers to require local service providers to respond to an issue of concern. Where a response is not adequate, Councillors can refer the matter to Overview and Scrutiny.

Councillors also have a role to play in responding to petitions, including e-petitions, that relate to services they are responsible for and services where they share delivery responsibility. If Overview and Scrutiny decide there has been inadequate response to a petition, then the matter will be referred to the full Council for a public debate. If 5% of the local population sign a petition, then it must be debated in full Council.

13. **Involvement in partnerships:** Councillors act as 'connectors' between communities, the Council and partners/partnerships.
14. **Establish links with voluntary and community sector organisations:** There is a clear distinction between the representative role of elected Councillors and their own role as voluntary and community sector representatives, which is supportive of local democracy and adds value to the work of local Councillors.
15. **Member development of community engagement skills:** The Member Development Strategy includes training to build on Councillors' engagement skills such as facilitation skills, consensus building skills, equality training, chairing community forums and public meetings. It also build on Councillors' knowledge of their communities and the statutory duties to consult, promote democracy and ensure equality.
16. **Officer support:** To support ward Councillors, a dedicated telephone number for the helpdesk has been put in place to speed up response times, Tel: 0300 300 8500 The Community Engagement function provides support to Members with timely and relevant information and bespoke briefings, as directed.

Principle Three: Enhancing the role of Town and Parish Councils

This strategy seeks to empower communities at the neighbourhood level. This includes:

17. **Community-led planning (Parish Plans, Town Plans and Neighbourhood Plans):** Community-led Neighbourhood Planning now features as part of the Localism Bill. Community-led planning provides communities with the means to tackle specific issues locally themselves, to voice their concerns and to outline their aspirations for public authorities to address.

The Localism Bill will place certain obligations on the Council to support neighbourhoods and approved bodies to produce Neighbourhood Development Plans. Consideration on how these new duties will be resourced and delivered will need to be featured as part of this Strategy in the future.

The Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership will produce an annual progress report on community led planning across Central Bedfordshire. CBT will use analysed community led planning data to inform the delivery of the Sustainable Community Strategy.

Community-led planning leads to service areas having a greater understanding of individual localities. It provides evidence for Councillors of local conditions, priorities and issues and provides an opportunity for closer participation at a very local level. The process can also bring together different communities in the locality, thereby improving cohesion.

There is already a well developed process for parish planning. There are 71 Town and Parish Councils and seven Parish Meetings in the Central Bedfordshire area. Of those, over half have a parish plan or are in the process of creating, finalising or showing an interest in having one. Where a town or parish council wants a plan this will be encouraged.

The Council recognises that there is no one size fits all approach to the management of town centres. The decision on whether a town has a Town Centre Management Committee, or a broader Town Committee, will be determined by the relevant Town

Council. Thereafter, the option for this to be a Joint Committee and part of Central Bedfordshire Council's constitution will be subject to joint discussion and agreement by both parties. The benefits of being included in the constitution are:

- a common understanding of the key issues;
- shared ownership and decision-making; and
- strong links with the Council's Executive to influence policy and strategy.

Where a Town Council decides not to have a Town Centre Management Committee, the Council will continue to work in partnership with the Town Council on developing its retail centre.

For each Town Centre Committee/Partnership, upon request, a senior officer from the Council will be identified to attend meetings on a regular basis and be the single point of contact for Town Centre issues. Each Partnership will be encouraged to develop a Town Centre Action Plan. The format and direction of this will be led by the partnership but, if required, assistance in developing the plans will be provided by Council Officers. The relevant Executive Member assisted by Officers, will meet with the Chairs of the Town Centre Committees/Partnerships on a quarterly basis. This group will discuss common issues and ensure direct access to all of the Council's service areas.

18. **Town and Parish Council Conferences:** The Council has committed to holding two Town and Parish Council Conferences each year. Moving forward, it is felt to be beneficial to hold separate meetings / conferences for town councils and parish councils to reflect the different relationships that are emerging with the larger parishes. This will enable two way dialogue and agreement on any joint plans.
19. **Identifying opportunities for devolving services, and budgets, to town and parish councils and local communities:** The Council and its partners will work closely with town and parish councils and local communities to devolve budgets for 'quality of life' services to those who want them and where the service will be enhanced by doing so, supported by evidence from an Equality Impact Assessment and a robust business case of the service / budget to be devolved.
20. **Supporting clusters:** Town and parish councils will be supported to work together on finding local solutions to common issues.
21. **Provide a key contact from Central Bedfordshire Council for each town and parish council:** The local Ward Councillor(s) will be the key contact from the Council for communication with individual town and parish councils. In addition, appropriate senior-level representation will be provided in response to requests for Council attendance at town and parish council meetings.

Principle Four: Building the capacity of local people to engage and to do more for themselves

To achieve effective engagement we need to ensure that, where necessary, we develop our citizens and communities to have the knowledge and skills to influence decision-making and feel empowered to take on the delivery of some services for themselves.

22. **Community Development - helping people to form or join groups that influence decisions:** The Stronger Communities Thematic Partnership will lead with the Community Engagement Delivery Group to develop a common approach to community development work, which can be provided by BRCC, Voluntary and Community Action, Groundwork and other organisations.

23. **Support the implementation of the Volunteering Strategy with the aim of increasing participation:** Volunteers provide an invaluable resource for the community and partners in realising the vision of this strategy and in supporting communities doing more for themselves. Volunteers working alongside officers provide capacity and local knowledge to design and deliver engagement activities. Officers working with volunteers will need training as will the volunteers. This training can be provided by Voluntary and Community Action, who will lead on developing the volunteering strategy. They are also able to support statutory, and other, partners to develop their own volunteer programmes.

The Council will also be developing a volunteering strategy for young people as part of the Positive Contribution section of the Children and Young People's Plan.

24. **Three-year funding agreements with Third Sector organisations:** Third Sector organisations encourage communities to take action themselves. This can range from informal activity, such as self-help groups for older people, to managing a community asset. These organisations can help to improve and fill gaps in public services.

Third sector organisations can also act as a useful conduit for contacting and engaging with vulnerable and marginalised groups, specifically the more hidden communities (e.g. transgender people).

Third sector groups should continue to be funded appropriately for their community engagement and development activities, particularly those able to reach out to marginalised and vulnerable communities.

Where three-year funding agreements can be entered into they enable Third Sector organisations to plan ahead, recruit, retain and train staff, and provide business continuity. In addition, Third Sector organisations are able to draw down central and regional funds directly and contribute in their own right to the partnership and the actions of this strategy.

25. **Third Sector Assembly:** This strategy supports the Central Bedfordshire Third Sector Assembly. The Assembly facilitates community involvement and consultation with CBT and other partners. It plays a vital role in empowering the voluntary and community sector to have a strong voice and an active involvement in influencing strategic planning and service delivery decisions that shape the communities in which they operate.

26. **Pilot a learning programme for local people interested in civic participation and engagement:** Opportunities will include shadowing, mentoring, interactive workshops and visits to see local governance in action. The programme will also signpost participants to available active citizenship opportunities.

27. **Projects to develop the engagement capacity of young people:** Young people are encouraged to participate as they are often underrepresented in engagement activities. Participation from an early age is encouraged so as adults they continue to feel able to engage.

28. **Community Right to Challenge and Community Right to Buy:** New powers for communities contained in the Localism Bill will mean that voluntary and community groups, social enterprises, town and parish councils and employees can challenge councils by expressing an interest in running any service for which they are responsible. Councils have to consider the expression of interest and decide whether it would promote or improve the social, economic or environmental well-being of the area.

The Bill will also give communities powers to save local assets threatened with closure, by allowing them to bid for the ownership and management of community assets. This will work through the creation of a list of assets of community value. When Council owned assets on this list come up for disposal on the open market, communities will be given the opportunity to bid, raise the capital and buy the asset. There is no right of “first refusal”, merely a period of time for interested groups to organise and prepare a competitive bid.

Principle Five: Ensuring a strategic and joined-up, coordinated partnership approach

Sharing opportunities, resources and learning with partners and across directorates, saves money, avoids duplication, and reduces engagement fatigue for our communities. In doing so we also develop a clear and consistent ‘One View’ about what our communities really want.

29. **Implement the partnership’s communication plan:** The communications strategy ensures that key audiences are informed and involved in its work. The strategy was developed with representatives from the Bedfordshire Communications Network, including the Council, Police, Fire, Health, Higher Education and the Third Sector. The strategy sets out a series of communications objectives and a range of actions for implementation.
30. **Develop a joint toolkit for consultation and engagement work:** This involves building on the key principles set out above and consolidating any guidance already in place.
31. **Joint consultation and engagement plan:** Individual partner organisations and Council service teams will retain responsibility for specific consultations as part of a joint consultation plan, which will be developed and coordinated by the Community Engagement Delivery Group. The plan will be produced annually and continuously reviewed and updated.

Statutory sector partners should work together to develop and maintain a consultation database showing actual or anticipated start and end dates for planned consultation exercises, and contact details of those leading the exercise. This database could also be used to record participation levels (including minority and vulnerable groups) and evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches.

A shared consultation database will enable the partners to identify opportunities for joining up on consultation activity; reduce duplication and therefore consultation fatigue; share learning and consultation findings. The database should also be made available to the public via the internet to enable residents and stakeholders to find out about future consultations and how they can get involved and to also find out about the findings and outcomes from past consultations.

Each partner organisation has its own communication plan and own programme of public engagement. However, under this strategy the Community Engagement Delivery Group will identify which elements of the engagement programmes could be integrated or coordinated with others. The Delivery Group will publish a joint public engagement calendar of activities including dates of forthcoming consultations.

32. **Coordinating representation at community events:** Opportunities to promote the Council and its partners’ services should be maximised, via coordinated representation at community events such as the Let’s Talk Together meetings. Relevant partners are involved in the planning and delivery of events. Council officers identify the main community events in their area and coordinate representation to ensure that frontline directorates are always represented. Councillors are notified of all events in their wards and invited to attend.

33. **Shared stakeholder database:** Partner organisations have a number of stakeholder and community contact databases held separately. A consolidated stakeholder database, which is updated automatically whenever the individually held databases are updated, should be developed.

As part of this project partners will investigate the possibility of implementing a suitable software system, which will enable community organisations to access the database and communicate more easily with partner organisations.

34. **Shared community intelligence, information and customer insight:** Partners should consider investment in a joint system to share appropriate data, information and intelligence relating to Central Bedfordshire and its communities. A central repository will improve access to information and promote the consistent use of intelligence to support strategic decision-making. Parts of the system could be made accessible by the public (as appropriate) whilst secure access could be made available to partners. This system could be developed into an interactive website for residents to provide local information. Mosaic could be used to monitor and evaluate who partners have engaged with and revise approaches accordingly.
35. **Partner learning programme:** When commissioning external training on consultation and engagement skills, partners should consider inviting other partners to join to maximise the benefits of training and provide better value for money on training.