

I promised when I was elected as leader in May that I would talk to you tonight about the ambitions for this new Council - what we want to achieve in the coming four years.

Before doing so, I would like to reflect on the legacy the new Council has inherited.

It is just over two years since Central Bedfordshire was created on April 1st 2009. In that time we have come a long way, having successfully transitioned from the three predecessor councils, while maintaining all our key services to residents. To do this seamlessly is a great credit to all involved.

From our focus on efficiency, we have driven out savings of £22m from the base budget and this year we are aiming to deliver a further £19m. I was delighted that this success allowed Central Bedfordshire, for the first time in a generation, to have a zero increase in council tax bills.

But it is not just about efficiency. We have improved standards in Adult Social Care as evidenced by the recent excellent Safeguarding Peer review, increased educational attainment, with the best GCSE results ever last year; and have received national recognition for our planning service.

I'm very aware that I am in a privileged position taking on the leadership of a Council that has been well managed.

How different an experience to that of our Coalition Government who have inherited such a massive challenge following 13 years of Labour Government.

I believe our thanks should go to my predecessor Tricia Turner and her Executive colleagues for having successfully led this transition, and providing a strong platform upon which we can develop. Thank you Tricia – the residents of Central Bedfordshire have much to be grateful to you for.

So, looking to the future, what next?

In setting out this agenda, I want to share with you some of my own perspectives on this area and what this Council can and should be looking to achieve.

Central Bedfordshire is a great place. I have now lived here for over 20 years. It is a wonderful area to live, work and to grow up.

We have fantastic countryside and charming towns and villages. By way of example on Saturday I was delighted to attend the opening of Rushmere Park, in Leighton Buzzard – a stunning 400 acre country park that epitomises why this is a great place to be – even in the rain!

We also have good schools and – critically – a great location supported by major trunk roads, railway lines and an Airport, which means that we are ideally placed to become an economically thriving community.

The residents of Central Bedfordshire have put their trust in us to protect and enhance this great place – and that is the responsibility of this new Council. Our primary focus will be on our residents, serving their needs and building Central Bedfordshire.

However we face severe challenges.

As the Government seeks to reduce the Country's deficit of over £900bn - a move we can increasingly see the necessity of with recent events in Greece, Italy and Spain - unfortunately the impact on us is tough, as we experience a 28% reduction in our Government grants over four years.

At the same time we are also facing increasing demands on our services such as greater spending on Adult Social Care with an increasing elderly population.

Times may be hard, but we are optimistic, because we have a clear sense of how we will work together to address the challenges we face and what our approach will be.

As Leader, I would like to engender ways of working that are Inclusive, collaborative and focused.

As a recent backbencher, I know how disheartening it is, to feel unable to genuinely engage with and influence the direction of the Council.

This is not only frustrating for the Councillors – it is also hugely wasteful of the talents, experience and knowledge of all members.

We need to have as much engagement of elected representatives as possible in determining and delivering our strategy.

I've endeavoured to reflect this more inclusive approach in the way I have structured the new Executive.

In designing the new model, there were four key issues I wanted to address:

- To strengthen clear Directorate Accountability
- To enable a functional focus
- To address cross cutting issues
- To leverage members' skills

In the new model, we have reduced the number of Executive Members, including myself, from 10 to 8 with 5 having direct portfolio responsibilities and two having the cross cutting roles of Economic Partnerships and External Affairs. In addition we now have 8 Deputies who all have a particular functional focus. While I was convinced this was the right strategy, it is pleasing that in operation it is already delivering in practice. We are getting a greater operational focus, and progress in specific areas such as Localism and see the benefits of the cross cutting roles.

So – with the new team in place – we have been developing our plans.

Our overriding ambitions remain:

To maintain and develop our services to residents

To build on the potential of Central Bedfordshire - to be a great place and to develop its economy

To continue to lighten the burden of Council Tax - I have no desire to preside over a Council which puts increasing pressure on local people through increased council taxes, when I know many of them are already feeling the effects of the economic downturn. We need to have a focus on value for money. We can do it.

We will have to find more efficient and effective means of delivering services.

Some of the things we are currently looking at are:-

- To save on back office functions, we are already making progress in areas such as IT, Finance and HR.
- Rationalising our office structure, to focus on Priory House and Watling House.
- Improving procurement and reviewing all our contracts

But we also need to look at alternative delivery mechanisms. A focus on the outcomes we want from our services, rather than obsessing on how they are delivered.

I appreciate that some residents may feel unsettled when their much cherished services are provided by a new organisation – but I believe this is preferable to the alternative prospect of these services being cut.

This is not just about outsourcing, it will also be about working with other parts of the Public Sector including other councils, seeking economies of scale.

I'm conscious that many of these ideas have been discussed before. But whilst the concepts are not new, there has not in the past been enough focus on delivery. I fear that for too long vested interests that are resistant to change have successfully blocked it. And I also suspect that the culture of public sector organisations has been risk averse. Fear of failure has prevented success. While we must not fail in critical areas we have to accept that some strategies will work better than others and we need to build on these successes and refocus without recriminations.

We need to be an open and responsive council that seeks to help – in the tired old phrase – a “CAN DO ATTITUDE”. Often this is not necessarily about money but the willingness to explore alternatives, taking ownership of problems and helping.

Localism is a prime example of this. We recognise that just as Central Bedfordshire can better make local decisions than Central Government, local Towns and Parishes can often provide a better local solution than Central Bedfordshire. Hence we are and will continue to push forward on this agenda.

While I recognise the tough times we face, I believe we should seize the opportunity to transform how we operate as a council. To deliver better more effective services at lower cost, to engage more with our residents and to further build on the great strengths of Central Bedfordshire.

I make no apology for the entrepreneurial approach – we need to be more business-like. Focusing our energy on maximising value for money, good customer service, effective service delivery and serious assessment about what we do and how we do it.

And how will we know if we have succeeded?

We will rigorously review our performance on a monthly and yearly basis. We'll ensure budget management is paramount and we'll check our results in service areas are improving – including the crucial measure of customer satisfaction.

The judgement on this council will be the good opinion of the people of Central Bedfordshire. I make no assumptions about this and I will work diligently with my Executive colleagues, the wider council and its officers to win this good opinion through the delivery of excellent results.

We are privileged to have been elected and ultimately it is the electorate who will judge us.