



Central Bedfordshire Community Engagement Strategy

2013 - 2016

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1. Introducing the Community Engagement Strategy for 2013 - 16

The 2013-16 Community Engagement Strategy for Central Bedfordshire has been developed by the Central Bedfordshire Together Partnership, which comprises senior representatives of: the Council; Police; Fire; Health; Education; Business; Town & Parish Councils; and the Voluntary and Community Sector.

The aim of the new succinct Community Engagement Strategy 2013 -16 (CES) is to ensure a strategic and joined up, co-ordinated partnership approach. The emphasis is on partners working together with communities to tackle local issues, share information and develop a better understanding through community insight. It will take forward the achievements of the previous strategy published in 2010, and ensure that engagement with local communities is at the heart of everything we do and helps to ensure great services for our residents. The principles of working in partnership to help people shape their communities are evermore relevant in the face of new legislation and tightening of public sector resources.

In this strategy we have included a new principle to ensure effective engagement with the business community which is a vital component to achieving Central Bedfordshire's vision, which is 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 effective community engagement; listening and responding to what our residents, businesses and communities are telling us, will help us to achieve our vision.

Throughout the strategy we have added web links to enable quick and easy access to additional information, including (where appropriate) any forms and procedures.

2. What do we mean by community engagement?

Community engagement is about giving local people a voice and involving them in decisions that affect them, their communities and their neighbourhood. At the heart of community engagement is the development of relationships, open and clear communication and listening and building understanding of people and their communities.

It is the action we take to inform, consult, feedback, 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 decision-making and design better services.

Feedback: by letting communities know how their views have been taken into account – 'You said, we did'.

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.

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

3. Why have a Community Engagement Strategy and what are the outcomes?

The strategy provides partner organisations, Councillors, stakeholders and service providers with access to information, support, engagement techniques and opportunities to ensure effective service delivery and local impact as follows:

- Involving our communities in the design and delivery of local services will help us 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 will save money, avoid duplication and reduce engagement fatigue for our communities. It will also ensure partners have ‘One View’ about what our communities really want, which will enhance our joint strategic decision-making.
- Supporting Councillors in their leadership role for their community will help ensure the views of local residents are known and considered by their elected representatives when they make key decisions.
- Increasing opportunities for communities 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 helps to improve community cohesion.

4. Legislative Framework

The national drive to shift power away from central government to local government, communities and individuals is built into recent legislation resulting in more opportunities for communities to be more involved in how their neighbourhoods develop and who delivers services.

The legislation that has helped shape this strategy can be found in our [Evidence Base](#) document.

We also have a local aspiration to support individuals, groups and organisations to get more involved in helping to shape their communities.

5. Implementation

The Council has adopted a number of [Policy Statements](#) to ensure the strategy is implemented consistently across the authority. Partners are encouraged to adopt the ethos and principles of the strategy in their own policies and procedures.

6. The Five Key Principles for successful community engagement

The strategy is built on the following key principles:

Principle 1: Supporting local people to engage, inform and influence decisions to help shape their communities

This principle recognises that people like to engage in many different ways. The strategy includes traditional techniques such as petitions, surveys and meetings as well as recognising the growing use of websites and social media as a means to engage. Greater emphasis will also be given to provide feedback to communities. Effective communities are active communities who are willing and able to get involved. This principle supports engagement with distinct groups to ensure all sections of our communities are included.

Principle 2: Enabling Ward Councillors to be leaders in and for their communities

Councillors are a vital and often first point of contact in their communities. They help tackle local issues and initiate action to resolve local problems. Their role will be supported through continuing training opportunities, bespoke engagement activity at ward level, support from officers and receipt of timely information relevant to their communities.

Principle 3: Enhancing the role of town and parish councils

The strategy sets out how we will work together to make a real difference to local communities.

Principle 4: Enabling more services to be delivered locally

The drive to deliver services at the most appropriate level means voluntary and community groups and town and parish councils are playing a greater role in service delivery and shaping their communities.

Principle 5: Enabling employers to thrive and play an active role in their local community

The Council and its partners interact with businesses at many different levels, through many service areas and activities. Employer engagement is the action we take to inform, consult, involve and empower our businesses through ongoing relationships and dialogue. It is also a powerful mechanism for gathering data and intelligence from businesses.

7. Delivering the Strategy

Principle 1: Supporting local people to engage, inform and influence decisions to help shape their communities	
<u>Let's Talk Central</u>	<p>Social media is an increasingly powerful communication and engagement tool. It enables people to have a conversation across the internet in a variety of forms (text, photos, video and sound).</p> <p>Let's Talk Central has been established by the Council as an online discussion forum to engage with residents using Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. People can also register to receive email alerts. Social media can be used to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitor community discussions and pick up on issues; • discuss local issues and resolutions with the community; • publicise meetings and encourage attendance (virtual or real); • involve residents who cannot attend meetings in a 'live' debate; • feedback to others who could not attend the meeting; and • call for volunteers and organising activities. <p>These methods also provide updates on progress and outcomes.</p>
<u>Let's Talk Together</u>	<p>When there is a local issue that requires face to face engagement, this approach can be rolled out and tailored to meet the specific need. Relevant partners will work together with residents to achieve a shared outcome.</p> <p>For example, this approach can be used to gauge local support and recruit volunteers for things like StreetWatch, SpeedWatch and Neighbourhood Watch etc.</p>
<u>Planning - Statement of Community Involvement</u>	<p>The Council is committed to engaging individuals, interest groups and stakeholders in the planning process. All planning applications and planning documents are required by law to be consulted upon and the requirements are set out in the Statement of Community Involvement which was adopted by the Council in October 2012.</p> <p>The Statement of Community Involvement outlines:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how we intend to consult; • the people we intend to consult with; and • at what stage in the process we will consult with them.
<u>Highways</u>	<p>People can report Highway issues such as street light faults, potholes or non working traffic lights, through the Highways Helpdesk on 0300 300 8049, or by emailing</p>

	highways@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk
<u>Consultation and Feedback</u>	<p>A list of live consultations is publicised through websites and communicated regularly to towns and parishes and Ward Members.</p> <p>The Council will adopt the principle of 'You Said – We Did' to feedback to residents as to how the Council responded to their input.</p>
E-Panel for Citizens	<p>Residents can register their interest in participating in consultations on specific services.</p> <p>By joining the electronic panel residents can take part in online surveys, online discussions and opinion polls on the services they are interested in.</p> <p>Whilst topics are normally generated by partner organisations, e-panel members can also put forward ideas for discussion.</p>
Petitions and E-Petitions	Citizens can raise a petition to generate activity in the community and influence decisions.
<u>Scrutiny</u>	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.
<u>Right to Veto excessive Council tax rises</u>	<p>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.</p> <p>This is intended to make Councils more transparent and accountable to local people.</p>
<u>HealthWatch</u>	<p>Healthwatch acts as the consumer champion for local people regarding health and social care services.</p> <p>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.</p>
<u>Projects to develop the engagement capacity of young people</u>	<p>Young people are encouraged to participate as they are often underrepresented in engagement activities.</p> <p>Participation from an early age is encouraged so as adults they continue to feel able to engage.</p>
<u>The Youth Parliament and Local Youth Forums</u>	<p>The Youth Parliament and Local Youth Forums influence decisions and services that impact on young people.</p> <p>These will be developed to enable young people to be</p>

	<p>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.</p> <p>Young people have been recruited and trained to become Young Inspectors and Young Commissioners. In addition, young people will also carry out 'Audits' in line with the requirements of Positive for Youth (a cross Government policy for young people).</p> <p>Youth Parliament has carried out extensive surveys to establish the needs of young people.</p>
<p><u>Vulnerable and minority groups</u></p>	<p>Vulnerable and minority groups are underrepresented in participation in civic roles, engagement and consultation.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>
<p>Specialist Forums and Citizen Governance</p>	<p>Wherever possible key partners will use established forums for consultation and engagement purposes such as Health Watch for health issues; Youth Parliament for involvement with young people and the Third sector Assembly to engage with voluntary and community sector organisations.</p>
<p><u>Neighbourhood Watch</u> <u>Streetwatch</u> <u>Speedwatch</u></p>	<p>These are examples of how people can actively engage in encouraging the wellbeing of their communities.</p> <p>They help in tackling crime and anti social behaviour and speeding through villages and neighbourhoods.</p>
<p><u>Volunteering Strategy</u></p>	<p>In recognition of the value of volunteering and the benefits volunteers bring to people's quality of life the Volunteering Strategy is essential to ensure that people willing to volunteer do so in a nurturing and supportive environment.</p> <p>It also recognises the contribution volunteers make to the economic, environmental and social life of the area.</p> <p>The strategy gives direction to supporting the demand for and supply of volunteers in areas such as health, social care, the environment, sport, the arts, education and learning, provision of information and advice services,</p>

	<p>housing, youth work, community development, community transport and many others.</p>
<p><u>Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC)</u></p>	<p>Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) were elected in November 2012. The PCC is to be the voice of the public and victims and must ensure policing needs are met. The PCC is responsible for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how police and crime reduction funding is spent; • preparing the Police and Crime Plan for Bedfordshire, including priorities for policing; and • building confidence in the criminal justice system and restoring trust. <p>The PCC will answer to the public on cutting crime in their police force area. They will also hold the chief constable to account for the performance of the police force.</p> <p>The Community Engagement priorities of the Bedfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner can be found here</p>
<p><u>Police and Crime Panel</u></p>	<p>The Police and Crime Panel scrutinises the actions and decisions of the PCC and makes sure information is available for the public to enable them to hold the PCC to account, including whether the PCC has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • achieved the aims set out in their police and crime plan and annual report; • considered the priorities of community safety partners; and • consulted appropriately with the public and victims. <p>Panel meetings are open to the public. Dates of the Panel meetings can be found here.</p>
<p><u>Armed Forces Community Covenant (AFCC)</u></p>	<p>The AFCC is a voluntary statement of mutual support between the civilian community and its local Armed Forces Community.</p> <p>The aims of the AFCC are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourage local communities to support the Armed Forces Community in their area and vice versa; • nurture public understanding and awareness amongst the public of issues affecting the Armed Forces community; • recognise and remember the sacrifices faced by the Armed Forces Community; • encourage activities which help to integrate the Armed Forces community into local life; and • encourage the Armed Forces community to help and support the wider community, whether through participation in events and joint projects, or other forms of engagement.

Village hall and community facilities	An audit of village halls and community facilities has been carried out. This will be used as the basis for developing a policy to support planning for future hall provision and investment.
<u>Troubled Families</u>	<p>The programme can benefit from active and co-ordinated community engagement, not only with the families themselves but with local residents and communities taking an active role in supporting neighbouring troubled families.</p> <p>For example, this could be through volunteering and community based activity, or through a community based network of support to help sustain the interventions and improvements felt by those families.</p> <p>We will work together to ensure positive outcomes for troubled families and their local communities</p>
<u>Advice Strategy</u>	Recent welfare reform means that there are a growing number of vulnerable people in our communities who will benefit from co-ordinated engagement to support their specific needs.

Principle 2: Enabling Ward Councillors to be leaders in and for their communities	
<u>Ward-based intelligence, information and customer insight</u>	<p>Ward profiles are provided annually to all Councillors. In addition, Councillors are provided with regular updates about what is happening in each ward.</p> <p>Council officers and key statutory partners will ensure that Councillors are informed of issues, initiatives, changes and success stories relating to their ward or specific key responsibilities.</p>
<u>Support for Members</u>	<p>The Member Development Strategy includes a variety of training, both general and service specific, to help Members carry out their role.</p> <p>In addition a dedicated telephone number is in place (Tel: 0300 300 8500) for Councillors to use when following up constituent matters.</p> <p>The Community Engagement function provides support to Members with timely and relevant information and bespoke briefings, as directed.</p>
<u>Provide a key contact from Central Bedfordshire Council for each town and parish council</u>	<p>The local Ward Councillor(s) will be the key contact from the Council for communication with individual town and parish councils.</p> <p>In addition, appropriate key officer representation will be provided in response to requests for Council attendance at town and parish council meetings.</p>

<p><u>Involvement in partnerships and links with voluntary and community sector organisations</u></p>	<p>Councillors act as ‘connectors’ between communities, the Council and partners/partnerships, including voluntary and community sector organisations.</p> <p>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.</p>
<p>Support for scrutiny, Councillor Call for Action and response to petitions</p>	<p>The Council is committed to a robust, collaborative, outward facing model of scrutiny for each of its committees – contributing to both policy development and performance management.</p> <p>Overview & Scrutiny provides Councillors with further opportunities to engage with the community and involve more people in influencing Council decisions.</p> <p>The Councillor Call for Action (CCfA) gives all Councillors the power to refer issues of local concern regarding local government services or crime and disorder matters to Overview and Scrutiny for consideration.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>If Overview and Scrutiny decide there has been inadequate response to a petition, then the matter can be referred to the Council for a public debate. If 1,250 of the local population sign a petition, then it must be debated in Council.</p>
<p><u>Co-location of services</u></p>	<p>Where the opportunity arises, partners will look to co locate their services to make it easier for communities to engage and ensure value for money through multi use of buildings.</p>

<p>Principle 3: Enhancing the role of town and parish councils</p>	
<p><u>Neighbourhood Planning</u></p>	<p>The Localism Act introduced a system of neighbourhood planning as a new way for communities to decide the future of places where they live and work.</p> <p>A Neighbourhood Plan is produced by the town or parish council on behalf of the community. It needs to be flexible to address different needs and expectations. Communities will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • choose where they want new homes, shops and offices to be built; • have their say on what those new buildings should look like; and • grant planning permission for new buildings they want

	<p>to see go ahead.</p> <p>The Council is supporting several parish councils to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan and providing advice to others.</p>
<u>Town & Parish Plans</u>	<p>Community-led planning leads to service areas having a greater understanding of individual localities.</p> <p>It provides evidence for Councillors and partners of local conditions, priorities, issues and aspirations and provides an opportunity for closer participation at a very local level.</p> <p>The process can also bring together different communities in the locality, thereby improving cohesion.</p> <p>Where a town or parish council wants to develop a plan this will be encouraged.</p>
<u>Joint / Partnership Committees</u>	<p>There is no one size fits all approach to the management of towns and town centres. This will be determined by the relevant town council.</p> <p>Thereafter, the option for a Joint Committee and part of Central Bedfordshire Council's constitution will be subject to joint discussion and agreement by both parties.</p> <p>The benefits of being included in the constitution are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a common understanding of the key issues; • shared ownership and decision-making; • joint discussion and action to find solutions to local issues; and • strong links with the Council's Executive to influence policy and strategy.
<u>Supporting clusters</u>	<p>Town and parish councils are encouraged to work together on finding local solutions to common issues.</p> <p>The Council will support and facilitate joint working between towns and parishes.</p>
<u>Town and Parish Council Conferences</u>	<p>The Council has committed to holding Town and Parish Council Conferences.</p> <p>Where relevant, separate events will be held for town councils and parish councils to reflect the different relationships that are emerging with the larger parishes.</p> <p>This will enable two way dialogue and agreement on any joint plans.</p>
<u>Enabling T&PCs to do more for themselves and their communities</u>	<p>The Council and its partners will work closely with town and parish councils and local communities to devolve services to those who want them and where the service will be enhanced by doing so.</p>

	<p>The Council has published ‘A Framework for the Delivery of Services by Town and Parish Councils’ that sets out the process and criteria to devolve services to town and parish councils.</p> <p>Towns and parishes that wish to have a greater role in service delivery will be supported in the process.</p>
Training, briefings and support for T&PC’s	Where possible the Council will work with partners and town and parish councils on joint training activities.
Section 106 agreements	Where the impact of a new development on a local community is significant and the developer is required to make a contribution to community facilities the Council will engage town and parish councils in the preparation of the S106 agreement.
Community Infrastructure Levy	<p>Towns and parishes with an approved Neighbourhood Plan will have a right to a proportion of the Community Infrastructure Levy earned from development in their areas.</p> <p>The Council has prepared and consulted on draft policy but implementation will be subject to final Government decision.</p> <p>Local authorities will have to report what they have spent the levy on each year.</p>
Consultations	Wherever possible, the Council will allow 12 weeks for formal written consultations with town and parish councils. Where this is not possible, we will explain why a shorter timeframe is necessary.

Principle 4: Enabling more services to be delivered locally

Community Right to Challenge	<p>New powers for communities contained in the Localism Act mean that voluntary and community groups, social enterprises, town and parish councils and Council employees can submit an expression of interest to run a service provided by the Council, whether it is currently delivered through a third party contract or not.</p> <p>If the expression of interest is accepted, the Council must carry out a procurement exercise.</p> <p>A list of the Council’s contracts and their end dates is published on the Council’s website.</p> <p>Expressions of interest will only be accepted between 12 and 9 months before the contract end date for contracts below the EU threshold of £179,934 and 15 to 12 months before the contract end date for larger contracts.</p>
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<p><u>Community Right to Bid</u></p>	<p>The Community Right to Bid gives communities powers to save local assets threatened with closure, by allowing them to bid for the ownership and management of community assets.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>There is no right of “first refusal”, merely a period of time for interested groups to organise and prepare a competitive bid.</p>
<p><u>Community Right to Build</u></p>	<p>Community Right to Build allows local communities to undertake small-scale, site-specific, community-led developments.</p> <p>The new powers give communities the freedom to build new homes, shops, businesses or facilities where they want them, without going through the normal planning application process.</p> <p>To get the go-ahead, the proposals must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • have the agreement of more than 50% of local people that vote through a community referendum; and • meet some minimum requirements (for example, they should generally be in line with national planning policies and strategic elements of the local plan).
<p><u>Three-year agreements with Voluntary and community sector organisations</u></p>	<p>Where three-year agreements can be entered into they enable voluntary and community sector organisations to plan ahead, recruit, retain and train staff and provide business continuity.</p> <p>In addition, voluntary and community 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.</p>
<p><u>Third Sector Assembly</u></p>	<p>The Third Sector Assembly 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.</p>
<p><u>E-zine</u></p>	<p>The quarterly ezine ‘together’ is distributed to over 1,000 stakeholders to share information, celebrate good news and promote community activity.</p> <p>www.centraltogether.org.uk</p>
<p><u>Sustainable Communities Act</u></p>	<p>This Act allows Local Authorities to put forward proposals from local communities that require action from central</p>

	<p>government.</p> <p>It begins from the principle that local people know best what needs to be done to promote the sustainability of their area, but that sometimes they need central government to act to enable them to do so.</p> <p>Any proposals must be endorsed by a Panel of Local Representatives made up of residents from the local community and representative groups.</p>
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Principle 5: Enabling employers to thrive and play an active role in their local community	
<u>Open for Business</u>	<p>Open for Business is a corporate programme to achieve a joined up approach to engaging with businesses, offering them a single point of main contact.</p> <p>The programme aims to develop a consistent understanding for all ‘business facing’ Council employees to the issues faced by business owners and how we can make it easier for businesses to create jobs and invest in the area.</p>
<u>Business engagement / networking events</u>	<p>These are organised to respond to queries about business issues and provide workshops and business clinics across the area.</p> <p>Owner managers can develop their own skills and those of their staff at these events, as well as receive impartial advice regarding business issues and referral to local, regional and national business support initiatives.</p>
<u>One to one meetings with strategic employers</u>	<p>On regular basis key personnel from the Council will visit the most strategically important employers in the area, to discuss their issues and offer a single point of contact for licensing, planning, development and all other types of enquiries that could help their business develop.</p>
<u>Let’s Talk Business Newsfeed Service</u>	<p>A regular e-mail newsfeed offering;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • financing and funding opportunities; • contracts and tenders from the Council and its partners; • updates on key infrastructure or new developments that may affect local businesses; • advice and information for businesses; • networking events; • awards and competitions; and • local business news.
<u>Timebank – business to</u>	<p>Access to a database of local businesses offering other</p>

<u>business</u>	businesses a free 1-1 session on topics including marketing, legislation and finance.
<u>Relocation support into or within the Central Bedfordshire area</u>	Help for businesses to find appropriate premises and planning permission for re-location, together with advice and support on recruitment, local amenities and support networks.
<u>Business start-up</u>	Support, advice and workshops to help individuals considering self employment look at the pros and cons, and to help them develop a business plan that will significantly increase their chances of success.
<u>Town Teams</u>	Town Teams engage local retailers to develop activity to enhance the vitality of their town centres. Dunstable and Leighton-Linslade both have active town teams engaging with the Council on ways to enhance and improve their town centres.
<u>Business networks</u>	Business Networks such as the <u>Federation of Small Businesses</u> and <u>Business in the Community</u> support and encourage businesses to get together regularly for sharing good practise tackling issues and doing more in their local communities.

The strategy will be refreshed annually including web links. Your feedback is essential, so if there is anything missing that should be added or if you would like to comment on the strategy, please let us know by contacting Sarah.Hughes@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk