Appendix A

28th Sept 2009

DRAFT

Central Bedfordshire Community Engagement Strategy

Central Bedfordshire Community Engagement Strategy

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Annex 1: Delivering the Strategy

Community Engagement Strategy - Executive Summary

The aim of this Community Engagement Strategy is to deliver greater added value to our citizens by understanding their needs and issues, and giving them a greater involvement in the decision-making process and access to public sector services.

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

1. Giving more people more opportunities to influence decisions
We will strengthen the link between decision-makers and local people by:
- giving a greater role to citizens or community representatives in deciding how services are delivered in their area; and
- identifying opportunities for local people to decide how specific budgets are spent in their community.

2. Enabling Councillors to be champions for their communities.
Councillors will be provided with up-to-date, relevant community intelligence and information, training and officer support to fulfil their community leadership role. Councillors will be:
- kept informed of all key activities in their wards;
- allocated a small budget to spend locally 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; and
- alerted to any complaints made about community issues in their wards.

3. Enhancing the role of Town and Parish Councils.
We will support Town and Parish Councils in the delivery of local services that affect the quality of life of their community. We will:
- enable residents to participate in setting the vision and priorities for their local area, through community-led planning, such as Parish Plans, Town Plans and Neighbourhood Plans;
- work 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; each application must also be supported by a robust business case that demonstrates improved value for money;
- support clusters of Town and Parish Councils working together to resolve common issues; and
- improve communications by 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.

4. Building the capacity of local people to engage.
We will ensure that, where needed, we will develop our communities to have the knowledge, skills and confidence to get involved in decision-making. We will:
- help people to form or join groups that are set up to influence local decisions;
- pilot learning programmes for local people interested in participating in civic and community activities; and
- support the development and implementation of a local Volunteering Strategy.

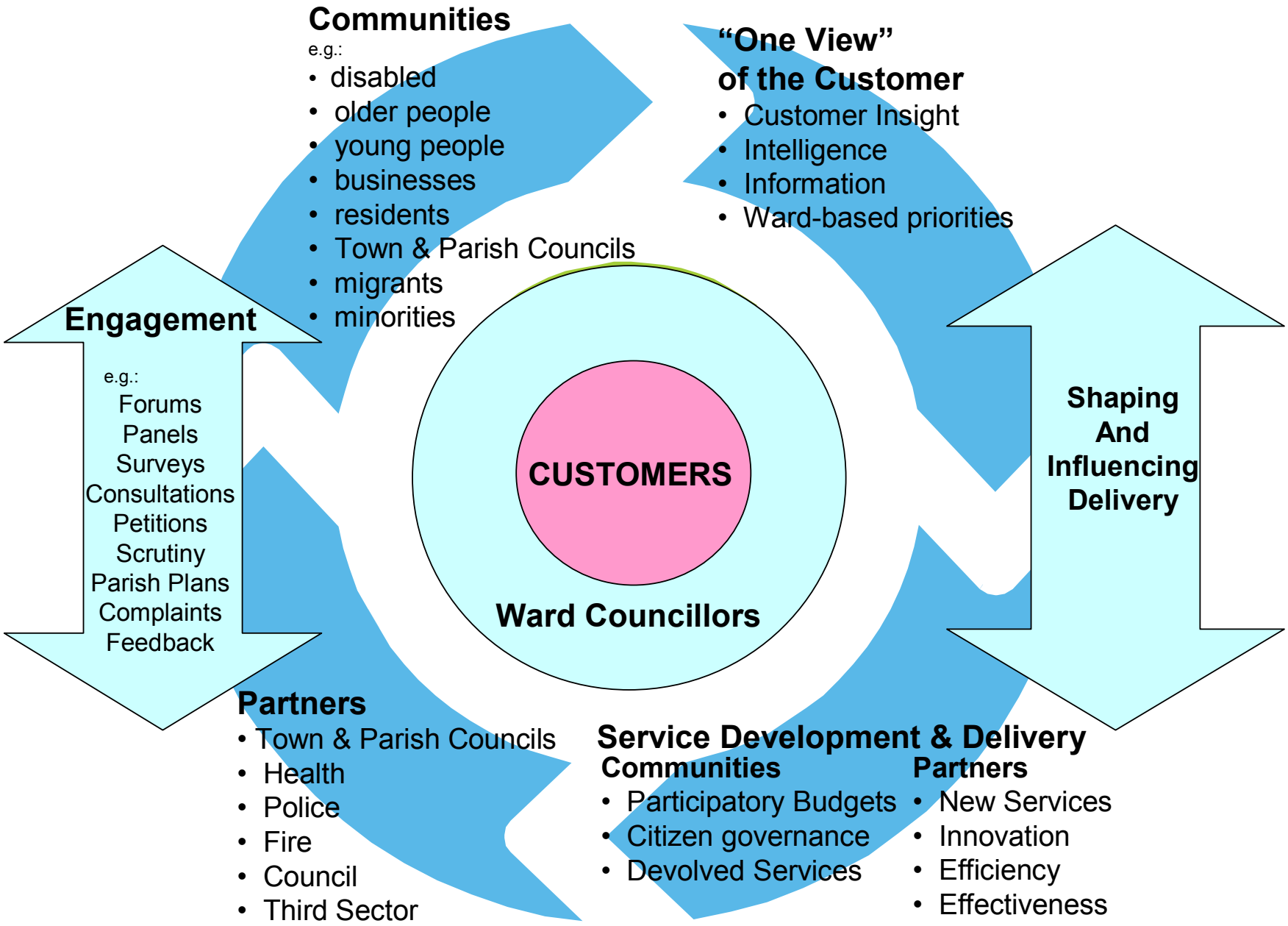
5. Ensuring a joined-up, strategic and coordinated partnership approach.
By sharing opportunities, resources and learning with partners and across directorates, we will save money, avoid duplication, and reduce engagement fatigue

for our communities. In doing so we will develop a clear and consistent 'One View' about what our communities really want. This will also support and complement the work being carried out to inform our commitment to our status as a pilot authority for Total Place. We will work with key partners to:

- have a joint consultation and engagement plan;
- coordinate community engagement at local events; and
- share appropriate data, intelligence and information and customer insight.

This strategy places local people and Councillors, as their elected representatives, at the heart of our community engagement activities. The key principles identified here will remain true irrespective of any possible changes to future public sector operating models in Central Bedfordshire.

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE'S COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MODEL



Part one: The Community Engagement Strategy

1. Introduction

The aim of this Community Engagement Strategy is to deliver greater added value to our citizens by understanding their needs and issues, and giving them a greater involvement in the decision-making process and access to public sector services.

This will be delivered by giving more people more opportunities to influence decisions, supporting Councillors to be champions for their communities, enhancing the role of Town and Parish Councils and developing a more strategic and coordinated partnership approach.

All of the key statutory partners in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) including Health, Police, Fire and the Council have visions that 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 LSP partners including Town and Parish Councils and Third Sector organisations.

This strategy is designed to encourage people to help shape Central Bedfordshire by taking an active part in making or influencing decisions about their locality. Ultimately this will increase satisfaction with all local public services and engender greater pride in Central Bedfordshire as a place.

An equality impact assessment of the potential effects of this strategy has been undertaken to establish whether it has a different impact on identifiable groups of people segmented by age, race, disability, gender, sexual orientation, religion or belief.

2. What is community engagement?

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

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 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 as community champions will help ensure the views of local residents are known and considered by their elected representatives when they make key decisions.

- Increasing opportunities to participate in local decisions will increase trust in public bodies and interest in local democracy - the reputation of local authorities is enhanced when citizens know that they are listened to and that their views are taken into account when decisions are made that affect their lives.

- Participatory budgeting to ensure that money is spent on priorities involves people in making decisions about how local money is spent. This 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.

- As communities come together with local decision-makers to tackle shared concerns, this creates greater interaction between people of different backgrounds, and more emphasis on shared goals. Greater openness about decision-making and greater involvement in those decisions can also remove perceptions of injustice that can challenge cohesion.

- Finally, implementing a comprehensive community engagement strategy should not be optional because:
    - a key feature of the bid for unitary government was the opportunity the creation of Central Bedfordshire Council brings to improve the way local public service organisations engage with local people;
    - the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act has placed on authorities a new statutory Duty to Involve, from 1st April 2009 (which this strategy will address);
    - the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill includes an expectation that participatory budgeting will be introduced in all areas from 2012; and
    - understanding our communities and responding to their needs is a key element of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment.

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.

Involving, engaging and empowering the community is every service's and partner organisation's responsibility. This strategy is not about telling services or partners how to engage but to ensure that engagement activities are coordinated and opportunities for joining up and sharing resources, outcomes and learning are maximised. This will reduce the number of consultations and duplication of effort by all, and improve value for money.

Our model of community engagement should be based around the issues identified by the local communities themselves and that these should be the key drivers for our community engagement work – not area structures.

It is clear that "one size does not fit all". Therefore this strategy envisages a great degree of flexibility and does not create area structures for engagement activities.

Councillors wish to ensure that investment in community engagement supports, aligns with and enhances their current work in their wards.

This strategy should align with and influence 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 five key principles of the Strategy

Following broad consultation with a wide range of partners and staff, the consensus on what the key principles for a successful comprehensive community engagement strategy should be are:

1. **Giving more people more opportunities to influence decisions** by increasing the opportunities for a wider range of people to get involved in decision-making, and identifying opportunities for local people to decide how specific budgets are spent in their community.

2. **Enabling Councillors to be champions for their communities** by: supporting Councillors to communicate and engage with the people they represent; providing Councillors with up-to-date, relevant information about activities in their wards; and providing each Councillor with a budget to spend locally in their wards.

3. **Enhancing the role of Town and Parish Councils** through community-led planning, supporting clusters of Councils to work together to resolve common issues, and devolving budgets to deliver local quality of life services.

4. **Building the capacity of local people to engage** by developing the skills and confidence of local people to engage, increasing communication and cooperation, supporting the voluntary and community sector, and significantly increasing volunteering.

5. **Ensuring a joined-up, strategic and coordinated partnership approach** by sharing appropriate data, intelligence and information to save money, avoid duplication, reduce the number of community consultations, and develop a clear and consistent 'One View' amongst all statutory agencies about what our communities really want, including customer insight.

6. Delivering the strategy

The following table sets out proposed actions to meet the principles of the strategy. Should these actions be adopted a timetable for their implementation will be developed.

Principles	How the principle will be realised
Enabling more people to influence decisions	• New Joint Citizens Panel • Develop a joint E-Panel • Petitions and E-Petitions • Scrutiny • Specialist Forums and citizen governance • Children and Young People Forums, Youth Parliament, Children in Care Council • Participatory Budgeting • Redressing issues through the effective handling of complaints • The Sustainable Communities Act
Enabling Councillors to be 'champions' for their communities	• Ward-based intelligence, information and 'customer insight' • Individual Councillor budgets • Support for scrutiny, Councillor Call for Action and response to

	petitions • Greater role and involvement in partnerships • Establish links with Third Sector organisations • Case management system for Councillors • Member development of community engagement skills • Dedicated officer support
Enhancing the role of Town and Parish Councils	• Community-led planning: Parish Plans, Town Plans and Neighbourhood Plans • Town and Parish Council Conferences • Identifying opportunities for devolving services, and budgets, to Town and Parish Councils • Supporting clusters of Town and Parish Councils working together to resolve common issues • Provide a key contact from Central Bedfordshire Council for each Town and Parish Council
Building the capacity of local people to engage	• Community Development: helping people to form or join groups that influence decisions • Support the development and implementation of a Volunteering Strategy with the aim of increasing participation • Three-year funding agreements with Third Sector organisations • Support the development of a Third Sector Assembly • Pilot a learning programme for local people interested in civic participation and engagement • Projects to develop the engagement capacity of young people
Ensuring a strategic, joined-up and coordinated partnership approach	• Develop a joint toolkit for consultation and engagement work • Joint consultation and engagement plan • Coordinating representation at community events • Shared stakeholder database • Shared community intelligence, information and customer insight • Joint social networking • Annual reporting to residents on the outcomes of engagement activities

The details relating to each of these actions is set out in Annex One of this strategy.

7. Structures to support community engagement

Coordination of Community Engagement Work

To deliver this strategy effectively it is proposed that a Community Engagement Manager be appointed to lead a team of community engagement officers. The focus of their work will be to:

- manage the day-to-day implementation of this strategy;
- monitor quality and evaluate the impact of consultation and community engagement;
- share/ disseminate learning and build capacity to deliver effective community engagement;
- coordinate consultation and engagement activities with partners and across Council directorates;
- assist (as appropriate) with the design and delivery of community engagement activities; particularly in setting up and supporting corporate mechanisms to engage with minority or vulnerable groups; and
- support ward Councillors in carrying out their community leadership role, including the provision of appropriate information, intelligence and community insight.

8. How will we measure our success?

Central Bedfordshire Council and its Local Strategic Partnership is committed to engaging with local communities and has agreed the following National Indicator targets for the Local Area Agreement:

- NI 3 *increasing civic participation* – attracting a wider range of people to stand as local councillors and to sit on local decision-making groups.
- NI 4 *people having the ability to influence decisions in the local area* – enabling more people to have greater influence on decisions affecting them.
- NI 6 *volunteering* – helping local communities to help themselves.
- NI 7 *developing a thriving Third Sector* – helping communities to be more inclusive and cohesive, and individuals to have more say about the issues that affect them.

The way National Indicator targets are measured is prescribed by central government. We will use these and a variety of other methods to measure our success:

- Evaluating all engagement and consultation activities, including accessing participation levels and involvement of minority groups.
- Annual residents' survey (including the biannual Place Survey) to measure achievement of three of our Local Area Agreement targets:
  - To increase the percentage of residents who participate in civic activities from 12.6% to 16.2% *(National Indicator 3)*
  - To increase the percentage of residents who feel that they can influence decisions affecting their locality from 23.8% to 28% *(National Indicator 4)*
  - To increase the percentage of people who say that they participate in regular volunteering from 24.3% to 27.1% *(National Indicator 6)*
- National Place Survey every two years
- Comprehensive Area Assessment
- Evaluating the outcome of local participatory budgeting projects.
- Feedback from ward Councillors and Town and Parish Councils.
- National and local Third Sector survey data.
- Scrutiny by the Business Transformation Overview and Scrutiny Committee, including monitoring the use of Petitions and Councillor Calls for Action and participation of the public in scrutiny work.

9. Our values in delivering the strategy

This strategy provides for a consistent approach for consultation on Council and partner activity whilst recognising that one size will not fit all when engaging communities. We recognise that people are busy and life can be stressful and we want to make sure that engagement is meaningful and rewarding.

We want to ensure that public engagement is undertaken with a clear sense of purpose. We will use the best practice methods for gathering the views of our communities. We want to build on the skills and knowledge of all those currently involved in engagement work including Councillors, partners and officers of the Council. We want to ensure that there is a commitment to learning for continuous improvement.

With this in mind all community engagement work in Central Bedfordshire should be:

- **Planned**: engagement and consultation activities should be well planned in terms of the approach, principles and methods used.
- **Transparent**: the rationale for engagement and consultation and what is and is not open to influence and change should be made clear.

Engagement and consultation should be genuinely open to influence and change, be meaningful and undertaken without preconceptions. This means we will only ask questions that we are prepared to listen and respond to.

- **Inclusive**: careful consideration should be given to who will be engaged, so as to be as inclusive as possible, whilst bearing in mind the need to take proactive steps to genuinely engage minority and vulnerable sections of the community
- **Proportionate**: the nature, scale and scope of each engagement and consultation activity should be proportionate to the resources available and the scale of the outcomes.
- **Resourced**: careful consideration should be given, on a case by case basis, to any resource implications and the most appropriate methods used to avoid duplication and ensure value for money.
- **Evaluated**: review and evaluation will be built in to all engagement and consultation work.
- **Published**: outcomes of all engagement and consultation work will be publicised and participants given feedback on the outcomes.

These principles are consistent with the Bedfordshire and Luton Compact[1] (*Getting it right together*).

[1] The Compact is the agreement between local statutory organisations and the local voluntary and community sector to improve their relationship for the benefit of each other and the communities they serve. The Compact was adopted by the LSP in April 2009.

Annex One: Delivering the Strategy

This section details each of the actions set out in the table in section 6 "delivering the strategy". Actions are listed in the same order as they appear in the table and are shown under the key principle they relate to.

Principle One: Enabling more people to influence decisions
We want the people of Central Bedfordshire to be able to influence and shape local decisions. The actions below are aimed at strengthening this and facilitate greater empowerment:

1. **New Joint Citizens Panel**: The current arrangements to operate a joint citizens' panel in Bedfordshire comes to an end in March 2010, and a new joint panel will be convened for the Central Bedfordshire area. It is intended that this will be a joint panel for the Council, Police, Health and Fire and Rescue Service and could be extended to include Bedford and Luton authorities.

   Through this panel local residents will be regularly consulted on local public services.

2. **Develop a Joint E-Panel**: This should be established to enable residents to register their interest in participating in consultations on certain services. By joining an e-panel residents will be able to take part in online surveys, online discussions and opinion polls on the services they are interested in. The topics would normally be generated by partners but e-panel members can also put forward ideas for discussion.

3. **Petitions and E-Petitions**: Petitions have the potential to empower individuals, generate activity in the community and influence decisions. E-petitioning is likely to be a requirement by December 2010 through the forthcoming Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill.

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

5. **Specialist Forums and Citizen Governance**: Key partners will continue to use established forums. 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. Examples of existing forums include:
   - The Bedfordshire LINk (Local Involvement Network) is a network of individuals, groups and communities who want to work together to improve local health and social care services.
   - The Older People's Reference Group seeks to improve current service provision and obtain views from users and carers about services that are currently provided for older people.
   - The Way Forward Panel, a panel of tenants and leaseholders from both urban and rural areas, is involved in reviewing policies and procedures and have played an active role in changing existing polices such as the Transfer Incentive Scheme
   - Community Safety Forums are in place Biggleswade, Sandy, Ampthill and Flitwick and link with the Police Safer Neighbourhood Teams. A Community Forum is proposed for Downside in Dunstable.
   - There are Town Centre Committees but these are under review.

- There are a number of other fora such as the Carers Forum, Migrant Workers Forum, BME Housing Forum and Equality Forum.

New forums should be encouraged and supported to ensure that all sections of the community are given more and better opportunities to engage. Such fora 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 resident 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.

6. **Children and Young People Forums, Youth Parliament, Children in Care Council:** A Youth Parliament and Local Youth Forums are already in place to influence decisions and services that impact on them.

   Further opportunities will be explored to establish greater links between young people and the democratic decision-making processes.

7. **Participatory Budgeting**: Participatory budgeting directly involves local people in making decisions on the spending priorities for a defined public budget. This helps engender a greater understanding of the complexities of public budgeting, including compromises and trade-offs.

   Participatory budgeting has been identified in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act as one of the activities to help comply with the new Duty to Involve. It can also help meet the expectations of the new Comprehensive Area Assessment. The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill includes an expectation that participatory budgeting will be introduced in all areas from 2012.

8. **Redressing issues through effective handling of complaints**: Central Bedfordshire Council has three redress procedures in place. The corporate procedure is the main vehicle for handling complaints, and there are separate statutory procedures for Children, Families and Learning services and Adult Social Care provision. There are plans to develop a council-wide training programme and to capture performance, trends and learning from complaints.

9. **The Sustainable Communities Act**: This Act allows councils to put forward proposals from local communities that require action from central government. Proposals can be submitted for any activities that promote the sustainability of an area. Any proposals must be endorsed by a Panel of Local Representatives made up of residents from the local community and representative groups.

Principle Two: Enabling Councillors to be champions for their communities
Involvement with local people is already a key part of a Councillor's role. The Duty to Involve aims to provide local people with additional opportunities to work closely with Councillors to influence decisions.

Councillors taking the lead role on engagement activity in their wards is fundamental to this strategy.

Through surgeries and other contact with the community Councillors can 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.

Councillors will be supported with information, intelligence/insight, training and officer support to fulfil their community leadership role. Councillors will also have practical support in involving people in specific community engagement activities. Councillors will have a strong role to play in terms of engaging with communities, encouraging advocacy and raising the profile of Central Bedfordshire Council.

Councillors will be:

- fully supported to communicate and engage with their communities;
- kept informed of key activities in their wards;
- alerted to complaints made regarding community issues in their wards;
- supported to efficiently resolve queries on issues in their wards, including through surgery activity; and
- supported to attend key community events in their wards.

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

10. **Ward-based intelligence, information and customer insight**: Ward profiles will be provided annually to all Councillors.

    In addition, the Community Engagement Team will provide Councillors with regular updates about what is happening in each ward. Both council officers and key partners will ensure that Councillors are informed of issues, initiatives, changes and success stories relating to their ward.

11. **Individual Councillor budgets**: It is proposed that Councillors should have individual budgets to spend locally in their wards.

    Councillor budgets will provide a non-bureaucratic system of allocating funds to causes of their choice. It is suggested that Councillors work with local communities in deciding how the money should be spent.

12. **Support for scrutiny, Councillor Call for Action and response to petitions**: Central Bedfordshire is committed to a robust, collaborative, outward facing model of scrutiny for each of its five committees – contributing to both policy development and performance management. Overview & Scrutiny will provide councillors with further opportunities to engage with the community and involve more people to influence council decisions.

    Councillors will be supported by dedicated Overview and Scrutiny Officers. These officers will provide research and project management support to Members when undertaking specific reviews. Officers will also arrange with the Chairs of Scrutiny Committees how to involve the public in scrutiny reviews.

    New legislation enhances the power of Overview and Scrutiny to be able to review the actions of all public sector providers, including those in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), and hold them to account. The exception to this is the Children's Trust, which is the statutory body where partners are held to

account. In this case the Lead member for Children's Services and the Director of Children's Services will account to the Scrutiny Committee for the Children's Trust. There is a regulatory duty for the Council's Leader and Chief Executive to sign off annually that the Children's Trust is a good partnership. The Council and Councillors should consider involving residents, voluntary and community organisations, businesses and service users in identifying issues for scrutiny and develop a work programme which has the input of local communities and LSP partners.

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 relation to petitions. The upcoming Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill proposes a duty on local councils to respond to all 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. And if five percent of the local population sign a petition, then it must be debated in full Council. Petitions will be noted as one of the evidence sources for the Comprehensive Area Assessment.

13. **Greater role and involvement in partnerships**: It is accepted that Councillors need support to act as 'connectors' between communities, the Council and partners/partnerships. Councillors need recognition of their role to influence strategic decisions and take action in support of their ward interests.

14. **Establish links with Third Sector organisations**: The sector recognises that there is a clear distinction between the representative role of elected Councillors and their own role as Third Sector representatives, which is supportive of local democracy and adds value to the work of local Councillors.

    Central Bedfordshire Council should explore opportunities for establishing stronger links with third sector organisations.

15. **Case management system for Councillors**: Central Bedfordshire Council will be investigating a Member case management system. This will enable Councillors to respond to individuals more efficiently. The system should also be able to provide reports on issues and trends so that problems can be addressed more generally.

16. **Member development of community engagement skills**: The Member Development Strategy will include training to build on Councillors' engagement skills such as facilitation skills, consensus building skills, equality training, chairing community forums and public meetings. It will also build on Councillors' knowledge of their communities and the new statutory duties to involve, promote democracy and ensure equality.

17. **Dedicated officer support**: To support ward Councillors it is proposed that there is a team of corporate Community Engagement Officers. A key role of these officers will be to provide ward Councillors with relevant information, intelligence and community insight, assist with designing and delivering community engagement activities and provide the coordination envisaged by this strategy. They will assist ward Councillors to interface with Town and

Parish Councils as well as with the existing and new community forums and partners.

Principle Three: Enhancing the role of Town and Parish Councils
This strategy seeks to empower communities at the neighbourhood level. This includes:

18. **Community- led planning (Parish Plans, Town Plans and Neighbourhood Plans)**: Community-led planning is a step-by-step structured process of creating a vision and priorities for the future of a community or neighbourhood. The process and outcomes are owned by the whole community. 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.

    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 Parish Councils and seven Parish Meetings in the Central Bedfordshire area. Of those, 42 parishes are currently active in the process of creating, finalising or showing an interest in parish plans.

    The aim should be to have a plan for every town and parish by 2012, which should be reviewed every three years.

    Following a review of the way in which Central Bedfordshire Council engages with Town Councils in terms of Town Centres it is proposed that a single plan for Town Centre Management and Development is created with buy in from all major stakeholders.

    Neighbourhood Plans have been developed for the three priority areas of Downside, Parkside and Tithe Farm.

19. **Town and Parish Council Conferences**: Central Bedfordshire Council has committed to hosting two Town and Parish Council Conferences each year.

20. **Identifying opportunities for devolving services, and budgets, to Town and Parish Councils**: The Council will work closely 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. Each application to deliver a devolved service must be supported by a robust business case that demonstrates improved value for money.

    Devolved budgets would be distributed by allocating the pro-rata costs for delivering the same service on a broader area-wide basis.

21. **Supporting clusters of Town and Parish Councils working together to resolve common issues**: We will support Town and Parish Councils to work together on finding local solutions to local issues.

22. **Provide a key contact from Central Bedfordshire Council for each Town and Parish Council**: A key contact from the Council will be named for each Town and Parish Council. 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
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.

23. **Community Development - helping people to form or join groups that influence decisions:** Community development is the process of building people's knowledge, skills, confidence and therefore a sense of empowerment. It enables people to act together on their common priorities, usually through the development of independent community organisations and networks, and with the support of community development workers within statutory or Third Sector organisations.

    Disadvantaged communities need additional support to help them to access services though the complexity of public services and structures in their neighbourhoods and to tackle exclusion and poverty. Without active intervention and investment in community development the danger is that community engagement will reinforce unequal access and could lead to tensions.

    There are three Community Development Officers in the Planning and Development Strategy team focused on our three priority areas, and one Community Development Officer for Rural Areas supporting Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity (BRCC) on community-led planning. Partners should explore the possibility of extending community development work across the whole of Central Bedfordshire and focusing on disadvantaged and minority groups. The Stronger Thematic Partnership should lead on a common approach to community development work, which can be provided by BRCC, Voluntary and Community Action, Groundwork and other organisations.

24. **Support the development and implementation of a Volunteering Strategy with the aim of increasing participation**: One of our Local Area Agreement (LAA) targets is to increase volunteering. This involves partners working together to develop and implement a volunteering strategy.

    Volunteers could provide a useful resource for the community and partners in realising the vision of this strategy. Volunteers working alongside community engagement officers would provide capacity and local knowledge to design and deliver engagement activities. Officers working with volunteers will need training as will the volunteers working on community engagement. 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 Peoples Plan.

25. **Three-year funding agreements with Third Sector organisations**: Third Sector organisations are already involved in local activities, and the new duties

for authorities to respond to petitions and provide enhanced powers for overview and scrutiny will give third sector organisations increased opportunities to involve local people in influencing council decisions.

Third Sector organisations also 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.

Three-year funding agreements will 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.

26. **Support the development of a Third Sector Assembly**: This strategy supports the creation of a Third Sector Assembly. The Assembly would facilitate community involvement and consultation with the LSP and other partners. It would have a role in empowering the Third 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.

27. **Pilot a learning programme for local people interested in civic participation and engagement**: We will indentify under-represented groups of the community and the barriers to their participation and develop and pilot a modular learning programme that is experiential, flexible and learner-centred, and will develop the following competencies among participants:
    - Knowledge of 'how the public sector world works' – including specifics around local governance and decision-making processes across all public sector agencies
    - Understanding power & influence
    - Principles of citizenship and civil society
    - Collaboration and co-operation
    - Participatory budgeting
    - Practical skills development
    - Self-confidence
    - Assertiveness and making yourself heard
    - How to influence decisions and policies
    - ESOL with a citizenship core agenda

The programmes will be based on the national Take Part framework, and we will learn from Pathfinder Hubs.

People interested in taking on civic roles will be offered tailored support specific to their needs and requirements. 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.

28. **Projects to develop the engagement capacity of young people**: Young people are the future and need to be encouraged to participate as they are often underrepresented in engagement activities. It is important to encourage their participation from an early age so as adults they continue to feel able to engage. A number of projects designed to increase the capacity of young people will be delivered as part of this strategy and the Children and Young Peoples Plan. These include, Local democracy week, Black History Month, youth thematic conferences and youth elections.

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

By sharing opportunities, resources and learning with partners and across directorates, we will save money, avoid duplication, and reduce engagement fatigue for our communities. In doing so we will also develop a clear and consistent 'One View' about what our communities really want.

29. **Develop a joint toolkit for consultation and engagement work**: This will involve building on the key principles set out above and consolidating any guidance already in place. Professionals working with the community have asked for a toolkit based on best practice nationally.

    A network of community engagement practitioners in Central Bedfordshire will be established and they will meet twice per year to share good practice and learning and feed into the joint consultation and engagement plan.

30. **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 coordinated by the Community Engagement Manager in Central Bedfordshire Council. 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.

    Each partner organisation will have its own communication plan and own programme of public engagement. However under this strategy a coordinator will identify which elements of the engagement programmes could be integrated or coordinated with others. The coordinator will assist partner organisations to publish a joint public engagement calendar of activities including dates of forthcoming consultations.

    We will support the trusted network of statutory officers and Third Sector organisation workers who are best placed to continue liaison with hard to reach and hard to reach communities. These representatives will be encouraged to link up and share opportunities through on-going involvement in engagement networks and communication of activities.

32. **Coordinating representation at community events**: The role of the Community Engagement Officers will be to coordinate community engagement activity within the Council and with partners. Opportunities to promote the Council, its services, partner services and engage with the public should be

maximised. The officers will identify the main community events in their area and coordinate Council service representatives to ensure that the three frontline directorates are always represented. The Councillors will be notified of all events in their wards and invited to attend. Partners will also be notified. The team will also coordinate an exhibition/stand as often as possible at each of the seven main town centres.

33. **Shared stakeholder database**: Partner organisations have a number of stakeholder and community contact databases held separately. The Community Engagement Manager will lead on building a consolidated stakeholder database, which is updated automatically whenever the individually held databases are updated.

    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**: It is recommended that partner organisations consider investment in a joint system to share appropriate data, information and intelligence relating to Central Bedfordshire and its communities. This central repository will improve access to information and promote the consistent use of intelligence to support our strategic decision-making. Parts of the website could be accessed by the public (as appropriate) whilst secure access could be made available to partners as necessary. This website could be developed into an interactive site for residents to provide local information.

35. **Joint social networking**
    Partners will be asked to explore a Central Bedfordshire social networking website. A relatively easy way of engaging the community is through the use of websites and social networking sites.

    LSP partners will be asked to consider investing in a website where local people can tell their stories about Central Bedfordshire, take part in discussions about topics of their choosing in forums, share their thoughts and views or share pictures or videos.

36. **Reporting to residents on the impact of engagement**: In addition to other communication and feedback, there will be an annual consolidated report to residents on the nature, scale and outcome of engagement activities in the previous year.