Meeting: **Executive**

Date: **13 October 2009**

Subject: **Community Engagement Strategy**

Report of: **Councillor Richard Stay - Portfolio Holder for Business Transformation**

Summary: The report proposes that Executive approves the draft Community Engagement Strategy for formal consultation with key partners via the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)

Advising Officer:	Richard Ellis, Director of Business Transformation
Contact Officer:	Peter Fraser, Head of Partnerships & Community Engagement
Public/Exempt:	Public
Wards Affected:	All
Function of:	Executive
Key Decision	Yes
Reason for urgency/ exemption from call-in (if appropriate)	N/A

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **That the Executive approve the five key principles of the draft Community Engagement Strategy, which are to:**

   - **give more people greater opportunity to influence decisions;**
   - **enable Councillors to be champions in and for their communities;**
   - **enhance the role of Town and Parish Councils;**
   - **build the capacity for local people to engage; and**
   - **ensure a joined-up, strategic and coordinated partnership approach.**

2. **Note that a formal consultation exercise with key partners and officers will be undertaken by the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) Board, during November 2009 – January 2010, to ensure their agreement and support for its implementation.**

3. **Note that a comprehensive Community Engagement Strategy for Central Bedfordshire will be brought to the Executive meeting on 9 February 2010, in preparation for its implementation from 1 April 2010.**

Reason for Recommendations:	*To enable the Council and it's partners 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 developing a joined-up, strategic and co-ordinated partnership approach, which is consistent with our aspirations for Total Place.*

Background

1 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.

2. A key feature of the bid for unitary status was the opportunity the creation of Central Bedfordshire Council brings to improve the way local public service organisations engage with local people. This strategy seeks to address this by bringing local government closer to the communities it serves.

3. The government and Whitehall expect local authorities, in their role of community leaders, to play a leading role in encouraging community empowerment. In particular, the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 has placed on authorities a new statutory Duty to Involve, from 1st April 2009, which this strategy will seek to address.

4. Central government has also set out a national policy imperative to improve outcomes for local people through the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the new Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) inspection framework.

5. Central Bedfordshire Council and its Local Strategic Partnership is committed to engaging with local communities and has agreed the following National Indicator targets in its 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.

Member, Partner and Officer Involvement

6 The draft strategy has been developed following consultation with a wide range of Members, partners and officers.

7. During April 2009 the Partnerships Team (within the Business Transformation directorate) held a number of drop-in sessions, which were attended by a total 43 Councillors.

8. Partners have been involved through a meeting of the Partner Sounding Board, which was set up by the Shadow Authority to share its proposals and plans with partners, and face to face meetings with key statutory partner organisations.

9. Community engagement, and in particular enhancing the role of Town & Parish Councils, was a key element for discussion for the 100+ delegates that attended the Town & Parish Council Conference on 29th April 2009.

10. There have been a series of face to face meetings with 42 senior officers across all of the Council's directorates.

Key Principles

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

12. **(i) 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.

13. **(ii) 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.

14. **(iii) 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.

15. **(iv) 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.

16. **(v) 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;
- Co-ordinate community engagement at local events; and share appropriate data, intelligence and information and customer insight.

Delivering the strategy

17. The following table sets out proposed actions to meet the principles of the strategy.

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 2007
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

18. Full details of the strategy are contained in Appendix A.

Conclusion and Next Steps

19. The draft strategy has been produced with input from a wide range of Members, partners and officers and builds on identified national best practice. Crucially, it proposes a joined-up, strategic partnership approach to community engagement, which will require the buy-in and support of all key statutory partners in Central Bedfordshire as well as all Council directorates. Consequently, it is recommended that a formal consultation on the final draft is carried out with key partners and officers during November 2009 – January 2010.

20. The consultation will be overseen by the LSP Board and a paper will be taken to its next meeting on 12 November 2009.

21. A final draft will be brought to the Executive meeting on 9th February 2010, in preparation for its implementation from 1st April 2010.

CORPORATE IMPLICATIONS
Council Priorities: The strategy has implications for all five of the Council's key strategic priorities as citizen and user input helps to influence and shape service delivery. **Financial:** Any resource implications will be identified as part of the final strategy document. **Legal:** Implementing this strategy will help the Council and its partners meet the new statutory Duty to Involve as set out in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. **Risk Management:** Risk management is a key part of the service delivery plan for the team and any risks will be managed through this process. **Staffing (including Trades Unions):** The strategy proposes a centralised corporate resource of a Community Engagement Manager and a small team of officers, though any specific resource implications will need to be identified as part of the final strategy document. **Equalities/Human Rights:** 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. **Community Safety:** Community engagement is and will continue to be a key element to tackling crime and reducing the fear of crime.

Sustainability: The community engagement strategy will help to shape the delivery of services that deliver LAA targets and outcomes and Sustainable Community Strategy priorities.

Appendices:
Appendix A – Central Bedfordshire Draft Community Engagement Strategy

Background Papers (open to public inspection): None

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