

Town & Parish Council Conference

29 April 2009



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Introduction

The 1 April 2009 brought about a landmark change in how public services are delivered to the people of Central Bedfordshire with the creation of the new unitary Council. Our vision for Central Bedfordshire is based on bringing local government closer to communities. We can't do this on our own and working together with Parish & Town Councils is vital to achieving this vision.

All Parish & Town Councils in Central Bedfordshire were invited to attend our first Central Bedfordshire Parish and Town Council Conference. The conference was an opportunity to build on our existing relationship and ensure it is productive and rewarding in the future.

At the conference over 100 Parish & Town Council representatives had a chance to network with colleagues and talk to our front-line service delivery teams, meet our Directors and Assistant Directors and talk with us about how we can work better together for the benefit of our residents.

This report provides a write up of all the comments and feedback we received plus answers to every question that delegates left on the question cards provided.

We are building your key issues into our forward thinking to ensure that many of the issues you raised will be addressed within our service plans. We have already actioned some of the feedback, such as arranging more Project Involve training and using the feedback to inform a first draft of our community engagement strategy.

Thank you to all those of you who were able to participate as your involvement is critical to our joint working for the benefit of all our communities. We will be able to update you on progress at the next Town & Parish Council Conference, which will be held on 4th November 2009 at Priory House, Chicksands. Please put this date in your diaries.

Finally, these conferences are not one-off events and we will continue to consult with you in between times through a variety of means.



Tricia Turner
Leader, Central Bedfordshire Council

P.E. Turner.

Conference Objectives

Upon arrival we asked all delegates how well informed they felt and tested this again using our interactive voting buttons at the end of the conference. The results – both before and after – are shown below:

Conference Objective Voting Questions

Q1. How informed do you feel about the vision for Central Bedfordshire Council?

	Before (%)		After (%)		Difference (%)	
Very informed	8	41	29	81	21	40
Quite informed	33		52		19	
Not very informed	43	59	15	19	-28	-40
Not informed at all	16		4		-12	

Q2. How informed do you feel about Central Bedfordshire Council's priorities?

	Before (%)		After (%)		Difference (%)	
Very informed	6	39	18	75	12	36
Quite informed	33		57		24	
Not very informed	45	61	22	25	-23	-36
Not informed at all	16		3		-13	

Q3. How informed do you feel about the services Central Bedfordshire Council is responsible for?

	Before (%)		After (%)		Difference (%)	
Very informed	38	75	29	77	-9	2
Quite informed	37		48		11	
Not very informed	23	24	22	23	-1	-1
Not informed at all	1		1		0	

Q4. How informed do you feel about how to contact Directors, Assistant Directors and Heads of Service at central Bedfordshire Council?

	Before (%)		After (%)		Difference (%)	
Very informed	25	58	38	77	13	19
Quite informed	33		39		6	
Not very informed	19	44	16	23	-3	-21
Not informed at all	25		7		-18	

Communications

After presentations from the senior management team, roundtable discussions considered what works well in terms of communications, what needs improving and any new ideas. This was followed by a voting exercise on the preferred methods of communication. The results of the vote and a summary of the table discussions is detailed below.

1. Communications - Voting questions

Q1. Which of these is your most preferred method of communicating with the council?

	%
Face to face contact – with officers	50
Electronic communication – such as e-zines, websites and email	28
Conventional written communication – including hard copy newsletters	16
Networking events – such as these conferences	7

Q2. Which one of these is your most preferred way of communicating with officers of Central Bedfordshire Council?

	%
Regular information about contact officers in all services	47
Dedicated officer “friend” at the council to act as a key contact	27
Regular officer attendance at your council meetings	26

Q3. Which one of these is your most preferred method of receiving information?

	%
Targeted letters and/or emails – relevant specifically to your organisation	60
Shared communication channels - partnership portals for exchanging news and views.	29
Partnership newsletters - from Central Bedfordshire Council	11

Communications - a summary of the roundtable discussions

Q1. What is working well and should be maintained?

- Emails to Clerks, but would like hard copies of attachments, and particularly large documents
- Direct contact numbers/ key contacts, which are regularly updated
- Officers, Members and Police attending Parish and Town Council meetings
- Parish & Town Council events/ conferences
- News Central Magazine
- The highways helpdesk and Watchman service is good
- Community Liaison Forums and Community Safety Forums are cited as good.

Q2. Issues we need to learn from or improve?

- Lack of response from some officers; queries not given a priority
- Information overload; excessive emails some not relevant; documents too large – need executive summaries and plain English
- More meetings in the evening to encourage attendance
- Planning – feedback on decisions required, engage earlier, early involvement in S.106 agreements, remove 3 minute rule to speak at planning meetings

Q3. New ideas or information exchange between Town and Parish Councils and Central Bedfordshire Council?

- A-Z of services
- Contact details (officers and Members)
- More out of hours contact
- Maintain continuity of dialogue even when officers change
- More face to face contact and officer and Member attendance at Parish and Town Council meetings
- Executive summaries on consultation documents including key questions

During the roundtable discussions any comments were recorded on a 'dialogue mat' on each table. A full copy of all of the comments is recorded in Appendix 1.

Community Engagement and Development Support

Delegates heard about the model being developed to better engage with our communities, and how the Council will work with and support Parish & Town Councils. After this the second roundtable discussions considered how Parish & Town Councils could work together, and with the Council, to solve community issues, improve community led planning and deliver devolved services. The discussions also considered what additional support the Council should provide. The discussions were followed by a voting exercise on the preferred approach to tackling local problems and the benefits of large events for discussing key issues. The results of the vote and a summary of the table discussions is detailed below.

2. Community Engagement & Development Support - Voting questions

Q1. What is your preferred approach to tackling local issues?

	%
Working with neighbouring parishes	74
Working in clusters of parishes with the neighbouring Town	21
Working with non-neighbouring parishes	5

Q2. How helpful are group events for discussing key issues in your locality?

	%
Very helpful	38
Helpful	37
Not very helpful	16
Not helpful at all	9

Q3. How often would you like a Town and Parish Council conference hosted by Central Bedfordshire Council?

	%
Twice a year	52
More often	27
Annually	21

