



# Economic Development Plan Consultation

Full Report, October 2011

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## **1. Background**

On 30<sup>th</sup> June 2011 Central Bedfordshire Council launched a consultation on a draft Economic Development Plan for Central Bedfordshire setting out our commitment to supporting sustainable economic growth in Central Bedfordshire and providing an outline of the way we will work with our partners to realise our economic growth potential. Copies of the consultation document and questionnaire (appendices A and B) were made available on the Council's website, at our main council offices and in all Central Bedfordshire libraries. The consultation closed on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

## **2. Process**

In producing the Economic Development Plan we considered the critical role our partners and stakeholders will play in both shaping the economic vision for the area, delivering supporting activities and, ultimately, facilitating sustainable economic growth in Central Bedfordshire. From the outset, therefore, the aim of the consultation was to engage with as many individuals and organisations involved in economic development as possible to gain their views and ensure that the plan reflected real business and community needs.

The consultation process took place in three parts: launch, discussion, and reminder.

### **Launch**

The consultation was publicised widely during the week of its launch. The online questionnaire was sent to over 400 stakeholders; including all Town and Parish Councils, local businesses and people who had previously expressed an interest in economic development. The launch was also promoted through the Local Strategic Partnership Ezine and Environment and Economy Theme Group. A press and social media publicity campaign was also undertaken to further promote the EDP locally, gaining coverage in a number of local newspapers, websites and business publications.

The consultation was further publicised to local businesses via the Chamber of Commerce's email newsletter and to almost 500 Voluntary and Community Sector organisations via South Bedfordshire Voluntary and Community Action.

Within the council, the consultation was publicised in the weekly Members' Information Bulletin and staff newsletter Be Inspired. In addition to this a working group of officers representing all Directorates has been engaged in developing the plan and aligning to existing corporate plans and priorities.

### **Discussion**

During the thirteen week consultation period, officers carried out a programme of presentations and face-to-face discussion to promote awareness of the consultation and further engage with key partners – both externally and internally – through in-depth dialogue. Workshops were also held to jointly discuss and promote the Economic Development Plan and related All Age Skills Strategy.

External stakeholders engaged through either one to one meetings or group presentations included

- Barnfield College
- Bedford College
- Bedfordshire and Luton Chamber of Commerce
- Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity

- Business Beacon
- Central Bedfordshire College
- Central Bedfordshire Equalities Forum
- Central Bedfordshire Youth Parliament
- Commercial Agents' Forum
- Cranfield University
- East of England IDB
- Federation of Small Businesses
- Health Improvement Partnership
- Intraining (Work Programme sub-contractor)
- Jobcentre Plus
- Local Strategic Partnership Environment & Economy sub-group
- South Bedfordshire Voluntary and Community Action
- Strategic Enterprise Group
- University of Bedfordshire
- Women in Business Network

In addition to the above, the EDP was presented internally to directorate leadership teams to ensure Council-wide input into the development of the EDP. Further to this, a presentation was delivered to the Conservative Group (other groups were offered a presentation) at the request of the group.

## **Reminder**

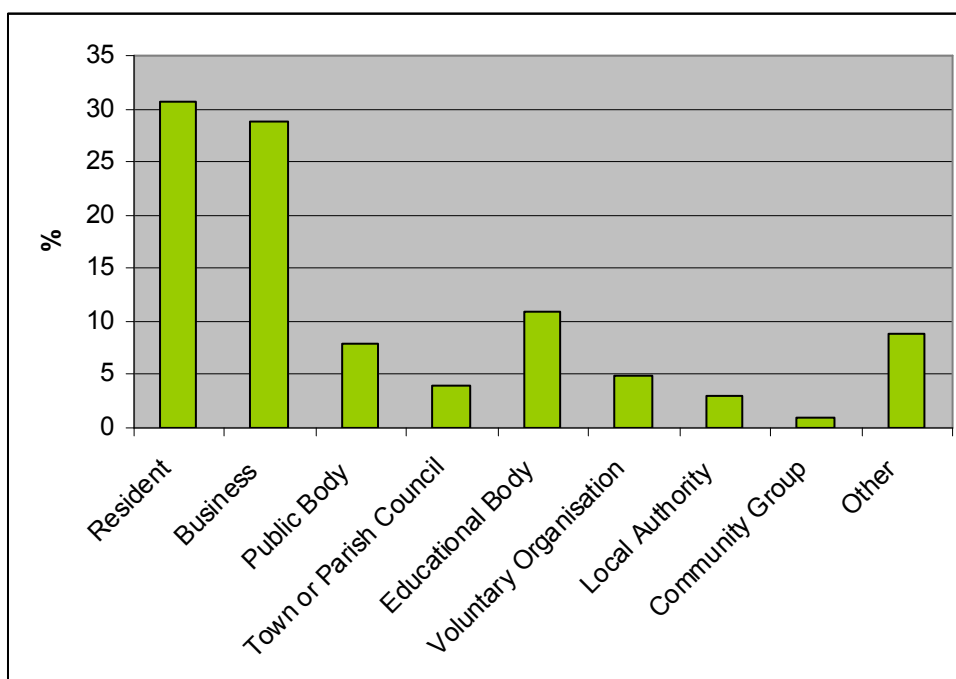
From early September until the closure of the consultation we conducted a reminder exercise to ensure that all partners were aware of the consultation, the deadline and how to respond. This involved a reminder email and reminder press release to the same recipients as at launch; further information in the Members' Information Bulletin and Be Inspired; inclusion in the Director of Sustainable Communities' blog and further discussion meetings with colleagues across the Council.

## **3. Consultation Responses**

105 responses were received to the consultation. 81 of these came through the online questionnaire and the remaining 24 were received in the form of emails/letters and face to face meetings.

## **Profile of Respondents**

Central Bedfordshire residents and businesses accounted for the largest proportions of respondents to the consultation (31% residents and 29% businesses). The remaining respondents comprised of public sector organisations, educational bodies, Town and Parish Councils, Voluntary Organisations and Community Groups as shown in the chart below. Of those who specified 'other', this group was predominantly made up of businesses based outside of Central Bedfordshire but with operations across the whole of Bedfordshire.



**Fig 1. Profile of respondents to the EDP consultation**

The majority of respondents were male (68%) and in the 45-59 year old age bracket (41%). There was a low level of response from younger people, just 4% were in the 18-29 year old bracket. To increase engagement with this demographic, our programme of engagement and discussion included attending a Youth Parliament meeting of representatives from schools across Central Bedfordshire to hear younger people's views on the Economic Development Plan.

## Results<sup>1</sup>

General feedback on the Economic Development Plan has been very positive and detailed, considered responses have been provided that will help us to prioritise the areas of focus within the final plan. Comments received include:

***"Great to see a local authority being so proactive and doing something positive"***

***"Thank you for taking the trouble to do this"***

***"The EDP is a thorough document and covers all aspects needed to drive the economy forward"***

Overwhelmingly, 93% of respondents agreed with the need to prioritise jobs growth and create the conditions to stimulate economic growth (strongly agree and agree combined). 7% had no view on the issue, and none of the respondents disagreed at all with the intention of the plan.

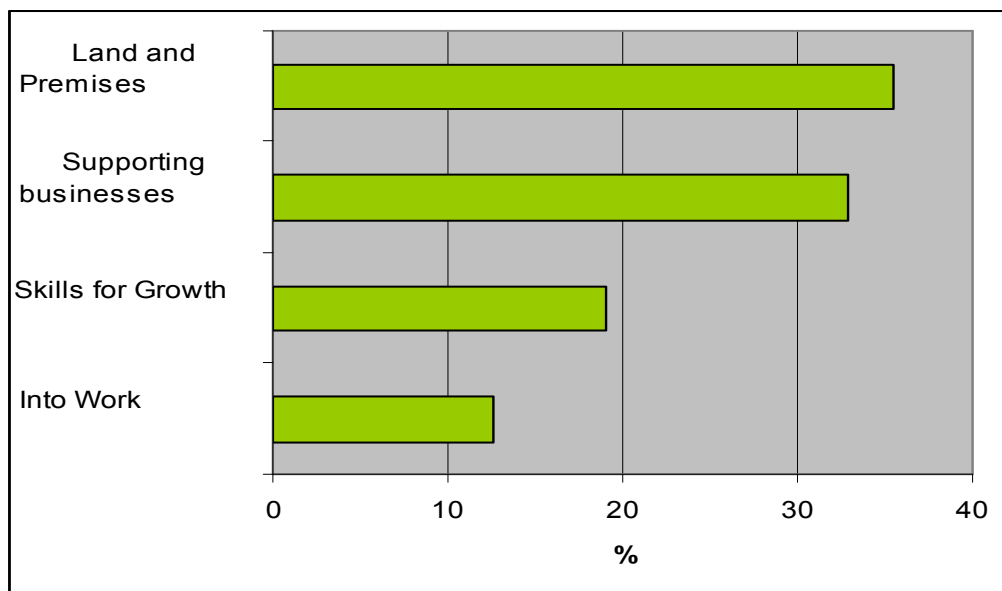
<sup>1</sup> Where results are provided as valid percentages, these are based on the number of people that have responded to the question with a valid response.

## 4. Priority Themes

The draft Economic Development Plan sets out four priority themes to achieve the economic potential of Central Bedfordshire:

1. **Supporting Business**
2. **Land and Premises**
3. **Into Work**
4. **Skills for Growth**

Respondents were asked to indicate which of these themes they believed to be most important in achieving jobs growth and give their reasons why. Land & Premises was considered the top priority to achieve jobs growth by 35% of respondents. However, it is clear from the reasons given for prioritisation, expanded upon later in this paper, that many respondents see all of the priorities as key requirements to support jobs growth due to the wider interconnected nature of the themes and proposed areas of focus and activities. Supporting Business is seen as the second priority (33%), followed by Skills (19%) and Into Work (13%).



**Fig 2. Percentage of respondents allocating each priority theme as most important**

Analysis was undertaken of the responses given by residents and by businesses, which shows a slight difference in the order of priorities allocated by each group:

Due to small number of responses across the sub-groups, caution must be taken when interpreting these results. For example if one or two Central Bedfordshire Residents or Businesses responded with a different view, this could change the results for this group significantly

	Residents	Businesses
	Valid Percent	
Land and Premises	35	50
Supporting businesses	29	36
Into Work	19	5
Skills for Growth	16	9
Total	100	100

Both groups see Supporting Business and Land and Premises as most important; however residents allocate greater importance to the Into Work and Skills for Growth priorities than businesses.

The consultation asked respondents to explain why they allocated the particular theme as most important. Responses have been grouped into categories for ease of analysis and are summarised in the tables below.

Due to small number of responses when giving reasons, caution must be taken when interpreting these results as percentages may appear artificially high. Valid percent is a percentage of those actually providing a reason.

Of those who selected Land and Premises as the top priority, the reasons for this were:

Reason Land and Premises is top priority	Valid Percent
Infrastructure and environment are essential to attracting and growing businesses	50
There is not enough/the right kind of employment land and premises in Central Bedfordshire	35
Planning policies should support business	8
This is the main area where business needs local authority support	4

Other	4
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Of those who selected Supporting Business as the top priority, the reasons for this were:

Reason Supporting Business is top priority	Valid Percent
Support businesses first, then other three priorities will follow	48
Businesses are key to a successful economy	24
Local businesses are the best source of local employment	10
Small/start up businesses need external support and are important because they make up majority of local businesses	10
Other	10

Of those who selected Skills for Growth as the top priority, the reasons for this were:

Reason Skills for Growth is top priority	Valid Percent
Investing in people through skills raises aspirations and individuals' potential to get a job	33
Skilled workforce attracts businesses and helps them grow	20
Lack of skilled people / basic skills locally	27
Skills base will be required to fill the jobs being created	13
UK cannot compete with other countries on lower skilled jobs, therefore we need to position ourselves as leaders in highly skilled industries	7

Of those who selected Into Work as the top priority, the reasons for this were:

Reason Into Work is top priority	Percent
It is important to tackle unemployment at all ages	67
Creating a 'can do' attitude in individuals is essential to growth	11
Economic growth will come through increasing the number of people paying tax/NI and having disposable income	11
Cost of travel will increasingly make it difficult for people to work outside the area	11



## 5. Areas of Focus

The consultation questionnaire set out a list of Areas of Focus within each Priority Theme and asked respondents to indicate which two areas they thought were most important within that theme. The responses for each theme are listed in the tables below. As each person was asked to select two Areas of Focus, percentages have been calculated based on the total number of responses to the consultation overall, rather than to this particular question.

### Land and Premises

Area of Focus	Frequency	Percent
Regenerating our Town Centres	37	46
Delivery of Key Infrastructure	30	37
Supporting Rural Diversification	20	25
Land Use Policy	16	20
Supporting the roll out of next generation broadband	15	19
Bringing forward employment land	15	19
Business Incubation	14	17

Following prioritisation of the Area of Focus, the consultation asked respondents to explain why the two areas they have selected are most important. When grouped into categories, the most frequently provided reasons for selecting Regenerating our Town Centres and Delivery of Key Infrastructure were:

- Town Centres are the heart of our communities
- Town Centres bring inward investment, tourism and local visitors
- Businesses need infrastructure to grow and survive
- Good infrastructure encourages inward investment

### Supporting Business

Area of Focus	Frequency	Percent
Start-ups and Entrepreneurial Activity	46	57
Business Support	34	42
Inward Investment	26	32
Business Engagement	20	25
Innovation	20	25

The most frequently provided reasons for selecting Start-Ups and Entrepreneurial Activity and Business Support were:

- Start-ups have the capacity to actually create jobs
- Start-ups are an essential part of a growing economy
- Support is essential to keep businesses of all types and sizes in the area and help them grow
- The majority of local businesses are small and they are the ones most in need of external support

## Skills for Growth

Area of Focus	Frequency	Percent
Promoting Apprenticeships and Vocational Learning	50	62
Meeting the Skills Needs of Employers	47	58
Developing the Workforce	26	32
Raising Individuals' Aspirations and Achievements	16	20
Provision of Labour Market Intelligence	5	6

The most frequently provided reasons for selecting Promoting Apprenticeships and Vocational Learning and Meeting the Skills Needs of Employers were:

- Apprenticeships/Vocational Learning develop transferable skills and build confidence
- Apprenticeships/Vocational Learning benefit the employer and employee
- It is important to tailor training to the local labour market to meet skills shortages
- Meeting employer skills needs helps businesses to grow

## Into Work

	Frequency	Percent
Promoting Enterprise	44	54
Targeting Youth Unemployment	37	46
Getting to Work	22	27
Tailoring welfare provision to local need	12	15
Advice and Guidance	10	12
Supporting targeted disadvantaged groups to get back into work	9	11

Volunteering as a route to employment	8	10
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The most frequently provided reasons for selecting Promoting Enterprise and Targeting Youth Unemployment were:

- Promoting Enterprise supports businesses and directly creates jobs
- Promoting Enterprise is an innovative way to tackle unemployment
- Youth unemployment is a major national issue which needs to be addressed
- Youth unemployment can have a detrimental affect on other aspects of society

Further to this, when looking at all of the reasons given across all Priority Themes one reason that recurred frequently regardless of the Priority Theme was:

- Because [the area of focus] helps businesses to grow and create jobs.

## 6. Enabling Culture

The four Priority Themes are underpinned by the need for the whole Council to develop an enabling 'can do' culture that is focused on delivering the economic outcomes for the area. This will help deliver the step change in economic performance we strive to achieve and build a reputation that this is a Council and area that is open for business.

The consultation asked for views on the enabling culture and thoughts on how Central Bedfordshire Council could work better together with partners to deliver services focusing on jobs growth.

Comments were predominantly positive and overall respondents were supportive of a Council trying to work in this way. In particular:

***“We commend the authors of the plan in trying to achieve this change”***  
***“It is positive that Central Bedfordshire is seeking to meet the challenges of the modern business world”***  
***“An excellent plan”***  
***“Spot on”***  
***“Can do Council championing business is a great ambition”***

Negative comments centred around the use of the term 'enabling' as possibly not being the right term and the ability of the Council to actually deliver on these promising words.

Respondents also provided suggestions of ways the enabling culture could be strengthened before implementation. Those which were most frequently stated are:

- An enabling approach to planning is essential to the success of this plan
- A sustainable approach must be taken
- Approaches to business rent/rates should be considered in this section
- SMART actions and concrete steps are required
- 'Enabling' may not be the right term – does not give an impression of leadership

- Important that local government does enable and not try to duplicate what business is already doing

## 7. Monitoring Indicators

The consultation document proposed a number of performance indicators to monitor the Economic Development Plan:

- Number of people in employment
- Number of out of work benefit claimants
- Economic activity rate
- Number of people in apprenticeships

These are aligned to the key indicators with the Sustainable Community Strategy and will be underpinned by a suggested wider basket of measures relating to each priority theme.

The consultation asked for views on these indicators. Of those who expressed a view, the majority believed that the right measures are being considered. Comments made have been coded into common themes and are summarised in the table below.

Comment	Valid Percent
These are the right measures	56
Wrong measures / no clear success factors / too vague / insufficient	22
Develop further in conjunction with partners and businesses	9
Poor use of resources	6
Economic Activity Rate requires explanation	6

Respondents were also asked whether any other key performance indicators should be considered. Few respondents made a comment in this section (21) . Many suggestions made were already listed within the wider basket of indicators stated within the Plan.

Further suggested indicators relevant to the Economic Development Plan include:

- No of job vacancies advertised
- Quality of life
- Pro-active business support / number of businesses assisted
- GDP / value of local economy
- No of people in training (generally – not just private sector)
- Career advice delivered in schools
- Outcommuting
- Carbon reduction / sustainable businesses
- Planning applications & permissions for employment land
- Types of business in operation

## 8. Help with delivery of the EDP

One of the principle elements of the Economic Development Plan is to facilitate partnership working in recognition of the need to work together to most effectively address the challenges of the current economic climate. The consultation therefore asked respondents to detail how they/their organisation could play a role in the delivery of the Economic Development Plan for Central Bedfordshire.

Responses to this question can be categorised as follows:

- Developers / Commercial Agents offering to work in partnership with Central Bedfordshire Council to bring forward employment land
- Education and training providers offering to help deliver the All Age Skills Strategy
- Consultants with an economic development focus
- Town and Parish Councils keen for coordinated working in their area
- Offers to deliver a range of business support
- Local authorities keen for joint working, including through the Local Enterprise Partnership
- Business networks offering to work as a link between the public and private sector
- Businesses who would like to take on apprentices
- Residents who would like to be kept engaged on economic development

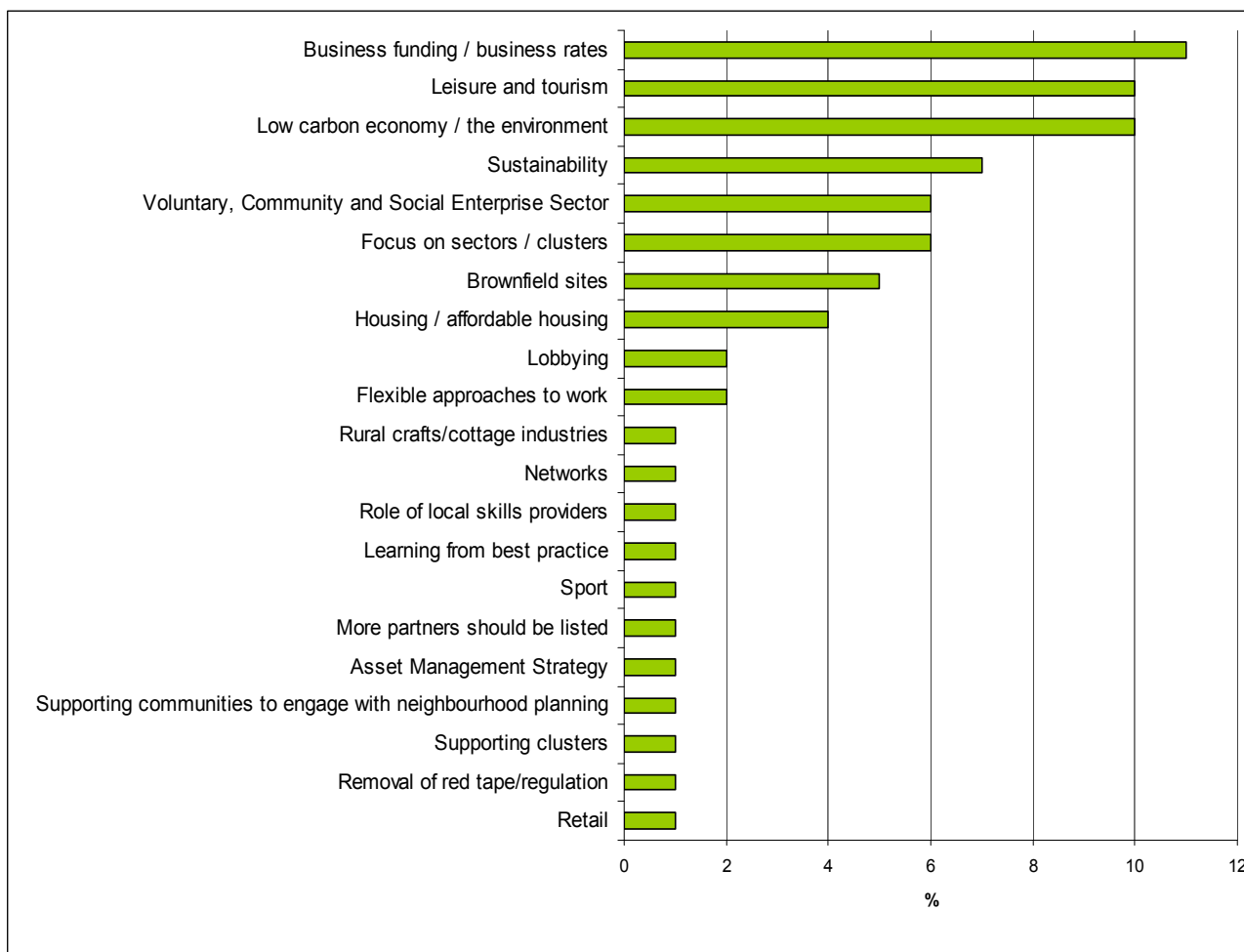
Where contact details have been provided, we will follow up on relevant offers of assistance to remain engaged with partners.

## 9. Is anything missing?

Throughout the consultation respondents were asked to specify if any key issues had been missed from the Economic Development Plan. This was first asked in relation to the Priority Themes, then again after each question on the Areas of Focus.

Analysis of the results has found the same issues recur throughout the consultation and therefore looking at the combined responses is the most appropriate way to determine whether anything should be added.

Suggestions made can in many cases actually be found within another section of the plan. Of the new suggestions, those which most frequently recur can be seen in the graph below:



**Fig 3. Issues regarded as missing from the Economic Development Plan**

## 10. General Comments

At the end of the questionnaire respondents were given the opportunity to provide further comments that may not have been covered elsewhere. Many of these were around issues that are missing from the plan and have therefore been included in the analysis in section 9 of this document.

The few additional comments were mainly positive and stressed the importance of ‘making it happen’ and delivering the plan.

## 11. Individual Issues

A number of respondents raised single, specific issues within their response to the consultation which the Council is aware of. It would be more appropriate to follow these up through engagement by the relevant Central Bedfordshire Council officer, rather than within the Economic Development Plan.

These issues were predominantly single sites raised by developers wishing to work in partnership with Central Bedfordshire Council to take forward their development and are:

- Sundon Rail Freight Interchange

- Bushwood
- Legal and General's Junction 10a Luton Gateway site
- Bedford MK Waterway

## **11. Next Steps**

The results of the consultation will inform the development of the Economic Development Plan to ensure that meets the needs of Central Bedfordshire's residents and businesses.

The findings of the consultation will be presented to Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee, CMT, Executive and Full Council for consideration.

Once finalised and approved by Full Council, the Economic Development Plan will be published on Central Bedfordshire Council's website and we will notify those who asked in the consultation to be alerted to its publication.