

# Community Network: Community Engagement

A conversation about enabling and delivering inclusive  
and accessible engagement and participation

Tuesday 25 June, 6:00–8:30 PM



## Summary Report

## Introduction

The Community Network Event was held on Tuesday 25 June 2024, at Bedford Borough Council Chambers where 55 individuals from 29 different local organisations and charities were welcomed to be part of an open conversation about community engagement and equality, diversity, and inclusion. In previous events, the voluntary sector had shown an appetite for exploring the themes of accessibility, and how we can remove barriers that communities may face when engaging with us.

Bedford Borough Council are currently creating two strategies that relate to these themes of interest:

- Community Engagement Strategy
- Equality Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

We felt that it was important to explore what should be included and considered in these strategies with our valuable partners and within other public services and the voluntary sector. As a local authority, we recognise that without voluntary organisations and community groups, our reach into the community would be limited – this highlights the importance of a continued dialogue between Bedford Borough Council, and those who are well connected within the community.

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## Engaging With Partners and Communities on Council Priorities

Over the past few months Bedford Borough Council's Communities Team have been meeting with residents, community groups and services to discuss the priorities and objectives listed in the Council's draft corporate plan on a page. The plan consists of four main priorities, each with a series of objectives:

- Promoting Health and Wellbeing
- Supporting Families and the Vulnerable
- Stimulating Economic Growth
- Protecting the Environment

These priorities will act as the golden thread aligning all council teams, ensuring that these priorities are at the heart of everything we do, and every service that we provide. For this reason, we wanted to hear from our partners, the voluntary sector, residents,

and young people to hear the voices of our wonderfully diverse community and ensure that our priorities reflect the needs of Bedford Borough.

Jacqueline Gray (Senior Officer & Policy Advisor) gave the room an overview of what a corporate plan is, explaining that Bedford Borough Council's draft corporate plan is an internal document that is a high-level outline of the priorities that the council will focus on over a 4-year period. In February, the communities team spoke with staff across the council, to gather feedback on the plan and things that should be considered in the service plans in relevant areas of interest. From March until July, we then engaged with communities in a number of ways to build an understanding of how accurately partners and residents felt that the plan addresses the needs that

we see in Bedford Borough. We held meetings and focus groups with:

- Young people (primary and secondary)
- Residents
- Environmental Groups
- Health services
- Voluntary sector organisations
- Youth services
- Family support services
- Adult service users with Learning Difficulties

Residents expressed that they felt the priorities *did* reflect the needs of the borough, and while they would need more detail on how the priority outcomes can be achieved, they were pleased to see the current objectives within the draft plan. Communities felt that the

'plan on the page' format was easy to follow, and an accessible way to access and engage with a high level strategic document. The groups and communities we engaged with were keen to be involved in the conversations that inform the service plans that contain the detail of how these priority objectives will be achieved. The key points that were raised for us to consider were:

- Making language more inclusive through the plan
- Ensuring language is clear and easy for all council officers and residents to understand
- Involve communities in decision-making processes on service delivery

If you would like to find out more about the Draft Corporate Plan, please contact [corporateplan@bedford.gov.uk](mailto:corporateplan@bedford.gov.uk) or [click here](#) to go to the webpage.

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## Community Engagement: How Do We Encourage Citizen Power?

Antigua Riley Corion (Community Engagement Officer), introduced herself, sharing her passion for community engagement with the room. All those that were present work with communities in some way, and have a passion for ensuring that their voice is heard – Antigua explained that not only do they deliver community engagement within their service or encourage participation with the people they work with, but they also act as the bridge between the council and the community in many instances, and for that reason are the pillar of the council's ability to engage with residents.

Although community engagement is key to the success of services and relationship building within the community, Bedford Borough

Council does not currently have a Community Engagement Strategy. The consultation strategy can be found [here](#), however there is a difference between public consultation and general community engagement and participation, which is an ongoing process. Bedford Borough Council's Communities Team are keen to create a strategy outlining the council's approach to community engagement, in hopes that this will be a guide and tool to all council departments who are keen to involve the community in decision-making processes and foster trusted relationships with residents across the Borough.

## Developing a Community Engagement Strategy

In this event, we were asking that the community and voluntary sector engage in some *Strategic Level Participation* with us, so that we can use their input to determine what Bedford Borough Councils vision for engagement is, and how we can create a document that can be used by each directorate to ensure that we are delivering best practice engagement and embedding participation and inclusion into decision making processes and service delivery. The full document will have the following contents (although this is subject to what is heard throughout the dialogue with communities):

- 1. Our Vision and Objectives For Community Engagement In Bedford Borough**
- 2. What is Best Practice Engagement**
- 3. Methods of Engagement**
- 4. Planning Engagement Effectively**
- 5. Effective Delivery**
- 6. Priority Outcomes**
- 7. Implementing the Learning and Monitoring Success**

We need a good understanding of what is working, and what is not – and the conversations that were had within the Community Network Event will directly inform the vision and objectives for this document, and what our values and principles should be in all engagement that we have with the community.

We predicted the following four priority outcomes, which were later discussed within breakout room discussions:



## Reviewing the Priority Outcomes

### **1. Create and nurture relationships with people and community organisations to build better connectivity between the council, and voluntary and community organisations and residents from all walks of life.**

The group were split into four groups to discuss the priority outcomes. Attendees felt building relationships with the community is important, but that there needs to be a commitment and appetite from council officers working within the community to build trust. This included those that are active within the community and do engage with the council may still feel a level of mistrust that can be addressed through consistent efforts to involve them in transparent conversations.

There was a large conversation around accessibility, and enabling those with additional needs to be part of community events or meetings. It was felt that more emphasis should be made on including groups that often feel unable to participate and/or access information by:

- Providing a BSL interpreter at every community event where it is likely that representatives from Access Bedford or residents from the deaf community are likely to attend
- Providing language translators where engaging with diverse communities that have large amounts of non-English speakers
- Providing easy read and translated documents
- Venues are accessible for those with mobility issues and/or disabilities

Budget and resources can make it difficult to provide these things in every instance, however it is a legal requirement under the Equality Act 2010 to provide support where required in each of the instances

listed above. Bedford Borough Council understand the importance of making it possible for all communities to participate, and strive for each consultation, engagement process, and all information to be inclusive and accessible.

Visibility of council officers and councillors was also seen as important in building trusted relationships with communities. Each group discussed the importance of human interaction - acknowledging that they often saw the Mayor, Chief Executive and local councillors in the community, but felt that with more conversations and visibility of council officers, senior officers, and directors, there would be less of a barrier between the residents and voluntary sector organisations and the council.

Each group discussed their role as the voluntary, community, or public sector; and felt that they act as a bridge that allow information to flow between the communities they serve and the council. This was something those in the room felt strongly about, however there was a collective concern about how both the council and the Voluntary Sector can reach those that are not involved in any group or accessing any services. There are individuals that 'fall through the cracks' and it is important that those individuals are able to have their voices heard.

### **2. Enable and encourage communities to have the power to influence decisions that affect them through fair and informed decision-making processes.**

The group felt that this is a difficult task, asserting that the majority of residents feel cynical about the councils motivation in most engagement processes. If the community feel as though the survey, consultation, or conversation is a 'tick box exercise', then how can

the council convince communities that we do want to hear from them?

There was a wide discussion on how Bedford Borough Council communicates opportunities with residents. Information should be presented in a fun and engaging way, moving away from traditional 'corporate' styles. The groups felt that the Communications Team use social media well, and that the reels and interaction through Facebook are great for those that are connected with the council on Facebook. However, there are many residents that do not use Facebook, and many people that will not seek to follow the council on social media to find out what's happening in the Borough. The same is true for the council 'What's On' e-newsletter (as well as the other Bedford Borough Council Newsletters), which are great for those that are signed up, but there is little information that reaches beyond those that may already be active within the community.

Again, the partners and voluntary organisations in the room saw themselves as the messengers that share information with the communities that they work with; but it raises the concern that there are many individuals that do not participate in any community groups, access any services, or identify with any community. Those people become the individuals that are disempowered and fail to have their voices heard.

It was also suggested that in line with the strengths-based approach, we could phase the priority outcomes to place power on the residents - moving away from language like '**enabling** citizen power' to more positive language like '**harnessing** citizen power', as communities already have power despite feeling disempowered at times. It is our role as public services and community organisations to remind them that they do have power, and that they can influence their own communities.

### **3. Understand individuals lived experience of the neighbourhoods they live in and the services they use at place.**

The group felt that a large part of understanding individuals lived experience came from active listening and positive in person training on cultural competency. It was suggested that the council work with community groups and voluntary sector organisations to learn about communities by reaching out for presentations and training from groups with lived experience. For example, working with voluntary sector organisations that support those with disabilities/from minority groups/young people etc. Access Bedford offered to support the council by delivering presentations and information sharing on the barriers deaf people face, the same was offered by Love Living It Up to deliver presentations on the barriers adults with learning disabilities face. Other suggested groups included: Autism Bedfordshire, Legacy of Windrush Descendants, Youth Voices, Menopause Alliance, Luton All Women's Centre, Mind BLMK, and other voluntary sector organisations and community groups (many of which attend the Community Network Events).

There was also a suggestion that where possible, residents should be involved in the analysis of data from events, as well as general statistics – 'just because something has had a number put to it, doesn't mean it is accurate or reflective of the whole community.'

### **4. Involve communities in engagement activities and programmes that are meaningful, focused and have a clear purpose or outcome.**

Similarly to previous discussions, the groups felt that there needed to be a strong feedback loop that allowed conversations to be transparent. When planning to speak with the community, we should all be asking ourselves what we want to achieve, who we want to speak to, and what level of influence can they have. The

view was that as long as public services are transparent on this, we can achieve meaningful engagement and encourage active citizenship.

### **The Main Takeaways for Bedford Borough Councils Communications and Communities Team:**

- Transparency is key - we should be honest about our agenda, and when something cannot be done we can explain why.
- Consider how resources can be utilised differently to allow for accessible meetings and engagement processes.
- Education and Information is a 'two-way street' – we should be deepening our understanding of communities by ensuring that council officers undertake in person training and draw on specialist knowledge within communities.
- Council Officers should be encouraged to spend more time within communities, as visibility of decision makers will be the start of rebuilding trust within communities.

Groups also mentioned that information resources would be helpful for the voluntary sector when signposting or attempting to advocate for individuals. The suggestion was made that officers utilise the

council YouTube channel to create resources that are accessible and answer questions about key topics such as housing, employment support, elections, the purpose of a consultation process, or updates on planning and developments etc. There was recognition that although this would be a helpful resource, it would need buy in by the relevant departments and they would have to have the capacity to produce the videos and/or podcasts for the Communications and Communities Team to share with communities through the e-newsletters.

There was also a further question of how community engagement and active citizenship can be measured, for council officers and communities to understand where we are now, and where we want to be.

The group felt that by engaging with communities and building trust, residents will feel like positive stakeholders and begin to feel valued for their knowledge and experience of their area, what they want, and what they need.

There were a range of words that came up throughout the evening, that give us a good understanding of the values and principles that should inform the Strategy, and the Councils overall approach to community engagement:



## Next Steps

The discussions held today will be incorporated into the draft Community Engagement Strategy, which will be shared on our website along with a survey for residents, voluntary organisations, and residents to complete. The Communities Team will also continue to engage with staff through surveys, meetings and workshops to refine the document further. We will also continue talking to groups and residents about how they would like to be engaged with through outreach stalls and meetings to consider in the final draft of the document, with a view that the strategy can be signed off and adopted before the new year.

## Developing our Equality Diversity and Inclusion strategy

The Public Sector Duty is set out in Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. The Council has due regard (which means proportionately and consciously consider) the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation (Fair treatment, a safe environment for all)
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not (Inclusion)
- Foster good relations between people/groups in the community who share a protected characteristic and those who do not (Community Cohesion)

Equality	Equity	Diversity	Inclusion
People are given the same rights and opportunities	People are provided with what they need to be successful or have access to equal opportunity and rights	People from a range of different social and economic backgrounds, from a variety of demographics are included	People feel welcomed, respected, supported and valued to be their true and authentic selves.

When thinking about Equality, it is important that we also think about Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. Our Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy will outline how we can achieve the following statement:

***'Championing equality, diversity, and inclusion by ensuring our policies and practices reflects the diversity in our community and workforce. Promoting fairness and equality for all, ensuring all voices are heard and valued in our decision-making process and services.'***

## Reflecting on Equality Diversity and Inclusion in Bedford Borough

The groups were asked to discuss two overarching questions when thinking about the EDI statement:

- What does an inclusive Council look like?
- What do you see as good practice in relation to representation from the community and community groups in decision-making processes for service delivery? (especially from marginalised and underrepresented groups)

The groups felt that an inclusive council would be one that has a reflective workforce and promotes equity and equal opportunities for all council staff. This led to a conversation around accessible recruitment, and how employment opportunities are promoted within the community. Groups felt as though local councillors seemed reflective of Bedford Boroughs diverse community, with representatives from different communities, cultures, genders, and age groups that are able to advocate for the wide range of individuals in the community.

There was also a wider discussion on training for staff that is in person and mandatory outside of the e-learning that is available in many organisations. Groups repeated the suggestion that voluntary and

community sector organisations could support the council by delivering presentations, offering advice and giving training on specific issues surrounding EDI such as anti-racism, allyship, unconscious bias, disability awareness, deaf awareness, islamophobia and more.

In answer to the second question, groups shared that there should be community forums that are representative that can be called upon by both the council and the voluntary sector, and that the citizens panel should be a reflective group of people that get to meet to discuss decisions that affect the community so that individual needs are met and respected. There was also discussion around the barriers that the council may face when trying to resource EDI to make information and events accessible for all. Some quotes that stood out to facilitators were:

***'EDI should not be an afterthought; it should be at the start of everything we do'***

***'Residents should be encouraged to have freedom of speech on all topics, without judgement'***

***'If you believe in EDI you must resource it, if you don't then you don't believe in EDI'***

## Appendix 1 – Event Feedback

Participants were invited to complete a feedback form that can help us to identify how we can improve the community network events, and understand what topics and discussions are most relevant to the voluntary and community sector. The charts can be found below.

Is this your first time attending a Bedford Borough Community Network event?

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure



To what extent do you agree that attending this Community Network was a valuable use of your time?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

70% of participants felt that attending the Community Network Event was a valuable use of their time



Did you make any new contacts at the event?



80% of participants  
made new contacts at  
the event



Would you recommend this event to other organisations/groups?



60% of participants  
would recommend this  
event to other  
organisations



## Appendix 2 – Contact Directory

Please note: This is not a complete list of those in attendance, or those that receive invitations to the Copmmunity Network Events. The email addresses below were given by those who responded to the poll asking if we are able to include a contact directory in this follow up summary report

Name	Organisation	Email Address
James Timmins	Be Active Beds	<a href="mailto:james@beactivebeds.co.uk">james@beactivebeds.co.uk</a>
Sue Beaumont	Bedford Council of Faith Remembering Srebrenica East of England UNA UK Luton	<a href="mailto:sue_beaumont@btinternet.com">sue_beaumont@btinternet.com</a>
Tom Middleton	Shortstown Parish Council	<a href="mailto:tom.middleton@shortstown-pc.gov.uk">tom.middleton@shortstown-pc.gov.uk</a>
Sarah Pearson	BLMK ICB	<a href="mailto:sarah.pearson22@nhs.net">sarah.pearson22@nhs.net</a>
Sharon Crisp	Liberal Democrat Research Officer	<a href="mailto:sharon.crisp@bedford.gov.uk">sharon.crisp@bedford.gov.uk</a>
Cass Howes	Bedford Council of Faith	<a href="mailto:showesmalcote@gmail.com">showesmalcote@gmail.com</a>
Anastassia Parsons	BPHA	
Amanda Higham	Beds Rural Communities Charity (Community Connectors)	<a href="mailto:amanda.higham@bedsrcc.org.uk">amanda.higham@bedsrcc.org.uk</a>
Fizz Heseltine	Love Living It Up CIC	<a href="mailto:fizz@lovelivingitup.org">fizz@lovelivingitup.org</a> <a href="mailto:gigbuddies@lovelivingitup.org">gigbuddies@lovelivingitup.org</a>
Hilary Tuohy	Age UK	<a href="mailto:Hilary.tuohy@ageukbedfordshire.org.uk">Hilary.tuohy@ageukbedfordshire.org.uk</a>
	Carers In Bedfordshire Mental Health Alliance	

Katy Hillman		<a href="mailto:Katyhillman@yahoo.co.uk">Katyhillman@yahoo.co.uk</a>
	Access Bedford	<a href="mailto:info@accessbedford.org.uk">info@accessbedford.org.uk</a>
Elaine Midgley	Bedford Creative Arts	<a href="mailto:elainem@bedfordcreativearts.org.uk">elainem@bedfordcreativearts.org.uk</a>
Celia Grenville	YMCA	<a href="mailto:contact@bedfordymca.org">contact@bedfordymca.org</a>
Ernie Boddington	Accessibility Bedford	<a href="mailto:Ernie.boddington@gmail.com">Ernie.boddington@gmail.com</a>
Tracey Hughes	Stroke Association	<a href="mailto:Supporter.relations@stroke.org.uk">Supporter.relations@stroke.org.uk</a>