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# Milton Keynes Council March 2009

Working Together  
Partnership working between Town and Parish  
Councils and Milton Keynes Council

Report

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## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This report marks the completion of the delivery of the two tier working project for Milton Keynes Council (MKC) by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA). This work was undertaken by Eamon Lally Carmel Gallagher, Rhian Gladman and Tom Kelly. The aims of this work were to:
- ensure that the learning from Milton Keynes and elsewhere informs further development of partnership working between Parish and Town councils and Milton Keynes Council
  - enable the widest possible participation of council members and parish councillors in the development of the two tier model
  - use the Milton Keynes example to help other councils improve their partnership working with Parish and Town councils, thereby building capacity in the local government sector.
- 1.2 The project was commissioned by MKC in September 2008 and included a number of activities to ensure the widest possible participation and engagement of local councillors and MKC members. The output of the work will be shared with the wider local government sector at a national conference being hosted by MKC on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2009.
- 1.3 MK is unique in the South East in that it is a unitary authority for a large and growing urban community plus an extensive rural area and the whole borough is parished. In the mid 1990s, MKC set out to establish local forums to engage and listen to the concerns of our residents. The 1974 reorganisation had left the more established urban areas in the new town without local councils, and although almost 50% of the borough was covered by Parish or Town councils these tended to be rural councils that were smaller by nature. After the establishment of the unitary council, work was undertaken with community groups to complete the borough-wide pattern with 45 local councils now extending across the whole borough. There are currently 426 councillors across both tiers of local government in Milton Keynes, including 375 Parish and Town councillors and 51 Unitary councillors (20 of whom are 'double-hatted' representing both tiers).
- 1.4 MKC was the first urban authority to agree a set of protocols as to how the relationship with local councils should be conducted. The Parish Charter formalised the relationship in 2004 and more than 40 local councils have agreed to adopt the Charter. The Community Liaison team was set up to facilitate working arrangements between MKC and parish and town councils across the borough.

## 2. Summary of Key Points from Findings and Main Conclusions

### 2.1. The main findings from the study are:

- Being fully parished is good for MK. It enables MKC councillors to be strategic, although there needs to be clear, effective and relevant lines of communication between the two tiers of local government and the associated agencies and partners
- In general there is mutual respect amongst councillors for the respective roles of PCs and MKC that provides parishes with the space to operate and contribute significantly to the well-being of communities—some Parish Councils in urban areas are taking a more strategic role and are engaged in effective partnership work and service delivery
- The relationship between parishes and MKC has been supported by the establishment of a team that liaises between parishes and MKC (the Community Liaison Team), and a Parish Fund, which has acted as a catalyst for substantial investment. A number of formal systems, now need to be updated, including:
  - a Parish Charter, which should be revised and universally agreed and adopted
  - the Parish Assembly which needs to be refreshed to ensure it is fit for purpose
- Area Forums provide opportunities for rural parishes to come together to discuss specific concerns that impact on the whole of the rural area and should be used to generate collective views of the needs of rural areas
- The unitary council should consider how MKC Councillors ‘fit’ with Parish Councils (PC) and Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAG)s, though work to address this has already commenced and there has been effective collaboration between MKC officers and parishes through NAGs. Part of the consideration should explore how the added value they offer can be consolidated
- Parish boundaries need to evolve to fit a changing population—MKC is currently undertaking a Parish Boundary Review.
- Devolution of services to parishes is complex and difficult to pursue; all partners need to work together to respond to existing and planned government devolution of responsibilities agenda, this issue has been a MKC priority since last Summer 08
- The April conference should be used to highlight the successes and address the broad issues of subsidiarity being proposed by government.

### 2.2. MKC is committed to working with Parish and Town councils as partners in order to deliver the best services for the communities they both serve. There are a number of structures and processes in place to facilitate this working relationship which include:

- Parish representatives on the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)
- Parishes have ‘call in’ powers on MKC decisions
- two seats for parish councillors on the Community Safety Partnership’s, Responsible Authorities Group (RAG)
- Parishes are represented on Community Safety Plan Delivery Groups
- Parishes lead on Safer Neighbourhoods programme
- Structured training programme for clerks and Councillors

- Grant funds for partnership projects 50% funded by MKC with the balance from the parishes, enables PCs to determine community projects. Over the last five years nearly £5.9m has been invested in 364 separate schemes
- Parish Assembly is a quarterly meeting for all Parish Councils with MKC which is chaired by the responsible Cabinet member.

### 3. Findings: What is working well

3.1 Parish Council offices are often the hub of the community and parish clerks play a key role in this process. A number of PCs produce informative newsletters, organise community events ranging from a diversity ball attended by 600 people to local clean up campaigns. Services that are based in parish facilities include:

- Citizens Advice meetings,
- Luncheon clubs that provide a valuable service to elderly residents for meals and opportunities to socialise,
- Mother and toddlers groups,
- Youth activities and
- Meeting space for voluntary/community groups.

Some Parish Councils are taking over responsibility for the management of community meeting rooms. MKC staff delivers housing advice sessions, there are regular street care surgeries held locally and there are future plans to extend this to other services.

- 3.2 Parish councillors are focussed on needs of their communities, and MKC councillors whilst committed to their local Ward area also take on strategic issues that impact on the wider community. There are generally constructive working relationships and many parishes are positive about the support they receive from the ward councillor. MKC councillors value the relationships with their local councillors and see this as a key mechanism to advocate the needs of their ward and to deliver effective community leadership.
- 3.3 Neighbourhood Action Groups are part of the national neighbourhood community policing programme which Thames Valley police set up with MKC, local PCs, Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service and other agencies. They work together with the Community Safety Partnership to promote community safety across Milton Keynes. The NAGs are involved in parish work and in some places are chaired by a PC councillor with secretarial support provided by the PC.
- 3.4 There has been effective collaboration between MKC officers and parishes through NAGs that involve the public and others, in environmental issues. Some PCs surveyed their residents to identify key community concerns that could be addressed through the NAGs. Feedback confirmed that concerns are dealt with efficiently and there are regular updates on progress.
- 3.5 Area Forums provide opportunities for rural parishes to come together to discuss specific concerns that impact on the whole of the rural area. This is taking time to establish and clarify its role and remit. However where they are established, the Area Forum provides a platform for parishes to act together on issues of common concern. It has the potential to address the perception that the needs of rural parishes are not fully understood in MKC.
- 3.6 The Parish Funds offered by MKC allow parishes to nominate community projects. The approved schemes are 50% funded by MKC with the balance from the parishes. This is a useful mechanism

that enables PCs to determine community projects. Over the last five years it has been the catalyst for nearly £5.9m of investment jointly by the councils in MK in 364 separate schemes, providing enhanced facilities within communities, halls and meeting places, play schemes, community events, traffic calming, street lighting, parking spaces and new play areas and play equipment.

- 3.7 The Community Liaison Team (CLT) is well regarded for the support it provides to PCs, as the interface with MKC. CLT works closely with MKC service areas including the Street Care team who were described by councillors as 'very helpful'. The way Street Care services are organised locally enables quick responses to community concerns. The service works particularly well with parishes by running clean up days in parish areas e.g. Little Brickhill. They also hold meetings in PC offices and so have cultivated an excellent relationship with many PCs. This excellent model of two-tier working should be learnt from and replicated across other council services.
- 3.8 PCs in urban areas are taking a more strategic role and are engaged in effective partnership work and service delivery. A number of parishes are at the forefront of the relationship between English Partnerships (EP) and the community around the growth agenda. Parishes are also taking on other services e.g. street lights, youth services and the issue of bus passes. Some parishes are tackling social issues and have funded Police Community Support Officers (PCSO). A Town Council has taken responsibility for managing the local swimming pool and has installed public toilet facilities in the town. These are examples of the range of activities where Town and Parish councils are responding to the wishes of their communities by augmenting the service provided by MKC. Further examples are included in the appendix.

## **4. Findings: Issues Raised**

- 4.1. The Parish Charter has not been fully supported by a number of stakeholders. Parish councillors said that there had been limited opportunities to engage in the original development process for the Parish Charter and a number of PCs signed it as a means of getting access to funds. Feedback indicated that the Parish Charter is perceived as being 'too much in favour of MKC', bureaucratic and not reflecting the needs of all the PCs in Milton Keynes.

- 4.2. The purpose of the Parish Assembly is not clear to all stakeholders. It is not currently working as an effective mechanism to disseminate information to the parishes. Some councillors do not attend so their parishes are not represented and the minutes of the meetings are not being distributed in a timely fashion to the other Parishes. MKC is perceived to be controlling the agenda, presentations take too long and the current format does not facilitate high level debate. Local councillors want to work in a non confrontational way that delivers the best outcomes for their communities.
- 4.3. Responding to consultation documents within the 6 weeks timescale is problematic for many PCs. The deadlines do not always fit with the PC meeting schedules. The electronic format and style of language can be additional barriers. Some councillors said that they feel pressurised by what they consider to be unrealistic consultation timescales and the volume of work this entails, these issues are of particular relevance to smaller parish councils, who may need additional support to engage effectively.
- 4.4. However, Parish Councils recognise the value of responding to key consultation exercises and make efforts to comply with consultation timetables. For example, one Town council is now meeting fortnightly to review planning applications. Some parishes consider that responding to consultation diverts time away from dealing with local issues, which is their primary concern. Sharing the work of responding to consultation exercises and collaborating with similar PCs could make this more manageable. For example, dealing with consultation on strategic issues like the Transport Plan through a Parish Cluster could reduce the workload for all concerned. It is critical to provide feedback on the results of consultation, this keeps people informed of outcomes and any changes that resulted from their feedback. Closing the feedback loop will help to engage people in the wider benefits of consultation.
- 4.5. Heads of Service in MKC understand the role of the PCs and the needs of Ward Members and the response at this level is good. However the role of all councillors is not fully understood at an operational level, by all officers. MKC needs to improve communication channels and build capacity in staff that have regular contact with PCs to help them understand the role and contribution of this tier of government. In addition, operational staff need to appreciate when to inform or consult with Ward Councillors. Efforts are underway to address this, but more work needs to be done.
- 4.6. There are examples of good work being delivered but local councillors are frustrated at the speed of response, and the difficulty of doing business with some council services. For example, in one case, it took 9 months to get a lease transferred. It is problematic to know who to contact and silo working results in enquiries being passed from one department to another. Highways are a major concern where complaints about traffic congestion and road surfaces have resulted in a complete divergence of view between parishes and MKC on Transport. Landscape issues, maintenance of hedges and grass cutting are other contentious issues for councillors.
- 4.7. There is potential to duplicate the work of PCs who are an independent statutory organisation with that of other consultative fora. NAGs and Area forums are welcomed, but some of their work replicates discussion that happens within PCs. This duplication dissipates time and energy. The Parish Assembly is perceived to be another layer, in this structure.
- 4.8. Devolving services from MKC poses difficulties; for some PCs the pace of devolution is too slow, while others view the concept with suspicion. Taking on extra responsibilities would mean parishes becoming significant employers and a number currently do not have the capacity or expertise e.g. on Human Resource. There are concerns about double taxation whereby communities 'pay twice'

for a service through council tax and the parish precept, and the impact of devolution on contractual issues and economies of scale. The Parish precept is currently £4.5 million.

## 5. Recommendations

- 5.1. **Work to revise the Charter which formalises the relationships and working arrangements between PCs and the unitary authority now needs to be undertaken.** The original Charter is perceived as 'one size fits all' which does not fully recognise the diverse nature of parish councils, particularly the differences between urban and rural parishes. The review will need to be set in the context of new emerging legislation and have input from all stakeholders, from the outset. This could result in some high level protocols that are appropriate for all PCs, alongside a menu of activities that could form the basis of Service level Agreements (SLA) for those PCs that wish to take on responsibility for service delivery.
- 5.2. **A review of Parish Council boundaries is ongoing and needs to be completed.** The review of parish boundaries is causing concern. Some Parishes consider the review to be unnecessary as the current system already enables parishes to work together on specific topics of mutual interest and concern. Parishes recognise the benefits of clustering on certain issues but also want to maintain focus on the specific issues that matter to their communities and ensure community meeting places are available. The review of boundaries needs to be completed and needs to take into account the growth in some areas which could result in very large Parish Councils. It is critical to get it right, as it will have an impact on communities, staff and contractual arrangements, with consequences for the next 10 -15 years on how the parish councils work and their capacity to deliver at a local level.
- 5.3. **The relationships and regular liaison between MKC councillors and parish councillors are important to good communication and partnership working and should be developed further.** There are examples of very good working relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. It is of course more difficult to maintain regular liaison in those cases where MKC wards cover many parish councils.
- 5.4. **PCs can take responsibility and work together more for the benefit of the wider community.** On occasions, this will entail taking a more strategic view as to what the area could be like in the longer term. There are examples where parishes have developed a longer term vision and this learning, and where appropriate staffing and other resources, could usefully be shared with others.
- 5.5. **The role of the Parish Assembly needs to be reviewed within the context of new consultative fora that are now in place, such as the Area Forums.** The Parish Assembly represents a significant investment of member and officer time and the impact of this time and energy is not always clear. There should be a constructive dialogue between MKC and partners to ensure that the role and function of the assembly is clarified and understood; this will help to support the achievement of the best outcomes for communities.
- 5.6. **Improved communication between Milton Keynes Council and the Parish Councils could facilitate more effective partnership working.** The Community Liaison Team (CLT) within Milton Keynes Council, which is well respected, is a small team with limited resources to facilitate all exchanges between the unitary council and parishes. Parishes need to take more responsibility, if they want to be more involved in decision making. They need to consider how they can work with MKC to facilitate local government deadlines.
- 5.7. **A cultural change is needed to bring about more effective communication and coordination.** This includes better signposting to council services; ensuring officers who have regular contact with

PCs understand their role and recognise the value of their contribution. It is also important that ward councillors are kept informed of any developments with the PCs in their area. – see para 4.5

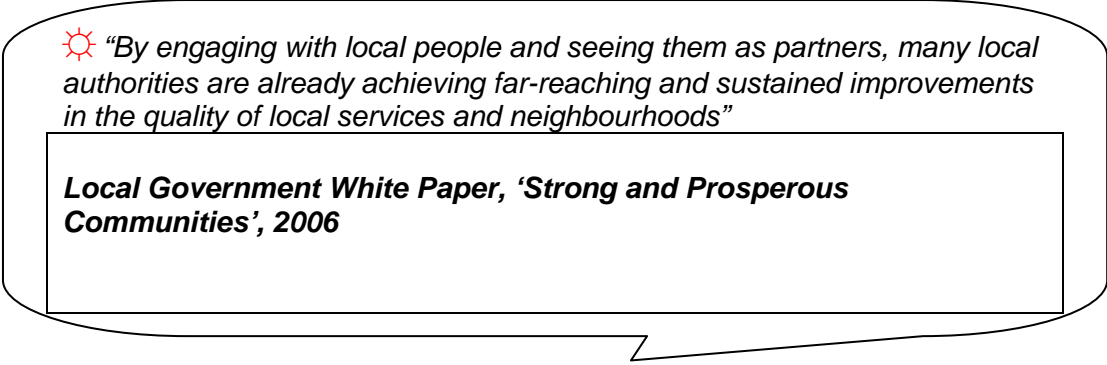
- 5.8. **In terms of the issues regarding consultation timelines, more should be done to ensure that PCs are given closer to the government's recommended time to respond (12 weeks), rather than the current 6 weeks average.** The consultations could be included on the agendas of meetings as regular standing items to ensure a more structured approach and capacity should be built in to close the feedback loop by letting people know the outcomes of the consultation.
- 5.9. **In devolving services, there needs to be a clear mutual understanding of the benefits to customers and residents, the contractual issues involved and where accountability lies.** Customers need to be confident that any changes will result in improved services, which are cost effective and tailored to their specific needs. This will require making difficult decisions, and involve new patterns of service delivery that will not disadvantage any section of the wider community. Devolution of service delivery is a complex issue that is difficult to pursue at a time when most authorities are exploring the shared services agenda in regard to large scale contracts and strategic issues and seeking to achieve economies of scale through joining up with other councils. Some parishes have come forward with proposals to take over devolved services, including issuing concessionary bus passes and the responsibility for meeting halls. Other Parish Councils have not sought to take on additional services. Parishes are clear that successful devolution of services will depend on the right financial package being in place. Both the unitary authority and the Parishes are also clear on the need to avoid double taxation.
- 5.10. **PCs need to demonstrate democratic accountability by encouraging communities to participate more fully in their local councils and aspire towards a greater number of councillors elected in an open and transparent way.** Only 10% of seats were contested at the last parish elections, the remainder were single candidates or co-options. This situation lacks robust accountability and democratic mandate for organisations collectively spending £4.5m in precept in 09/10. More PCs should work to attain Quality Council status; to date only five PCs have reached that national benchmark.
- 5.11. **There are some practical actions that MKC could consider to enhance partnership working.** PCs would value support with administrative and organisational work which includes:
- policy input particularly around equalities
  - performance management systems
  - keeping staff motivated
  - support for all PCs to develop parish plans.


## Appendices

### A. Context

#### Community engagement

In the last decade, there has been a move to encourage more *participatory democracy* in local government, i.e. local councils using their role to inform, consult and involve local people in identifying community needs. In recent years, greater attention has been given to the involvement of community leaders, voluntary groups, neighbourhood residents and civic associations in council policy decisions which affect their lives and in the design and delivery of better public services. This is often referred to as 'the new localism' and is designed to broaden democratic participation and contribute to more effective neighbourhood management and sustainable communities. The way that councils involve local people in decision making and service improvement is often known as *neighbourhood and community engagement*.



 *“By engaging with local people and seeing them as partners, many local authorities are already achieving far-reaching and sustained improvements in the quality of local services and neighbourhoods”*

**Local Government White Paper, ‘Strong and Prosperous Communities’, 2006**

Councillors are in the front line of neighbourhood and community engagement. It is only at a local level that problems such as access to social housing, crime, deprivation and anti-social behaviour can be understood and addressed. Few other community leaders have the mandate to co-ordinate different interests, reconcile diverse views and encourage open debate and dialogue in the way that elected representatives can.

The Community Empowerment White Paper sets out how the Government plans to give citizens and communities more rights and more power in three key ways:

1. more information and greater influence over the local decisions that affect them
2. new means of holding politicians and councils to account
3. where they choose, more opportunity to get directly involved in managing and shaping how local services are delivered.

This duty will continue to place councillors at the very heart of the neighbourhood and community engagement process.

## Parish and Town councils

Parish and town councils are key to community engagement and greater representation. The Local Government White Paper in 2006 stated that 'communities need skilled local councillors who can be a pivotal link between the council and local people and organisations'. The National Association of Local Councils' (NALC) National Conference in Bournemouth (5-7 October 2008) highlighted that parish and town councils now have the opportunity to further develop their services to enhance their role as advocates and representatives of their communities.

Parmjit Dhanda MP, minister of local government, stated that with nearly 9,000 parish and town councils across the country, they are a powerful force for engaging communities. He said: "These are exciting times and I see a key role for parish and town councils. It is therefore vital that they all play a role in engaging communities".

John Findlay, Chief Executive, NALC commented: "Councils should engage with the community in 'blue skies' thinking about what improvements the community would like to see, using Parish Plans where they exist. Community engagement should involve the community as a whole and direct involvement with stakeholders and voluntary and community organisations. We need to take a fresh look at what our councils can do, building on existing models and good practice and being imaginative in key areas of community concern".

## B. Methodology

The key phases of the project are outlined in the table below:

Phase 1	Document review of current working practices and governance arrangements, looking at good practice elsewhere and researching other approaches to enhance partnership working.
Phase 2	Base lining interviews with 30 key stakeholders. This included telephone discussions with a cross section of councillors from MKC, Parish and Town councillors, and officers who were involved in service delivery. The purpose of this was to identify core practices and community engagement tools to inform the content of the councillor workbook.
Phase 3	This included designing distance learning material to develop the community leadership capacity of councillors from the two tiers. A helpdesk and telephone support was offered to everyone participating in the distance learning stream and MKC produced hard copies of the workbook for all councillors. A Community of Practice (CoP) was set up to facilitate discussion and share learning as part of this phase. This can be accessed at <a href="http://www.communities.ides.gov.uk/c/956221/home.do">www.communities.ides.gov.uk/c/956221/home.do</a>
Phase 4	9 Shared learning sessions provided an opportunity for councillors to network, share learning, discuss challenges facing the community and engage in problem solving exercises to address these challenges. Each workshop (9) was facilitated by an IDEa consultant and member peer with support from officers in the Community Liaison team. 57 councillors attended the workshops  The project team attended a meeting of the Parish Assembly and were invited to attend meetings in two PCs. Members of the project team also met with parish

	clerks to keep them informed of progress and to ascertain their views on current working arrangements.
Phase 5	Production of a report which captured the lessons learnt from the project. This will inform work to revise the Parish Charter and future partnership working in Milton Keynes and across the local government sector.
Phase 6	The key activity in this phase is sharing the learning within local government, at a national and regional level. The CoP will have a key role in this as well as a major conference MKC are hosting.

### C. Examples of joint working:

Partnership working between Milton Keynes Council and the Parish and Town Council takes three forms. There are examples where the unitary council and the parishes work together either through joint funding, joint activity or decisions to devolve services in order to deliver better outcomes for communities. There are also examples of where parishes use their own funds to enhance services provided by the unitary council. A third form of partnership is where parishes step in to provide services that are not provided or have ceased to be provided by the unitary council. All three of these forms of joint service delivery provide enhanced benefits to local communities.

During the course of the two-tier working project a number of good practice examples emerged.

Working in partnership with Milton Keynes Council and other partners, many parishes including Campbell Park , Woburn Sands, Newport Pagnell, West Bletchley and Bow Brickhill are introducing 'No Cold Calling' Zones ,

"Initiatives such as this highlight the joined up approach to tackling issues within Campbell Park Parish. Working in partnership with the Milton Keynes Council Trading Standards, Thames Valley Police, and the Parish Council will help to ensure that our residents feel safer within their communities". *John Goss Chair of Campbell Park.*

Partnership between Parishes and the unitary council is also facilitated through the Parish Partnership fund. Provided on a matched funds basis, the grant supports Parishes in the delivery of the improvements that local communities want to see .e.g. new street lighting in Weston Underwood.

Parish Councils are building on MKC core services. In Woughton Parish rangers inspect play parks, report offensive graffiti and deal with a host of liveability issues. Other examples of Woughton Parish Council enhancing services include improved lighting in underpasses and the provision of bus shelters.

Many parishes provide services to young people. Woughton took on a youth worker, formerly employed by MKC to deliver a range of youth activities within the local community. The parish runs a number of youth groups for young people from 8 years to 15 years. These are held in community centres across the parish.

Parishes are also providing opportunities for communities to engage in key issues. The 'Spotlight' series of events held by Campbell Park Parish Council is an example of a parish council addressing key community issues such as diversity, health inequalities and housing issues. These events have given communities the opportunity to share their experience, learn about and discuss these key issues and have also provided an opportunity for Parish Councils to share learning.

Parish councils are also maintaining services where there is a local demand. Newport Pagnell TC has employed staff to run the swimming pool and play areas through match funds. They have installed toilet facilities and are determined not to impose car parking charges

Hanslope PC increased their precept to keep the village hall open as a facility for the community.

Shenley Brook End Parish employ Youth workers and a Parish Warden to support their local community

In Stantonbury (Bradville) the unitary authority has handed over their former housing office to Stantonbury Parish Council for a community office, local facilities and police base.

Bradwell Parish Council have their parish office in MKC housing stock

The depth of partnership in MK has been recognised by central government; the Home Office have awarded the Neighbourhood of Shenley Lodge & Furzton, where the police, parish and unitary authority staff work together in co located premises, as a National Exemplar of good practice for Neighbourhood Management.