

# Together We Can

2021

Working together to do  
the best for every local  
community within  
Milton Keynes



## Why this and why now ?

2020 was tough for us all here in Milton Keynes. The impact of the COVID pandemic and the associated lockdown has been both immediate and there will undoubtedly be longer-term implications. What has become really clear is that all councils, regardless of type and size, have pulled together to support the most vulnerable in our community. All Local Councils have worked tirelessly for and on behalf of residents. They have also come together in partnership with Milton Keynes Council (MKC) to find innovative solutions to fast moving challenges caused by the pandemic. Local Councils working together are an incredible and powerful force and this only becomes stronger when working with and alongside MKC. There is a need to build on these incredible partnerships and ways of working and this document sets out some parameters for engagement between and with Local Councils and MKC. The relationship between MKC and Local Councils has, at times, been challenging for all concerned. The purpose of this document is to frame a new relationship between Local Councils and MKC- it isn't based on sanctions or directives, but rather it is to encourage the development of a mature relationship between us all. We all have a role to play in developing this key relationship and our residents and communities expect us to do this especially at this time of increased demand for support, advice and guidance. This will not be easy but - together we can.

**Local Councils (Parish<sup>1</sup>, Town and Community Councils)** have a key role in supporting local communities and shaping and improving their local areas. Milton Keynes is unique, being the first unitary local authority to be fully parished in England, and this is something to celebrate. This unique democratic model is one that has and must continue to be to the benefit of residents and communities. Local Councils and MKC can be proud of the relationships we have with each other - much has been achieved. But these have been difficult times for local government with continued reductions in budgets whilst at the same time an increasing demand on services. The impact of this, both for MKC, Local Councils and our delivery partners has been that all have had to take a long hard look at what they each do and how they do it. The pandemic and associated lockdowns have further exacerbated this challenge.

Given the scale of the task, as a Principal Authority and as Local Councils alike, we are all aware that the only way in which communities can be fully supported is through **working together**. This relationship is one of equals, as we all have a key role to play, and to this end we are all committed to creating the right environment so that Milton Keynes continues to develop and thrive with all councils (both Local and Principal) and communities taking innovative and bold decisions that can effect real change at the local level.

The MKC Plan (2016-2022) recognises the importance of this partnership working and the vital role that Local Councils have in shaping their own local areas and Milton Keynes as a whole. There is a vast reservoir of ideas, innovation and local knowledge within our local communities and we all

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<sup>1</sup> Includes Parish Meetings

want to ensure that, working together, we feed into the sustainable and ever-evolving development of Milton Keynes as a place to visit, work and live.

## Our structures

- MKC is recognised as the Principal Authority for the area.
- Policy is set by a combination of democratically elected ward councillors and national legislation and administered by MKC Officers.
- Local Councils (48 within Milton Keynes) are the first tier of local government and have a unique and in-depth knowledge of their local communities and places. Local Councils are autonomous and independent and are corporate bodies constrained by statute. They have a number of statutory powers and broader powers can be acquired through a General Power of Competence.
- Policy is set by Local Council Councillors and administered by Local Council Officers, usually but not exclusively, the Clerk.
- It is important for Ward Councillors (within MKC) and Local Councillors (within Local Councils) to recognise the great value in having good relationships across and with the different local councils and with MKC. Good communication and engagement are central to being effective. Local Council Councillors understand the role that Ward Councillors play at the MKC wide level. Equally, Ward Councillors understand the role that Local Council Councillors play at local area level. And whilst there are different types of councillor (be they ward or parish), all are committed to ensuring the best outcomes for their local areas and for Milton Keynes as a whole.

## Working together

- 'Together We Can' embodies the true ethos of partnership working, which involves all partners contributing to a common goal and communicating and working effectively with each other.
- By pooling knowledge, experience and tools, all members and council officers (both local and principal) can build a better understanding of what works at the very local level and identify the needs and capture the views of residents and communities and represent and act upon these.
- The success of this is dependent on all partners treating each other equally and with respect and with an understanding of the statutory landscape within which each partner operates.
- This collaborative relationship will be mutually beneficial for all and involve both officers and councillors at every level.

- The non-statutory Milton Keynes Association of Local Councils (MKALC) gives voice to issues affecting Local Councils across Milton Keynes and liaises with MKC on their behalf (although of course individual Local Councils also raise specific issues). MKALC is supported by a County Association (BALC) and National Association (NALC) which provide advice, training and literature to Local Councils.

We all know that the challenges that local communities are facing are sometimes very difficult to solve but **together we can** work towards positive solutions. To ensure that all parties feel valued, it is important that we treat each other with respect, dignity and politeness (even when we might not always see things the same way). We must all behave fairly and constructively towards each other when we disagree, and we will listen and be respectful in our exchanges of views. We all know that disagreements will arise sometimes and that's okay, because everyone can express their opinion and be listened to. Sometimes debate will be robust, but all of this is grounded in the aim of making Milton Keynes a better place for our residents and communities.

**What this means in reality is that Local Councils and MKC will:**

- Respond to each other in a timely manner and work together to ensure a regular flow of information, particularly where issues remain outstanding or unresolved. We all recognise communication is important, so to respond with acknowledgements and regular / periodic updates is helpful.
- Provide inductions to new key officers on the role of Local Councils and MKC.
- Within MKC, have Local Council champions that work with ward councillors, council officers and cabinet members to highlight the key role that Local Councils have.
- Support closer working between ward and Local Council councillors.
- Strive to continuously work together and improve engagement.
- Not work in silos and ensure the words within this document translate into actions.
- Ensure that the Parish Partnership Team continue to be a point of contact, information and advice and provide issue resolution for Local Council difficulties.

## Consultation and engagement

Local Councils and MKC recognise the importance of consultation and engagement and it is a key element of the democratic process.

**MKC and Local Councils** will recognise that consultation and engagement can be challenging but is a key mechanism for ensuring that Local Council and resident voices are heard about key issues impacting on both them and Milton Keynes more generally. As the principal authority, it is MKC that runs formal consultations on both local and national issues, but it also engages Local Councils

in more informal ways through various types of engagement to help inform the development of policy and practice of the Council. To this end **MKC will:**

- Consult and engage positively with Local Councils on matters which impact them and their communities. The matters that will be of importance to some Local Councils might be less so to others, so there will be a bespoke approach for some issues.
- Engage and start conversations early, where it is recognised that things will impact Local Councils. It may well be that formal consultation follows but engaging Local Councils early in the formulation of some policies or initiatives can have a beneficial impact on success.
- Publish formal consultations on <https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/consultations> to enable Local Councils to respond accordingly and highlight, in advance, through the parish clerks, the consultations that are coming up.
- Continue to engage with Local Councils using the Parishes Forum (PF), the Parishes Advisory Group (PAG) and other meetings to enable consultation, engagement and dialogue to take place. This can be both formal, but also can be informal through discussions with Local Council members / officers and local resident and other groups.
- Attend Local Council meetings, as and where appropriate, and if requested to discuss the impact on the Local Council and its parish area.
- Ensure that formal consultations, other than those governed by statutory regulations such as planning matters, will be for a minimum of six weeks excluding the Christmas/New Year holiday period and giving some extra allowance in August when many Local Councils do not have formal meetings.
- Understand that community engagement and consultations is about listening and learning and having meaningful dialogue with the community and is an opportunity to find out what is important to them, their neighbourhoods and local areas.
- Use the most effective method to consult and engage, including digital methods.
- Consult in plain English to be clear and concise.

**And for Local Councils, they will:**

- Respond and engage with formal consultations and provide contributions to shape policies that matter to local residents and communities.
- Provide officer / clerk contributions and support where the nature of the consultation or engagement is more about operational processes.
- Engage with MKC officers in the development of policy or initiatives respecting the uncertainty and confidentiality which comes in the early stages of development but recognising early influence of these decisions can lead to successful results for residents.

During the pandemic, the nature of consultation has evolved as there has been an increase in delegated decision making as MKC has responded to national government directive. There is a need to ensure that, going forward, the primacy of both formal and informal consultation is maintained by MKC and the MKC cabinet is committed to ensuring this.

Useful documents:

- *Cabinet Guidance on Consultation*  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/691383/Consultation\\_Principles\\_1\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/691383/Consultation_Principles_1_.pdf)
- *Statement of Community Involvement* setting out how MKC engages and consult with local communities and stakeholders on planning policy documents and planning applications  
<https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/planning-and-building/planning-policy/statement-of-community-involvement-sci>

## Asset and Service Devolution

Both MKC and Local Councils themselves recognise that Local Councils are all different in their makeup, capacity and size and will require different solutions and responses, because they have different needs – one size simply does not fit all. These assets and services are for the benefit of residents and Local Councils can be best placed to deliver this. MKC will support those Local Councils with an appetite to become more involved in service and asset devolution and work across the Local Council community to ensure that the involvement is at a level that suits individual Local Councils and the communities and residents they serve.

Local Councils are welcome to make use of the past experiences and expertise accumulated by MKC in relation to devolution projects in which they choose to engage. For example, this could include shared ambitions for healthy and active communities, to be the Greenest City, promote biodiversity and combat climate change.

## Joint working arrangements

**Parishes Forum (PF)** - We will all ensure we meet regularly to discuss issues that are important to each other. The current way this is done is through the PF, which meets four times a year to achieve this. PF meetings can be held physically or virtually. Physical meetings take place in various locations, e.g. MKC offices, Local Council Offices, other appropriate venues, etc. Each Local Council

nominates two representatives annually. Local Councils share the details of their representatives with MKC (usually following their Annual General Meetings). The Cabinet Member with responsibility for Parish Partnerships chairs the PF. A vice chair is elected by the Local Councils and serves for two years. The election is undertaken by ballot at the PF. The PF provides an opportunity for influencing, bringing fresh ideas and new outlooks, etc, as well as providing and sharing information.

MKC officers from the Parishes Partnership Team support the PF.

**Parishes Advisory Group (PAG)** - The PAG is made up of a small group of committed and enthusiastic Local Council councillors, who have joint working at the heart of their being and wish to work co-operatively for the greater good of all Local Councils across the MK area. The PAG has no decision-making powers and nor is it a constituted group. It is purely an advisory group. The Cabinet Member and vice chair of the PF also hold the same roles on the PAG. The purpose of the PAG is to:

- advise the Cabinet Member with responsibility for Local Councils on matters of mutual interest to MKC and Local Councils and make any appropriate and relevant recommendations to MKC or hold consultations with / seek views of Local Councils on areas of particular interest.
- To shape and agree approaches on key issues and pieces of work before wider circulation to all Local Councils. There is an opportunity to set up Sub Working/Task Groups to focus on the identified areas of concern or progress. Working / Task Groups are chaired by a PAG representative and opportunities to attend will be issued to all Local Councils. This could be Local Council clerks, Local Council councillors or a combination of both.
- To determine the way forward for the devolution agenda and ensure that services and assets rest with the level of local government that can best maximise the opportunity of particular assets and services to work for the wider community.
- To consider agenda items, discussion topics and show casing for the PF, and agree the agenda for the PF each quarter.
- To foster close co-operation and engagement between each Local Council, stakeholders and partners to ensure the best possible outcomes for the communities that we all work to serve.

Ideally the PAG membership consists of

- Six Local Council councillors
- A Ward councillor from each of the main political parties
- A representative from the **Milton Keynes Association of Local Councils (MKALC)**

MKC officers from the Parishes Partnership Team support the PAG.

**Local Area Forums (LAFs)** are meetings for groups of Local Councils who share common interests / are connected by physical locality (usually ward). LAFs are attended by the Ward Councillors (who

ordinarily take the role of chair). Support for LAFs is discussed and agreed with MKC Officers and each individual LAF.

## Covid-19

We know that Covid-19 has brought about a sudden change to the way in which Local Councils and MKC are working to support our communities. There has been a fantastic response from MKC and Local Councils, we will need to take stock and consider what has worked well and less well and what we can learn from this in terms of working more effectively together. Working together and respecting our different roles, we know that we can make a real difference to our residents as we move into the post Covid 19 recovery era. There will be continued challenges for our communities that may be of an order that MKC and Local Councils will find challenging. There will be a likely rise in demand for services at a time when budgets across all councils will be under considerable pressure. We know there are difficult times ahead, but with an open and honest dialogue between us all (for example, around respective future financial and funding positions) we will be able to deliver for residents.

## Together we can...

Create the right environment to make things better for our residents and communities with a collaborative way of working, sending a powerful signal that the old ways of thinking and working in silos are no longer fit for purpose. Collaboration has the potential to:

- bring in a much wider range of resources and use available resources far more efficiently and effectively;
- be fit for purpose to tackle the complexity of the challenges; and
- add far more creative and innovative approaches, as a result of the organisations involved.

This document is intended to be a living document that will be edited and updated / revised over time to encourage open collaboration and avoid stagnation. It is envisaged that it will be circulated for review annually, so that all partners can have the opportunity to say what has been working well, what has not been working so well and what, if anything, needs changing within the document. It is deliberately not focused on specific measurements or sanctions for various parties, but rather it is meant to act as a document that sets out the parameters for mature relationships between all councils within MK.