

Borough Cllrs Report for GDPC 5th February 2024

Open Space Management Charge LWOK.

This hot topic has been running for years now so thought it might be time to explain the history and my involvement. The history of why this charge was first brought about was due to the financial crisis in 2008. The new development underway in Great Denham and what is now Kempston West was collectively known as the Land West of Kempston (LWOK). Some may recall that the developer DWH & Barratts submitted a “financial viability statement” that reduced infrastructure and housing mix by £13m affecting LWOK. When it came to looking after amenity spaces, they outlined that they had a cash-flow issue and couldn’t pay the normal expected commuted sum so came up with a scheme that residents are paying for now. Officers compiled a report for the then-portfolio holder (Conservative Deputy Mayor) which was signed off in 2009. It was a poor decision and Officers highlighted that there would be “disgruntlement from residents” and that the Council “would suffer reputational damage”. They were not wrong. The developer had also taken advantage of the option to again avoid a commuted sum payment to the Council – perfectly legal – although not desirable which resulted in the disastrous system creating the Estate Management Companies and the agents that administer them. Hopefully, legislative changes will help going forward on this subject. My involvement when as chair of the parish council was to try to support residents who felt that this third charge after Council Tax and Estate Management charges was grossly unfair and inequitable. The original assessments by the parish council in Great Denham were based on the disparity of the charges between the two areas. Kempston West contained 79% of the amenity space with Great Denham at only 21%. Great Denham however paid 54% of the total charge which meant it was paying £7.40 per m2 as opposed to £1.67 per m2 by Kempston West. However, I did later take a different view that despite the differences it was an unfair and badly made decision for all in LWOK, and as such it should be removed. I still contend that an amenity space - that includes the large play area in the Country Park – that can be utilised by anyone, and everyone on land owned by the Council should not be paid for by a targeted few residents in LWOK.

New Administration’s First Budget

The pressure placed on services and staffing following years of cuts and failure to borrow – prudently – has led to massive under-resourcing and cuts to vital maintenance budgets. I know and understand that practically all Local Authorities face many tough decisions with some declaring section 114 notice (indicating a serious financial crisis). I do understand the former administration's desire to keep Council Tax as low as possible and they would always point to the fact that it was one of the lowest in the Country. The year-on-year impact of that has led to the hollowing out of services and cuts in staffing. Regretfully the council is proposing the maximum allowable increase this year of 4.99%. The capital budget is also up for debate at Full Council on 7th February which has included some ambitious plans which require the council to borrow. We have had to curtail some of our ambitions due to a lack of support from opposition parties. When the former County Council was disbanded, and CBC

and BBC were created, BBC was passed a balance sheet of £90m of debt and £240m of assets. The Council paid off £30m of the debt creating headroom to borrow which was never pursued through lack of ambition. By early March the Council must set a balanced budget so discussion between the parties is ongoing.

LTA Funding for New Tennis Courts

In a boost to local sports facilities, Bedford Borough Council has secured £370,000 of funding to refurbish park tennis courts across the borough. The investment is part of a £ 30 million nationwide investment by the UK Government and LTA Tennis Foundation, delivered by the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA), to refurbish thousands of public tennis courts across Great Britain. In addition to improving the courts through a mixture of resurfacing, repainting, and new nets, there will be new gate-access technology and an online booking system. These will be introduced later in the Spring to make it easier for players to find, book, and get on a court.

Refurbishment works at four Mowsbury Park courts began late last year, and the next courts due to receive work are at Allen Park tennis courts, scheduled to begin the week commencing 22 January 2024. Southfields, Kempston courts, as well as those at Bedford Park, Linden Road, Addison Howard Park, and Russell Park in Bedford also have refurbishments and/or improvements planned.

Significant works will be taking place at Bedford Park, where the courts are being entirely reconfigured from a nine-court to a three-court site. This is necessary to protect the surrounding mature trees and ensure that the courts are not damaged by tree roots in the future. The tennis courts in Russell Park will also be re-configured to ensure that the court surface can be adequately maintained and that the much-valued trees are protected and preserved.

Amazing New SEND facility in Kempston

Bosses from the Department for Education (DfE) recently visited Kempston, to see the amazing progress in building the new special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) school on Hillgrounds Road. Bedford Borough Council is working with site teams from Wates Group and Pick Everard to create the school, which will open in time for the new school year in September. And it can also be revealed that the £26million new school, which will eventually have room for 200 pupils, will be called Rivertree Free School.

Mayor of Bedford Borough Tom Wootton said; “When Rivertree opens it will be one of the largest SEN facilities in the country. “It will cater to hundreds of young people, aged from two to 19, with special educational needs and/or disabilities. These young people both need and deserve facilities that are tailored to their needs so that they can flourish.

“We’ve worked closely with the Department For Education on this project, and they have helped to fund its creation. “Signing off on Rivertree was one of the first things I did on my first day when I was elected. It will make an enormous difference to so many children and families for many years to come.”

The name Rivertree Free School has been chosen as a symbolic representation of its values and commitment to providing an exceptional educational experience for all pupils.

New Business

Local business Absolutely Shabbylass opened its doors this weekend, following the move to Bedford. The business, which will celebrate 11 years in April this year, has just reopened on Castle Road, moving from Ampthill. Maria Harris-Ash, the owner of Absolutely Shabbylass, said, "My passion lies in the art of upcycling neglected furniture. I conduct workshops in my studio to impart the skill of upcycling to others, and I offer a furniture painting service for customers who prefer not to take on the task themselves. We're making Bedford our new home and can't wait to welcome our customers."

The local business also provides shelf space for over 40 independent small makers and artists. They specialise in crafting unique gifts and homeware, and many of them conduct craft classes in the shop. Maria added, "This arrangement not only offers a retail space for small businesses but also serves as a platform to teach adults various crafting skills, contributing positively to mental health."

At the opening, Mayor of Bedford Borough, Tom Wootton said, "I am delighted to be at this fantastic opening of Absolutely Shabbylass here in Bedford, adding to our distinctive offer for shopping. Another business relocating to Bedford is always great news."

"Along with my colleagues, I have an aspiration for Bedford and Kempston town centres, to make both of them areas where people want to live, work, shop and spend time. And Absolutely Shabbylass have joined us on Castle Road to be part of this transformation."

You can find out more about the business at www.absolutelyshabbylass.co.uk

EWR Alternate Routes Explored

Councillors and other stakeholders have been invited to Borough Hall next week, to receive a briefing on the reports that Bedford Borough Council commissioned on East West Rail. The briefing will be also live streamed online on our website. Mayor of Bedford Borough Tom Wootton commissioned the reports following the East West Rail (EWR) route update announcement in May 2023. The briefing will take place on Tuesday 6 February in the Council Chamber from 6.30-8 pm.

After the meeting, the reports will be published on the Bedford Borough Council website, as part of a continued commitment to be transparent and honest. We aim to ensure that Councillors, stakeholders, the public, and media all have access to the report at the same time."

Share your thoughts on bus services in Bedford Borough

A consultation has gone out to the public to collect the views from public transport users, residents, businesses, and visitors within the Borough regarding local bus services and other public transport alternatives that will be used to help shape the Council's Public Transport Policy.

The consultation period concludes at 23:59 on 16th February 2024. To learn more and participate in the survey, please visit: <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/your-council/have-your-say/consultations/bus-usage-survey-2024>