

Monthly Borough Cllr Report for GDPC March 2024

- **Budget Update**

Since our last meeting, the 7th of February Full Council passed the budget for 2024-2025. Council Tax has been set at an increase of 4.99%. The settlement from the central government has not addressed the major underfunding issues that have been experienced by most local authorities recently. Despite the meeting going on until 11:00 pm we did manage to set a balanced budget. The Executive will look to ensure any other funding streams are pursued. The Open Space Management charge reduction was also part of the budget, but some sections of the opposition are still arguing that GD and KW should still have to pay this additional charge.

- **Current Bus Operations in Bedford Borough**

Bedford Borough currently spends £3.7m on supporting bus operations on public transport, not including school buses. The majority of this is spent on concessionary fares (£2.3m) with the rest on route support. Many of the routes that operate in the Borough – especially in our rural villages – are not commercially viable and would not exist if the Borough didn't fund them. Of the £3.7m the grant for the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP+) is only £546k so the Borough must provide the rest from Council Tax. The more funding we have the more we can support routes. In 2021 when the Borough submitted a bidding document under the BSIP funding round from the Central Government we were unsuccessful and did not receive any funds. Conversely, Luton and CBC received £19.1m and £3.7m respectively. So, the £546k was a consolation prize in 23/24, we will receive the same amount again in 24/25.

We recognise that the issues being experienced by residents in the rural areas are more profound than those in the urban parts of the Borough. The distances and the recent flooding issues have created even greater problems for the operators in sticking to schedules. The whole bus service operations and routes have not been reviewed for 13 years and the public transport team is doing this now. We are also looking at some new models of operation to see if smaller buses in the rural areas might be able to feed into more main routes. We are also looking at Demand Response Transport (DRT) dial-a-bus type operations – these during the review of routes. I know that both of our main providers (Grant Palmer and Stagecoach) are constantly battling to retain and recruit a full complement of staff when warehousing and courier delivery jobs attract higher salaries and less stressful opportunities.

We meet regularly with the operators, but the changes in patterns of life have been impacted severely since the pandemic on many routes having become commercially unviable. In the last 2 years, 7 services have been withdrawn due to very low patronage. The recent bus survey undertaken by the Borough received 2,500 responses showing that the main usage was shopping at 37.5%, work at 28%, school transport at 9.7% with others at 24.9%. 75% of respondents highlighted timetables and failure by operators to keep to them, as the main issue of dissatisfaction.

Officers continue to push for improvements, and we are determined that the review of services will deliver a better and more reliable bus service for residents in the Borough.

- **Council potentially owed millions in uncollected capital receipts.**

The Executive has been investigating the disaggregation agreement between Bedford Borough Council (BBC) and Central Bedfordshire Council (CBC) to ensure all money that could be due to BBC is identified. Various pieces of land noted in the disaggregation agreement that have either been sold or developed will need to be identified and the proceeds of which should be split based on 63% CBC and 37% BBC between April 2009 and March. This is an ongoing process regarding a very significant amount of land (199.167 acres).

- **LTA Funding under threat after opposition motion**

At the most recent Full Council, a motion had been passed by opposition parties instructing the Council Executive to re-negotiate already agreed terms and conditions for funding by the LTA for the Borough's Tennis courts by introducing free "turn up and play" at courts across the Borough.

The terms and conditions set by the LTA to receive the grant of £400,000 were agreed in June 2023 by an Executive decision. Each Executive decision has a call-in period of seven days. This call-in option wasn't used. If we accept the motion this could mean that some dangerous courts in Bedford Borough will not be refurbished and will continue to fall into an extreme state of disrepair which would lead to them eventually closing permanently. There is a provision of free tennis that any appointed operator will have to adhere to, but the motion presented expressly "calls on the Executive to...

- Ensure the protection of turn-up-and-play at Bedford Park Tennis Courts
- Ensure Linden Road Courts remain free turn-up-and-play courts at all times.
- Ensure the protection of free-turn-up-and-play options at other courts throughout the Borough, as has been achieved at Mowsbury Park Courts and
- Consult with Ward Cllrs before making any changes to tennis court provision in their wards.

These requests are at complete odds with the terms and conditions that are attached to the grant agreement with the LTA.

- **NHS Staff announce 48-hour strike at Luton Dunstable and Bedford hospital.**

The union UNISON has confirmed more than 400 workers will be taking strike action beginning on the 11th of March, Monday 7.30 am and last 48 hours.

The strike action will be affecting Bedfordshire Hospitals (Bedford and Luton & Dunstable) and it is advised that any residents who have appointments to check with the hospital if their appointments are still going ahead as planned or if they will need to re-arrange or if these appointments have already been re-arranged.

- **Mayor Tom “deeply disappointed” after East West Rail summit**

Tom Wootton, the Mayor of Bedford Borough, has admitted to being “deeply disappointed” after a crunch meeting with bosses behind the planned East West Rail scheme.

East West Rail would put Bedford at the heart at a rail route also serving Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge.

Last month’s summit, at Borough Hall, brought together the Mayor, senior officers and councillors, and leaders of the East West Rail Company.

It followed Bedford Borough Council releasing two reports it had commissioned about the scheme, which gave a detailed breakdown of eight different possible routes, looking at how each of them compared for criteria such as economic benefit, ecological impact, and how many homes would have to be demolished to make way for the new route.

Mayor Tom said; “We’ve shown that there is a real need to look again and decide if the current northern route really is the best one for East West Rail, and for the people of Bedford Borough. Unfortunately, East West Rail made it clear that they are still not going to do that.

“When I asked, they did agree that they would formally respond to our reports, but they seem determined to move ahead with the current route.

“This scheme has the potential to bring enormous benefits to Bedford Borough – but that only makes it more important to get it right. And knocking down people’s homes is not a necessity to make this happen.”

The East West Rail scheme is expected to go out for an eight-week statutory public consultation this summer, and then a second statutory public consultation in 2025.

Mayor Tom added: “This is an exceptionally exciting time for Bedford, and for the entire Borough, and East West Rail could be a key part of that. But it’s crucial that we get the maximum benefit from these developments, and not just settle for what we’re being given.

“I will be asking for another meeting with Huw Merriman, the minister of state for rail, who is the man behind the plans. This is something that I know so many of our residents feel strongly about, and I will fight all the way to the top.”

- **Philharmonia Orchestra**

The Philharmonia Orchestra will be doing pop-up performance sessions over 3 days in March. The Philharmonia’s activity takes place on Friday 1 March, Saturday 2 March, and Saturday 9 March. There will be accompanying VR (virtual reality) activity on Friday 1 and Saturday 9 March. All events are free and open to all.

Performances will take place on:

- 1st March with performances at the Harpur Centre
- 2nd March the timetable for performances is:
 - 10:30 – Damiano Hair
 - 11:00 – Kempston Library
 - 11:00 – Bedford Central Library

- 13:00 – The Higgins Bedford
- 13:00 – Queens Park Family Hub
- 14:00 – Samsons Academy Gym
- 15:30 – Barley Mow pub
- 16:00 – The Standard pub
- To be confirmed: Bedford Bus Station
- 9th March sessions will take place at St Paul's Church
- **Garden waste bin collections.**

Garden waste bin collections will be starting again from 1st March, residents are advised to put their garden waste bins alongside the recycling bins by 6 am on their next collection day.

You can check collection dates and other waste services, at <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/.../household-bins-and-recycling>

- **Grant Palmer 44 service**

Despite financial pressures the Council extended the Grant Palmer 44 service on the 26th February benefitting users of Elstow Park and Ride site, along with residents and commuters in Flitwick and Ampthill. The service is being extended by the Council utilising the Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP+) grant funding from the Government and ensures continued accessibility and convenience for residents and commuters.

- **SEND School and update.**

Despite financial pressures, the Council is building a £ 26 million SEND school in Kempston at the former site of Robert Bruce Middle School and will have places for 200 children and young people from across Bedford Borough.

The children attending this new school will predominantly have profound and multiple learning disabilities, severe learning disabilities, and autism and will be open in phases and is on track to be delivered on time.

In addition, the old Robert Bruce School was scheduled to be demolished however, it has been discovered that there are pregnant bats now in the school. Due to this, the Council is awaiting guidance from Natural England on how to proceed.

- **Mowsbury Golf Course**

Due to excessive amounts of rainfall Mowsbury Golf Course, like many Golf courses across the UK, has been closed due to repeated flooding.

GLL are looking at the current drainage provision and working with the grounds maintenance provider to look at ways to improve drainage provision.

- **More money to manage Drainage.**

Due to inherited budget restrictions, the Council has limited equipment and resources however, the Council will be using £470,000 which will be used to conduct more highway work to hire more equipment and put together a cyclical drainage programme so drains and gullies are more efficiently cleansed.

- **Home Upgrade Grant expands.**

The Council will be announcing significant enhancements to the Home Upgrade Grant Phase 2 (HUG2) scheme, making it easier for more residents to access vital energy-saving home improvements and further reducing fuel poverty across the borough.

The changes will ensure the Council continues to support residents during extremely challenging times.

Residents can find further information and apply for HUG2 at:
<https://www.bedford.gov.uk/environmental-issues/sustainability/home-upgrade-grant> or
<https://hugapply.co.uk/2023/09/06/hello-world/>