

Monthly Borough Report to GDPC November/December 2023

Estate Management Charges

Following a long campaign to champion residents' utter dissatisfaction and disillusion with the Estate Management companies' system of charges for shared services it has finally had its first reading in Parliament. The Bill seeks to address the lack of transparency and the reasonableness of charges made by the agents appointed by the Companies. It enters its second reading on the 11th of December and our MP Richard Fuller will be debating and commenting on this and throughout its progress through the Commons and Then the Lords. I would like to thank Richard for all the support he has given me and the residents in Great Denham in trying to correct this scandalous system. One of our residents was interviewed on "BBC Politics East" about this system and gave a good account of the issues. I have been approached again by BBC to help identify others who would be willing to speak to the BBC on the unfairness of the system.

Pre-adoption process

The Parish Council and residents will know that following the debacle caused by the removal of the "stone henge" feature on Greenkeepers and the memorial next to Sainsbury's I had a motion accepted by the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee (EOSC) that before any works in preparedness for adoption (taken out or put in) the Parish Council would be consulted. This had already been breached once and residents believe is about to be breached again in Garyn Lane with the removal of a footpath. I will try to ascertain what the intentions are and bring to the attention of the PC so that they can be consulted.



Parking on zig-zag lines at pedestrian crossing.

After discussions with Borough Highways and Engineering Officers, we are to look again at a way a barrier can be affixed to the pavement to avoid the highly dangerous – not to say illegal – parking that continues to endanger the community. Despite the dozens of photos sent to police this dangerous parking continues unabated.

Junior Park Run

Bedford Borough Council has been approached by the organisers of the park run to hold a Junior Park Run – on Sundays. As this sits in my portfolio, and after discussion with Officers we would be happy to allow but we would wish to solicit the views of the Parish Council before agreeing.

Borough Capital Programme

At the 29th of November Full Council meeting, the Capital Strategy proposed by the administration was voted down on an amendment proposed by the Liberal Democrats. The proposals were ambitious and included 5 new GP surgeries, a new Leisure Village, a refurbishment of the Athletics Stadium, a new primary school in Sharnbrook, support for the new Muslim Cemetery, and an investment in Bedford and Kempston Town Centres. Bedford Borough Council currently has low borrowings and to fulfil these ambitious – but much-needed interventions to regenerate our County Town – we would need to borrow. Part of the Liberal Democrat amendment referred to the borrowings needed for the future Leisure Village project which it described as “adding significant future pressure and a burden on taxpayers”. The business cases have yet to be presented and will be before any action on raising funds is taken. The Borough inherited £248 million of assets when the former County Council was disbanded, and the Council's Executive believes that the capital receipts from these assets should be adding many more millions than currently realised. It also suggested that £1.2 million had been cut from the Roads & Pavements budget in its amendment. As I explained last year – owing to a windfall income stream – the Council spent this on extra work on footpaths. This year there are no windfalls which they are now referring to as a cut. Labour Councillors joined with the Liberal Democrats and voted down the Capital Strategy and voted for the amendment. More on this at the next meeting of the Full Council on 10th January.

- **New Leisure Service partnership**

The Council has now signed a new 2-year contract with the charitable social enterprise Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) to manage and operate leisure facilities across the Borough, ending the 10-year fusion contract.

The Council will be working with providers to ensure the modernisation of our leisure facilities.

- **Bedford Borough Local Plan 2040**

The Planning Inspector has responded to the previous administration's Local Plan 2040. The plan has been found to be unsound and the Inspector's report can be found [here](#).

This is the second time the Local Plan has been sent back by the inspector and the Council will now take time to consider its response and how it intends to proceed.

Unfortunately, this does leave the Council exposed to speculative planning applications.

- **The Greater Southeast Net Zero Hub**

In an initiative funded by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) - the Greater Southeast Net Zero Hub is collaborating with the Council seeking Bedfordshire-based installers to join its growing supply chain dedicated to delivering energy-efficiency measures, renewable energy solutions, and low-carbon heating.

Details on the DPS process and specific requirements for installers can be found on the Greater Southeast Net Zero Hub website at www.gsenetzerohub.org.uk/supply-chain-procurement/.

- **Town Centre Christmas events and footfall**

In the last 3 months (August to October 2023) Town Centre footfall has increased by an average of 28.8% - increasing by 1.94 million in real number terms.

Additionally, there are many events taking place across Bedford Borough over the Christmas period. There will be:

- Live performances taking place in Harpur Square and Saxon Square
- The light switch on which features a new tree and lights in the Town Centre
- Unique seasonal markets
- Christmas family activities – Christmas crazy golf, family photos in the Christmas Snow Globe, carols, and other activities.

For full details, including times and dates of these fantastic events and even more, visit www.bedford.gov.uk/Christmas.

- **Homelessness recruitment drive**

Due to cuts that took place before the 2023 local elections, the Council's homelessness service had been facing overspends reaching £6 million, a significant backlog of cases, and lack of expertise and employees in the service.

To address the lack of expertise and overreliance on agency staff due to cuts that took place last year – the Council is now launching a recruitment drive to hire skilled caseworkers dedicated to providing expert homelessness advice and assistance.

For more information about homelessness, please visit www.bedford.gov.uk/housing/housing-advice/housing-advice-overview.

- **£26 Million SEN school underway**

Construction is underway on the £26 million SEN school being built on the former Robert Bruce Middle School site. The school will have places for 200 children and young people across the Borough and provide much-needed education for SEND students. It is due to open in phases from September 2024.

- **Consultations**

Bedford Borough Council has begun a public consultation on its annual budget proposals.

The Council has stated that the budget focuses on the themes of a “one council” approach and remains committed to protecting services, transforming service quality, improving

organisational and process efficiencies, realigning resources to priorities, and improving customer service.

Take part at www.bedford.gov.uk/budget2024-25.

The Council is also planning a consultation on the Council's Trees and Development SPD for public consultation for a minimum of 6 weeks.

The SPD supports existing policies in the Local Plan 2030 and will provide guidance to ensure that trees are adequately addressed in the development process.

- **Council Financial Overspend Update**

The Council facing significant financial challenges with a £12.188 million overspend that occurred before the 2023 local elections.

The financial picture remains challenging however, the Council has further reduced the overspend from £8.3 million at the end of June 2023 to £4.6 million at the end of September 2023 - equivalent to 2.9% of the Council's net budget.

The Council is continuing to work towards balancing the budget for the end of the financial year.

Wider Borough Items

- **Paula Radcliffe Way**

The Council has announced that the works on Paula Radcliffe Way are entering the final phase of the project and remain on schedule to finish on the 15th of December 2023.

- **Bedford Borough Council announces new option to apply for postal and proxy vote applications**

The national government is making significant improvements to the process of applying for postal and proxy votes, aimed at enhancing accessibility and efficiency for electors. Since Tuesday, 31 October, residents in Bedford Borough now have the option to apply for a postal vote through a simplified online application form at www.bedford.gov.uk/your-council/elections-and-voting/postal-voting.