

Borough Councillor Update for GDPC – February 2023

Estate Management Actions.

As reported at an earlier meeting I had started a petition which after 300 signatures I presented to Full Council on 1st February. The petition asked that the whole council add their voice to mine and write to the relevant Minister and challenge the unfair practices and lack of transparency. This will be debated at the next Full Council on 28th February where I will also present a motion to enact the request.

I also reported at an earlier meeting that I had raised an official complaint with the CEO of Barrett Developments plc. Following this two Directors representing the group were charged with arranging a meeting involving the largest managing agents FirstPort below is an outline of what was discussed, and actions requested of all parties.

I met with Directors from DWH and Managers from FirstPort yesterday (Thursday 2nd Feb). Zoey Essen the new Property Manager was at the meeting and she and other attendees were fully briefed by me with many examples of the issues residents have to face by poor service, almost non-existent communication and charges that a) are not properly explained or b) are so eye watering high that they really can't be justified.

I genuinely think that Barrett's and DWH had never seen such raw detail of what residents were being charged and have vowed to look at some of the suggestions I made. I also asked FirstPort to take on board a number of changes I was recommending; The following should now be underway, and we have agreed an 8-week period to come back with proposals.

1. That all budgets for each scheme should be a bottom-up exercise. That is to say look at the actual costs of work that needs to be done and build the cost budget from that. Everyone expects there to be a markup, but it must relate only to the work undertaken.
2. The large amount of "reserves" needs to be looked at for each scheme as the cash held at the bank is far more than any ongoing contingent liabilities. I have suggested that this might be used as a write back to give residents a charge free period.
3. That they look at the 20 separate schemes across GD and Kempston Rural and Kempston West and put the 13 in GD into one scheme and the 7 in Kempston into one scheme. This will mean 1 set of accounts for each new expanded scheme and not 20 different sets of accounts and economies of scale on many fronts can be gained and thus reduce costs.
4. DWH team will look at the separate schemes and join them up so that a map can be produced, and the number and type of properties Identified.
5. I will be meeting the Property Manager next week and going through all the communications I've received from individual residents with issues and the first step will be to put a hold on those accounts while we resolve the outstanding issues. (I will endeavour to write to everyone who wrote to me and update what has been agreed – there are a lot of you)
6. That a review be undertaken by FirstPort of the way communication is handled by them and that they set out invoices and accounts in a straightforward and simplified way so that we can all understand what is being paid for.
7. All this is to be completed and presented at a further meeting involving the Developer and FirstPort on 5th April.

Whilst I know that FirstPort have been vilified up and down the Country I genuinely believe that those attending the meeting got the message loud and clear. I believe they will come back with an acceptable and workable scheme. We do of course have other options if they fail to do so.

To all those paying estate charges to RMG, Alexander Faulkner Partnership or any other managing agents I've missed please be assured that once we have a way forward (in 8 weeks' time) I will be asking the same of the other organisations.

Question raised in the House of Common by our constituency MP

1. Richard Fuller MP (Great Denham Constituency MP) – 9th January 2023

“Residents and Cllr Weir of Great Denham are challenging excessive fees, poor service, and lack of transparency of estate management companies. Will the Minister review the TOR for the Property Ombudsman to make it easier for freeholders to challenge these unfair practices?”

Response from Minister

Lucy Frazer KC MP (Minister for Planning and Housing)

“My honourable friend is right to highlight the unfairness in relation to freeholders and estate management companies must be more accountable to homeowners on how money is spent. We will be giving owners on these estates' new rights to challenge costs and appoint a manager. We will also require private estate management companies to join a redress scheme.”

I will keep you all updated with any new developments but please feel free to contact me on any subject.

Parking Issues

After working closely with the Parish Clerk I believe the parking solutions and new TO's for Kingswood Way and King Alfred Way have been received and will soon be in place following the normal consultation period for the King Alfred Way scheme.

Executive Decisions

5th January - To accept funds of £66,058 from Active Travel England/Department for Transport for revenue funding to develop active travel scheme.

24th January – The Borough Council has awarded £1,000 to Bolnhurst Stables Trust to support clients with learning disability, mental health issues and ex-offenders.

26th January – Bedford Borough Council has accepted £74,166 for 2023/2024 from the Department for Transport's Bikeability Trust. The grant allows 2,308 children to be train in cycling proficiency from learning to ride to Level 3 Bikeability.

Bikeability level training will teach children more advanced skills which enable them to navigate more complex situations and roads.

Council Tax

Council Tax was raised by 3.99% in the current financial year, the 6th highest increase of all unitary authorities. The Council now collected more Council Tax than anticipated (£1.26 million) which is now being carried forward into 2023/24 budget.

Bedford Borough Council raise Council Tax

At Full Council on Wednesday 1st Friday, the Council moved forward with a Council Tax increase of 2.90%. Which is made up a Core Council Tax increase 0.90% and the Adult Social Care Precept of 2%. The resulting increase in Council Tax takes the average Band D Council Tax to £1,737.92.

An alternative budget to freeze an increase in Core Council Tax (0.90%) was submitted by the Conservative Group as they felt the budget had over-estimated the extent of inflationary pressures (12%), for which £17m was included in this budget.

Evidence from the Bank of England, OBR, OECD and other economic forecasters are predicting that inflation has peaked and will drop as low as 2.5% by the end of the financial year.

Financial Settlement

The Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove on the 19th December 2022 confirmed an almost £60 billion package for councils in England for the next financial year. The settlement means councils across England will benefit from an additional £5 billion – a 9% increase on last year's settlement.

The agreement for next year includes a one-off Funding Guarantee that ensures every council in England will see at least a 3% increase in core spending power before any local decisions around council tax are taken.

Bedford received multiple grants from the DFT and £2 bus fare.

The Council accepted a grant of £69,509.50 from the Department for Transport to protect socially necessary bus services from January to March.

Additionally, the Council has also accepted a further £66,058 from Active Travel England/Department for Transport. The funding will be used to develop an active travel scheme and development, public engagement on schemes and data collection and evidence. The funding also provides one full time Active Travel Officer for one year.

A grant of £74,166 for 2023/2024 has been accepted from the DFT which allows 2,308 children to be train in cycling proficiency from learning to ride to Level 3 Bikeability (on road cycling). Bikeability in Bedford is delivered by an external provider, Outspoken.

Bedford Town Footfall for December falls below COVID levels/Multi Storey care parks fall below 50% usage

Footfall for the Town Centre during December 2022 was lower than the footfall levels in December 2021 by 3.7% when we were beginning to exit lockdown. Since 2017 there has been a decrease of 46.15% for footfall in December. For comparison Rushden Lakes saw a 5% uplift in footfall during December in 2022 and an increased number of shoppers from Bedford.

Car park usage for Bedford's multi storey car parks (MSCPs) have also struggled significantly with the majority of them being less than half full during the holiday period. The Council have added a 0.747 million overspend to their environment budget relating in part to reductions in car parking income that have not fully recovered since the pandemic.

Attainment Gap

Bedford Borough Council's Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report on the attainment results for Bedford Borough which have fallen behind significantly when compared nationally.

You can read the report here:

<https://councillorsupport.bedford.gov.uk/documents/s64913/Item%2006%20-%20Education%20Performance%20Note%20January%202023%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

Residents will need photo ID to vote in person at elections in May

Electors voting in person at polling stations will need to show photographic ID to vote at this year's local elections. Accepted forms of ID include a UK, European Economic Area (EEA) or Commonwealth passport; a UK, EEA or Commonwealth drivers' licence; and some concessionary travel passes, such as an older person's bus pass or an Oyster 60+ card.

'Riverside for All' project

Riverside for All is a £1.5 million project that is aimed at improving and developing links alongside the Great Ouse from Priory Country Park to Kempston Outdoor Centre.

The plans include refurbishment of playgrounds, planting projects, footpath repairs, improvements to Longholme Lake, new signage, and refurbishment to infrastructure along the riverside, incorporating investment from other projects at the same time.

Bedford Borough Council offers 5,000 trees to the local community for free

Bedford Borough Council is giving away 5,000 trees to local residents, businesses, schools and community groups to collect and plant locally. This giveaway takes place on Wednesday 15 February and Saturday 18 February, from 10am to 3pm at Oasis Beach Pool car park.

Free crafts for children at Bedford Libraries this half-term

From Saturday 11 to Saturday 18 February, families are invited to visit Bedford Libraries for free fun craft activities.

Crafts include creating bug masks, paper bag dinosaurs, and Valentine's Day Cards. There will also be colouring and Lego clubs the library.

HALF-TERM EVENTS

AT BEDFORD BOROUGH LIBRARIES

Bedford Central	Time	Event
Saturday 11 th February	11am - 3pm	Lego Club and Colouring
Sunday 12 th February	11:30 - 1:30pm	Sunday Funday
Monday 13 th February	11am - 3:30pm	Dotty Pictures
Tuesday 14 th February	11am - 3:30pm	Valentine's Cards and Bouquets
Wednesday 15 th February	11:30am - 12pm	Story time
Wednesday 15 th February	12pm - 3:30pm	Make your mark community library display
Thursday 16 th February	11am - 3:30pm	Hanging Spring Decorations
Friday 17 th February	11am - 3:30pm	Make a Wristband
Saturday 18 th February	11am - 3pm	Lego Club and Colouring
Bromham	Time	Event
Saturday 11 th February	10am - 12.30pm	Lego and Colouring
Wednesday 15 th February	10am - 11.30am	Bug Masks
Friday 17 th February	10am - 11.30am	Superhero craft
Saturday 18 th February	10am - 12.30pm	Lego Club and Colouring
Kempston	Time	Event
Saturday 11 th February	10am - 3:30pm	Mosaic Necklaces
Monday 13 th February	2pm - 4:30pm	Animal Masks
Tuesday 14 th February	10am - 3:30pm	Valentine's Hearts
Wednesday 15 th February	2pm - 4:30pm	Wicked Wednesday
Thursday 16 th February	10am - 3:30pm	Halcy Head Magnets
Saturday 18 th February	10am - 3:30pm	Paper Bag Dinosaurs
Putnoe	Time	Event
Saturday 11 th February	10am - 3:30pm	Lego Club and Colouring
Monday 13 th February	2pm - 4:30pm	Valentine's Cards
Tuesday 14 th February	10am - 3:30pm	Make a Bookmark
Thursday 16 th February	10am - 3:30pm	Decorate a fish
Friday 17 th February	2pm - 4:30pm	Butterfly craft
Saturday 18 th February	10am - 3:30pm	Lego Club and Colouring
Wootton	Time	Event
Saturday 11 th February	11am - 12.30pm	Lego and Colouring
Tuesday 14 th February	10am - 11.30am	Bug Masks
Friday 17 th February	2pm - 4.30pm	Superhero craft
Saturday 18 th February	11am - 12.30pm	Lego and Colouring

Culture & Heritage
Bedford



Check our website or Facebook page for activities and events

www.bedford.gov.uk/libraries
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[BedfordshireLibraries](https://facebook.com/BedfordshireLibraries)
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