

Borough Councillors Report – September/October 2023

Meeting with Richard Fuller MP and Bidwell's

All will be aware of yet another unauthorised encampment on the former golf course which resulted in yet more fly-tipping along with some anti-social behaviour. Residents have asked again that the landowner and their agents be requested to do something to deter these encampments by providing barriers to prevent access to the land. Richard and I met with Jack Hawkesworth from Bidwells and outlined the state of the land and the lack of protection which was a detriment to residents in the community. Residents also asked that the land growth of weeds and grasses be cut back and away from houses surrounding the former golf course. This in the past had created a fire danger and should a similar spell of hot weather arrive it could lead to a major threat.

I suggested that the Borough would quote for a clean-up and provide options and quotations for preventative measures to block access. I will meet with Officers in the next week to look at these options and to organise the clean-up.

Park & Ride

The height barrier at the Park & Ride has now been replaced. The village green area has now become a meeting place for young people on Friday and Saturday evenings. This sometimes goes on until 1 am and people living close by are complaining about the noise. I have asked that residents keep a log so that the Anti-Social behaviour team can track and respond.

Parking on Pedestrian Crossing Zig Zag lines.

I have now sent over 25 pictures of vehicles parked on the lines in Anglia Way. This doesn't appear to have been acted upon and in the light of some recent near misses, I have escalated to the PCC staff members. I am also investigating what enforcement can be brought about by the installation of an ANPR camera. I will also provide NO PARKING SIGNS which if permission is given will be fixed to the wall outside the "Daily Needs" shop.

Bus Service No 8

The number 8 bus service should now be routing both ways up Anglia Way and King Alfred Way.

Peer Review

The Mayor has asked the Local Government Association (LGA) to conduct a peer review of Bedford Borough Council. The last review was conducted in 2016 and given that there has been an administration change this year it was considered a good time to conduct another. The reviewers will be made up of 2 Cllrs, 1 CEO, 1 Monitoring Officer (MO), and 1 Finance Officer all from other authorities. They will be at the Council for 4 days and be interviewing across the spectrum of Officers at all levels, elected members and senior management teams, and the Council's Executive. They will look at governance, finances, service to residents, forward plans and priorities, the emerging corporate plan as well as looking back at past performance.

Bedford Borough Council Rural Support

Bedford Borough Council has launched a rural grant programme that is open for applications from both businesses and community groups located in an eligible rural area to help improve productivity, connectivity and boost prosperity.

For more information about the UKSPF programme in Bedford Borough, visit <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/business/invest-bedford/rural-england-prosperity-fund>

The Council has also streamlined how it determines Rural Affairs Grants. The previous Rural Affairs Committee that had been responsible for determining grants meet only 12 times in the last 10 years, with an equal number of meetings (13) being cancelled. During 2017 until late 2021 no meetings were held – the current executive determined the committee had not been functioning at a sustainable level to support residents and thus the process has been streamlined.

Caterlink

To address possible confusion about the Caterlink contract, please see a summary of the Council's decision.

Through finding an affordable provider, the Council offers a buyback school meal service to help schools procure affordable school meals – this contract ended at the end of the previous school year which required the Council to find a new provider.

The original tender was agreed by the previous administration – this tender received no bids as potential contractors cited issues with the price cap and costs as barriers to bidding. This left the Council in a difficult position as there was insufficient lead time afforded to make it viable for the Council to re-tender the contract or for schools to undertake individual re-tender.

Instead of ceasing the service, which would result in schools struggling to meet their statutory duty to provide a school meal service, the Council renegotiated with the incumbent contractor Caterlink to continue to offer the school meal service. The Council sought to negotiate the best price possible for schools however, due to increases in food costs and other factors the price of school meals had increased slightly.

There have been suggestions there are reserves that can be used. The reserves mentioned are there to be used for the maintenance and upkeep of the kitchen equipment of the schools that are part of the service as well as pay for the administration and oversight of the service. If these reserves are used to try and decrease the cost of school meals, this would leave schools in a vulnerable position if their equipment broke down as there would not be sufficient funding to support replacement and repairs.

There have also been comments made about the legality of schools using their pupil premium for meal provisions. The Guidance is very clear that the Pupil Premium can be used for "Breakfast clubs and meal provision" under the 'Wider Strategies' section – schools have done and continue to use their pupil premium for meal provisions, and this isn't illegal as per the guidance from the Government.

Town Centre and Town Vision

The Council has set out its new vision that sets out a series of short, medium, and long-term projects to reinvigorate our Town an offer of shopping, services for the community, and leisure, cultural, business and residential spaces, with distinctive quarters that reflect history, heritage and culture. A big part of the new vision emphasises the importance of connectivity across the Borough.

In terms of changes happening in the Town Centre, in the last 3 months 9 new stores have opened which included:

- Kokoro
- Zebra
- Tops Pizza
- Ruby's Aesthetics
- FAD3D Studio
- ADORN
- Squires Barbershop
- Mercy In Action
- Edinburgh Woollen Mill

The Council have also revamped their clean-up efforts with a more comprehensive cleaning plan now in place to keep our Town Centre looking smart. These are modest improvements but one of a number of factors at play in influencing footfall and Town Centre vitality.

Family Hubs

The Council opened a new Family Hub in Queens Park this month. Family Hubs provide assistance to families from conception right through to age 19, and up to 25 for those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Their aim is to offer every child, young person and their family the best start in life.

There are plans to also open a brand-new hub in the centre of Bedford and one in Kempston which will appeal more to older children. More information on these projects will be released in due course.

Wider Borough Items

Bedford Train Strikes

Passengers at Bedford are warned of disruption as union workers stage industrial action over eight days. On Saturday (September 30) and next Wednesday (October 4), no trains will run across the majority of the Govia Thameslink Railway network, which operates Southern, Gatwick Express, Thameslink and Great Northern services.

Rivercare Clean Up event

There is a community Rivercare Clean Up event happening on Saturday, October 7th between 10am and 12pm. Volunteers are asked to meet at the back of the Bedford Borough Hall car park, alongside the river. No special equipment is required to participate as Bedford Borough Council will provide all necessary tools and materials. Volunteers are advised to wear suitable clothing and sturdy boots.

World Mental Health Day 2023

Bedford Borough Council Mindful Sport Team has worked with local mental health partners and will be holding an event place in Harpur Square, Bedford Town Centre, (outside Bedford Central Library) on Tuesday October 10, from 11am to 3pm – this will be focused on health and wellbeing promoting mental health awareness and support within our community.

Paula Radcliffe Way

The northbound dual carriageway has been re-opened but with the offside lane closed to facilitate ongoing barrier repairs. The southbound carriageway is now closed from the Bedford Road Clapham turn to the Great Ouse Way roundabout so that outstanding bridge repairs can be completed, with southbound traffic once again diverted through Clapham.

From now until the 19th October the road will be closed in both directions overnight between 8pm and 6am to allow resurfacing works to be completed between the Oakley junction and Milton Ernest. A diversion route via Thurleigh and Kimbolton Road will be in place for this closure.

Work is still expected to be completed by 24th October as previously reported.