

Borough Councillor Update – September 2019

**Contact Borough Councillor Alison Foster by telephone on 07773371190
or email at ajfieldfoster@gmail.com**

Local Plan 2030

The Council's Local Plan, outlining sites for housing and employment growth to the year 2030, was subject to 'Examination' by the Planning Inspectorate in June and July, with hearings taking place at Borough Hall. This process provided an assessment of the Plan's 'soundness' by reviewing its proposals and evidence base, as well as hearing submissions from Council officers and external stakeholders.

A consultation was launched on the 19th August, lasting until the 1st October, on 'main modifications' proposed by the Planning Inspectors to ensure that the Plan is sound and compliant with national policies. Amongst the main modifications is the requirement that the Plan must include an 'Early Review Policy'. This means that the Local Plan will need to be updated and re-submitted for Examination within three years. This is as a result of the decision last year to reduce the length of the Plan period from 2035 to 2030 (requiring fewer homes to be allocated). There is also the need for the Plan to consider the implications of the emerging Oxford – Cambridge Arc policy which is set to increase house building requirements in the region and lead to the development of associated infrastructure. For more information on the consultation and the main modification search 'Bedford Local Plan 2030'.

Odell Road, Harrold Application for 90 Homes

Those of you who have been through Harrold recently will note the signs protesting about a proposed development of 90 homes on Odell Road. I completely support the residents in their campaign. Building 90 homes on greenfield land would lead to pressures on our rural roads, schools and GP services. The Borough Council's Local Plan, which is soon to be agreed, requires Harrold's Neighbourhood Plan to set aside land for around 30 homes; clearly the proposal goes well beyond that. The Parish Council and its Neighbourhood Plan Committee has selected certain sites for a small amount of development on each to enable the 30 homes required to be spread throughout the village. They do not support 90 homes on one site.

There is, however, an issue with the Local Plan that is leaving villages across the Borough vulnerable to speculative applications such as that for Odell Road. The Council submitted its Local Plan to the Planning Inspectorate in December 2018 following a decision by the Mayor to shorten its duration from 2035 to 2030, thus meaning the Council had to find sites for fewer houses in this new Local Plan Period. This was done following the withdrawal of the Colworth site due to noise issues from Santa Pod.

The Council is required by national planning policy to have a five year land supply for new homes. Following a recent change to the way housing need is calculated and the shortening of the Local Plan period, the Council presently can only demonstrate a land supply for the next 3.01 years. This will be the case until the Local Plan is finally approved, at which time the five year land supply will be in place again. Until this time, developers can say to the Planning Inspectorate, which determines planning appeals, that their proposed developments should be allowed to proceed on the basis that the Council cannot demonstrate a five year land supply. This is effectively a loop hole which some developers are hoping to exploit.

Planning officers at the Borough Council are of the view that the Odell Road site is inappropriate for 90 homes and this view was supported by the Planning Committee at its recent meeting on 19th August. The applicant has appealed to the Planning Inspectorate and clearly hopes they could be favoured by the land supply issue as set out above. It is disappointing that we are in this position but I am hopeful of a positive outcome given that the site is

completely inappropriate for a development of this size. The appeal is set to be heard by the Planning Inspectorate at a public Inquiry over a number of days starting on 12th November at 10.00 at Borough Hall. For those of you wishing to make your views known please attend on the first day for the start of the hearing. To view the application and the developer's grounds for appeal please go to www.bedford.gov.uk/searchplans.

East West Rail

You may be aware that a consultation was held earlier in the year on the proposed route for the East West Rail line, which will link Oxford – Cambridge via Bedford. The consultation proposed five routes, two of which would link with Bedford station before moving north and then east of Bedford, while the other three would join a new station to the south of Bedford (possibly Wixams) and then move east.

It is my view that the two routes joining with Bedford station should not be taken forward. It is proposed that these routes would move to the north of the town which is unacceptable for two reasons in particular. Firstly, it would increase pressure on the already congested A6 north of the town in peak hours and the adjacent rural roads given the need for extra journeys to Bedford station. Secondly, it would require the destruction of good agricultural land to build the new line. I have made this view known to the East West Railway Company.

It is thought that a preferred route will be set out by the East West Railway Company and the Government by the end of 2019, although a General Election could delay this timetable. For more information see <https://eastwestrail.co.uk/>

Council Agrees Funding for New Projects

Funding for a range of new Council projects was agreed at a meeting of all councillors on the 17th July, including funds to support the town centre. A review of the final accounts for 2018/19 yielded an underspend of £800k which has been allocated to three projects, namely; £350k for new average speed cameras; £250k for required works at the Council's depots, and; £200k for security improvements at the Willow Drift traveller site, adjacent to Meadow Lane on the A603.

Councillors also agreed around £2.3m of funding for new initiatives following a review of reserves, summarised as follows:

- Public events and activities to support Bedford town centre
- A reintroduction of the Climate Change Fund, supporting local organisations with grants to reduce their carbon emissions
- A 'Young People Empowerment Fund' to assist voluntary organisations offering support to improve the skills of children and young people
- Additional funding to provide improvements to open spaces, highways and the public realm
- A continuation of the Council's Jobs Hub for a further four years, offering careers advice and guidance to job seekers

Bedford Town Centre Consultation

A consultation has been launched by the Council on the future of Bedford town centre. Residents, visitors and businesses have the opportunity to set out their views on the town centre shopping area and ideas on what would attract them to come into Bedford on a more regular basis. The survey can be completed at <https://forms.bedford.gov.uk/TCS/>

Hospital Merger

The Chief Executives of Bedford Hospital and Luton & Dunstable Hospital have welcomed £99.5m of Government funding which is set to enable the merger of the Trusts. The Department for Health announced the funding would provide a new intensive care block, delivery suite and operating theatres at Luton & Dunstable. The merger, announced in autumn 2017, pledged to protect key services at Bedford Hospital including A & E, maternity and paediatrics.

Rough Sleeper Support Grants

The Council has accepted grant funding of £547k from the Government to deliver a range of support services for rough sleepers, as set out below:

- £95k is to be available for homelessness prevention work
- £221k will be used to provide a 24 hour 'Somewhere Safe to Stay Hub' based at 26 Harpur Street in the town centre, providing overnight beds as well as cooking and washing facilities whilst housing needs are assessed
- £125k will fund 'Rough Sleeper Navigators' for a 12 month period to ensure rough sleepers have access to services, providing in particular support to those with complex needs
- £106k has been allocated to employ Local Lettings Officers for 12 months who will work with housing providers to provide secure accommodation for rough sleepers.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Support

The Council has launched a 'Local Offer' website, providing details of support and services available to children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This includes details of health services, family support and entertainment activities. For more information see localoffer.bedford.gov.uk

Children's Mental Health Support

The Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group (BCCG), the organisation responsible for organising local NHS services, and Bedford Borough Council have commissioned a new online mental health resource for children and young people. The service, called 'Kooth', offers emotional and wellbeing support to children and young people aged 11 – 19. It provides one-to-one counselling and self-help materials on issues including exam stress and anxiety for 1700 users logging in every day around the country. For more information see <https://www.kooth.com/>

Ward Fund

The Ward Fund allows councillors to support community schemes. Please do get in touch if you would like to discuss any potential projects. The following deadlines apply: highways and greenspace – 13th September; litter bins / salt bins – 22nd November, and; projects supporting external organisations – 13th December.

'Active Adults' Exercise Classes

The Council has started taking bookings for its 'Active Adults' exercise class programme including football, golf and walking, which starts on the 23rd September (for those aged 35 and over). There are also classes available for those aged 75 and above. For more details search 'active adults Bedford'