

Borough Councillor Update – April 2020

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Borough Council Meetings

Planning Committee rules were changed in March, to allow more delegation of decisions to officers. However, now that virtual meetings are possible, it is expected that the next meeting of the Committee will change this back again. There has been concern from some Councillors about the slowness of the Borough in switching to virtual meetings, when other Councils were already underway. However, I was advised last Friday (17th April) that we are now proceeding with virtual meetings which the public will also be able to access and ask questions.

Borough Council Services

Borough Council services continue to operate, though with much reduced capacity. Where possible Council officers are working from home. The Borough is updating its website www.bedford.gov.uk – fairly frequently with the latest information. Services are being prioritised with a particular focus on services to vulnerable people. Refuse service are reduced and planning applications are still being processed. Please check the Borough website to get the latest updates.

Community leadership role

As things stand, I am being advised that in reality we are likely to be this for at least 12 weeks. This sounds truly daunting, and there is a lot of human behaviour management at work. People WILL get truly cheesed off and compliance with the lockdown will be tested as time moves on. It is important that to re-enforce the "stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives" message, otherwise we do run the risk of a second peak.

Waste collections

Bedford Borough Council is restarting green garden waste collections from Monday 27 April, on a monthly basis to begin with. You should check when your next garden waste collection will be by visiting www.bedford.gov.uk/bins. During the coronavirus outbreak, the Council has been following the latest government guidance to protect both the public and bin crews working on the front line. This meant there had to be some changes to ensure priority collections could continue, while enabling the crews to work in line with social distancing measures and stay safe. Now, with the crews having settled into the new working practices to stay safe and the Council successfully sustaining the government's direction over the priority of household waste and recycling collections, garden waste collections will be restarting from next Monday (27 April), on a monthly basis to begin with. The Council's crews are still having to work in a different way to ensure that they are staying safe and working to the government guidance so collections may take longer than usual. Black and orange bins will be collected as normal, but green bins may not be collected on your normal bin day. Check when your next garden waste collection will be by visiting www.bedford.gov.uk/bins. The online collection day finder has been updated to reflect this brief change to monthly collections for garden waste.

Recycling Centre closed

The Borough's Household Waste recycling Centre in Brakers lane is closed until further notice. The Mayor has considered trying to re-open it, however he advises that the Police closed a recycling centre in the North of England after they stated it was impossible to manage social distancing properly.

Planning Applications

The Planning process has not been suspended or delayed and planning applications are continuing to be received and processed. We have asked the Planning Department to ensure that Parish Councils are still contacted for consultation as normal. Borough Councillors are being sent lists of major applications in case there is a need for a call-in to the planning Committee, which can now meet virtually. Planning Committee schedule for 27th April has been cancelled and the next meeting will be 18th May.

Borough Community Hub

The Borough has set up a "Community Hub" in order to assist isolated and/or vulnerable people with shopping or collection of medical prescriptions. The process that has been set up is as follows:

- Volunteers have been mobilised who have agreed to shop for fellow residents.
- Many volunteers have been happy to pay for the shopping themselves and then drop at the resident's door. The Borough has set up a process where the shopper emails the Council the receipt and the Borough aims to reimburse the shopper through a direct payment to their bank.
- The Borough has organised shopping vouchers which can be used at Tesco, Sainsbury's and Morrison's. These are emailed to the volunteer shoppers as PDFs and can be used via their phones at checkouts. The shopper emails the receipts to the Council.
- The fall-back position is that the volunteer shopper can call at the Corn Exchange and will be provided with cash. They drop the receipt and change back to the Corn Exchange.
- In all cases the Borough has set up a process for 'invoicing' the resident afterwards (where they are in a position to repay). Irrespective the resident does not need cash or to pay upfront. The residents are instructed they must not hand over cash to volunteer shoppers.

Over the Easter bank holiday weekend, the Borough Community Hub provided support to vulnerable residents across the borough, which included delivering the 1000th food parcel to those in need.

Contact details for the Community Hub are: 01234 718 101

If you either **need** help, or want to **offer** help, please use this weblink:

<https://www.bedford.gov.uk/social-care-health-and-community/public-health/coronavirus/coronavirus-community-hub/>

Community Group help in Harrold Ward

Community Groups in all Ward villages have been working together to help residents locally with shopping, prescriptions and dog walking. I would like to thank all Groups for their work for our community and the speed with which they were up and running.

Vulnerable residents

Each Borough Councillor has been provided with a list of local residents in their ward that the Government has identified as potentially 'vulnerable'. I have a list for Harrold Ward and should anyone require help, I will notify the Borough Hub and the local Community Groups, to try and provide assistance.

Coronavirus in Bedford Borough and Bedford Hospital

As of Saturday 18th April, 244 cases of Covid19 had been reported across Bedford Borough including at Bedford Hospital.

Support for Businesses

£16m has already been given to Bedford businesses, to support them through the impact of coronavirus. Bedford Council is administering the Government grant funding for certain businesses ratepayers affected by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

The Council has set up an online form, to make it as easy as possible for local ratepayers to get this money. Eligible businesses are asked to get in touch with the Council online and provide the necessary details for their business, which will enable the Council to get this grant funding to them as quickly as possible.

Grants available to businesses include:

- small business grant funding of £10,000 for all business in receipt of small business rate relief or rural rate relief
- grant funding for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses of £10,000 where the rateable value is up to including £15,000, with the grant increasing to £25,000 where the rateable value is between £15,001 and £50,999.

This is in addition to a 12-month business rates holiday for all retail, hospitality, leisure and nursery businesses in England.

Many charities are also entitled to the grants. The grants are based on business rates assessments and the Borough Council's rating records show that many Village Halls will be entitled to a grant if they are operated by stand-alone charity. To register for a grant, an organisation just needs to spend a few minutes completing the form on the Borough Council's website. Officers will check if they qualify and pay a grant within a few days where they do qualify. We are keen to ensure that as many eligible charities and businesses receive the grants as soon as possible. Therefore, I should be grateful if you would draw the attention of charities (particularly village halls) and small rural businesses in your parish to the availability of the grants. The form to complete can be found at:

www.bedford.gov.uk/bsg

Online help and advice for Wellbeing

Bedford Council has created a new page, bedford.gov.uk/wellbeing, offering advice to Borough residents on how to look after themselves whilst at home during the coronavirus outbreak and beyond. The page will be updated over the coming weeks and will offer advice and signposting to help residents stay healthy during this unprecedented time.

This new page includes a range of materials, such as:

- Exercise tips including indoor games for kids, live fitness classes, and seated exercise
- Mental health advice and links to services that can provide help
- Food & nutritional guidance including Change4Life, recipes and cooking videos
- Further Public Health advice including sexual health, stop smoking, drugs and alcohol, health checks and emotional wellbeing

Dentists

Most dentists are currently closed and only those seeking emergency dental treatment should try and see a dentist. I am not yet aware of how and where people can seek emergency treatment, but I will share when known.

Homeless

The Borough Council has put in place measures to accommodate homeless people, so that they are able to stay inside and observe social distancing measures.

Schools

Schools across the Borough are currently operating at between 12-15% capacity with spaces mainly taken for children of key workers.

Council Tax

Bedford Council is asking vulnerable groups and those self-isolating to pay Council Tax by phone or online instead of in person. Residents normally paying Council Tax at the Post Office or a Payzone shop are advised to use a different method of payment, if possible.

Residents can call the Council's telephone payment service to pay their Council Tax on 01234 718061 (24 hours a day) or visit www.bedford.gov.uk/payments. Residents can also setup a direct debit to pay their Council Tax by calling 01234 718097.

Bogus calls and scams to businesses

Despite the generally positive way that people are adapting to the Coronavirus pandemic, sadly there are always a small few who seek to take advantage. There have been a number of reports of bogus callers targeting businesses. Bedford Council is urging small businesses to act with caution if they receive a suspicious telephone call or email regarding business rates or support grants.

Borough Ward boundary review

The Borough expects to hear from the Boundary Commission on 20th April as to whether they will postpone the 4th May deadline for public responses to the ward Boundary review.