

Borough Councillor Update – November 2019

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Communities Need Protection from Developers

Rural Parishes in north Bedfordshire are spending significant time, effort and money developing Neighbourhood Plans which allow them to determine acceptable sites for new housing. The last meeting of the Borough Council's Planning Committee laid bare the harsh reality that emerging Neighbourhood Plans are not being given enough weight in the planning process. This is due to the inability of the Borough Council to comply with national planning policy by failing to show it has a five-year supply of sites for housing until the Local Plan 2030 is finalised in the coming months.

This situation is galling for residents in our villages who are close to completing their Neighbourhood Plans but find that developers can ride roughshod over their wishes. The failure of the Borough to show a 5 year housing supply tilts the balance in favour of development on sites that would not previously be considered suitable such as those in the open countryside.

National planning guidance states that an 'emerging Neighbourhood Plan is likely to be a material consideration in many cases', with those furthest advanced carrying the greatest weight. I and my fellow Conservative councillors are concerned that the Borough Council is not paying sufficient heed to this approach given the consistent advice to the Planning Committee members that they have to approve speculative developments because of this so called 'tilted balance'. Sites at Sharnbrook and Willington were both granted permission at the last Planning Committee meeting as a result. Our rural communities need all the protection they can get from untrammelled development.

At the time of writing the appeal to the Planning Inspectorate by Catesby Estates for 90 houses on the Odell Road in Harrold has not yet commenced. This is due to start on 12th November and continue for 4 days. The Borough Planning Officers have prepared a robust defence and many local residents are preparing to speak against the development.

Hospital Merger

The Chief Executive of Bedford Hospital told a meeting of the Borough Council's Health Committee in October that the merger with Luton & Dunstable is set to be completed by April 2020. This follows the receipt of £99.5m from the Department for Health to upgrade facilities at Luton & Dunstable Hospital including a new intensive care block, delivery suite and operating theatres.

The merger, announced in autumn 2017, pledged to protect key services at Bedford Hospital including A & E, maternity and paediatrics. The meeting heard that some smaller services may be combined on a single site, but 95% of services would be unaffected.

Rural Crime

Bedfordshire Police undertook a range of targeted activities as part of Rural Crime Week of Action from the 7th October. Actions addressed issues such as motoring offences, illegal fishing and fly-tipping.

Bedfordshire Police has published a Rural Crime Handbook, primarily for businesses, setting out advice on how to make it more difficult for criminals to operate. Search 'Bedfordshire Rural Crime Handbook' for more information.

Bedford Town Centre

Bedford High Street has been awarded a £2m grant as part of the Government's 'Historic High Streets' initiative. This will enable the improvement of shopfronts and buildings on the High Street and the adjacent roads (namely Mill Street, Lime Street and Lurke Street) and public realm works on Silver Street.

Bedford has also been invited by the Government to bid for £25m of the £3.6bn 'Towns Fund' to improve economic growth. Further details are awaited from the Council as to the scope of its bid. Proposals should relate to 'transport, broadband connectivity, skills and culture.'

A consultation on the future of the town centre ended on the 17th September. Its responses will inform the Council's forthcoming Town Centre Plan.

Wixams Railway

At its meeting in September, the Council's Environment & Sustainable Communities Committee was provided with an update on the proposed Wixams railway station

A Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) has been formulated which anticipates 866,000 passengers a year using a two-platform station. This has been shared with the rail industry for discussion before it is submitted to the Department for Transport (DfT). DfT's preferred route for the East West Rail (EWR) line from Oxford to Cambridge will have a bearing on how the Wixams station is taken forward.

Putnoe Walk in Centre

The Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group (BCCG), the organisation responsible for organising NHS services locally, has stated its intention to renew the contract for the Putnoe Walk in Centre (WIC) for a further year to September 2021.

The Putnoe WIC (but not the main GP surgery) was threatened with closure last year after the decision to open the Urgent Treatment Centre, which has a 'walk in' element, on the Bedford Hospital site. It was ultimately agreed that the Putnoe WIC would remain open with reduced hours. The Council's Health Committee has heard that it continues to receive a high number of patients.

Hydrotherapy Pool Closure

The Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group (BCCG), the body responsible for organising NHS services locally, has decided to close the hydrotherapy pool situated at Gilbert Hitchcock House at Kimbolton Road, Bedford.

The pool, which was closed temporarily in November 2018 due to maintenance issues, was used primarily by patients with conditions such as chronic pain, arthritis and neurological disorders. The BCCG says the £120k cost

of refurbishing the pool is unaffordable and that in future hydrotherapy sessions will be provided at various pools around Bedford.

Temporary Accommodation Investment

A meeting of all Borough councillors in October agreed investment of £10m to purchase and provide the Council's own housing supply to support individuals and families at risk of homelessness. This is an 'invest to save' measure designed to reduce payments to private landlords.

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 deadline for highways and greenspace projects has now passed, but applications can still be submitted for litter bins and salt bins (deadline 22nd November) and projects supporting external organisations (13th December).

'Safe and Well Visits'

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service provides Safe and Well Visits for the benefit of elderly and vulnerable people. These are designed to check over houses to identify safety hazards and provide advice to improve wellbeing and prevent crime. Email safeandwell@bedsfire.com if you know of someone who might benefit.

Flu Jab

The NHS advises that you should have a flu jab if you are:

- 65 years old or over
- pregnant
- have certain medical conditions
- living in a long-stay residential care home or another long-stay care facility
- receive a carer's allowance, or you're the main carer for an elderly or disabled person

Contact your GP or local pharmacy for further details.

School Admissions

The admissions process for transfer to secondary schools in the Borough closed on the 31st October, but remains open until the 15th January 2020 for children beginning primary school in September 2020. For more information search 'Bedford school admissions' or call 01234718120.