

BOROUGH COUNCILLOR'S ANNUAL REPORT 2021/2022

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COVID

It has been another strange year for all of us, dominated as it has been by Covid. The need to protect against Covid has meant more restrictions on our day-to-day freedoms than have ever previously been imposed. However, it soon became clear during the pandemic that the Borough is fortunate to have a committed and professional workforce which was able to meet many of the additional demands although the incredible efforts of the voluntary organisations and dedicated individuals acting within their communities should not be overlooked.

As the pandemic diminishes in intensity, at least for the time being, things will slowly return to normal although there are likely to be many changes such as an increase in home working. Many jobs and businesses have been lost and for many residents things won't be quite the same again.

Hopefully now we are out of the worst and life is slowly returning to normal.

BOROUGH COUNCIL SERVICES

The long-term implications from Covid for the Borough are unclear but it seems that remote working will continue and with it the use of form filling, generally online, for most purposes rather than residents being able to deal directly with officers. This is a handicap for many residents, many of whom are not familiar with the internet/email and/or have a poor broadband connection due to their rural location.

We have had examples of residents being unable to get the advice they are needing including urgent advice with deadlines looming. The wait on the telephone is often reported to as being excessive. If residents are having difficulties, then please do email me with the details and I will see what I can do. Although we Councillors also have to do most things online too, we do have direct access to officers, however, it may take officers a day or two to get back to us, depending on their workload.

One department that has seen long delays is the Planning Department where residents have reported much longer than usual response and decision times for their planning applications. The Planning Department found that a number of officers were leaving to pursue careers elsewhere, particularly in the private sector and, also during Covid recruitment was a problem. This resulted in the planning officers that remained at the Borough having a significantly larger number of cases to deal with than usual, in some cases 130-140 cases per officer rather than the usual 40 – 45 cases each. Fortunately, the Department has recently been provided with additional funds by the Borough and has been able to recruit more officers.

BEDFORD BOROUGH LOCAL PLAN 2040

Bedford Borough's new Local Plan was approved by the Executive at its meeting on 27 April 2022 and is due to go to Full Council on 11th May. The proposals will, if adopted, be subject to consultation for a six-week period from **15 June 2022 to 29 July 2022**. Formal publication

of the 'Plan for submission', also known as Regulation 19 consultation, invites local residents and others with an interest to support, object to or comment on the Plan.

By way of background, the current Bedford Borough Local Plan 2030 was adopted in January 2020 with a requirement that an updated or replacement plan would be submitted for examination no later than three years after the adoption of the Local Plan 2030. In accordance with this requirement, the next Local Plan must be submitted for examination by January 2023. If this is not achieved, the policies in the Local Plan 2030 which are most important for the determination of planning applications for new dwellings will be deemed to be out of date, with the effect that the Borough would effectively have less than a five-year housing land supply, exposing the Borough to risks of speculative planning applications. The timetable for the production of Local Plan 2040 is set out in a recently updated Local Development Scheme 2022; whilst there are still areas of uncertainty around national plans which impact the Borough, including the Oxford – Cambridge Arc and the precise route for East West Rail, the Borough Council is legally obliged to submit an updated Local Plan by January 2023.

The broad approach to the development strategy retains the initial focus for growth in the urban area, including suitable, previously developed 'brownfield' sites. The strategy then focuses on growth based around the rail network, taking advantage of the opportunity to enable people to live and travel sustainably. This includes two new settlements close to two new rail stations on the proposed East West Rail line at the former brickworks at Kempston Hardwick, and at Little Barford to the east of the Borough, where the East West Rail line is planned to cross the East Coast Main Line.

Other development sites are allocated south of Bedford, where new sustainable connections to existing or planned rail stations at Kempston Hardwick and Wixams, and to nearby Bedford, can be achieved. The Local Plan 2040 also focuses on ensuring that new development is supported by new infrastructure, including green infrastructure (In this regard, it is intended that development will help to bring forward the new water sports lake at Bedford River Valley Park to the east of Bedford at Willington, the Bedford to Milton Keynes Waterway Park to the west of the town and to further progress the Forest of Marston Vale). The Local Plan also recognises the challenge that town centres face and it includes policies that would permit more residential properties in the town centre to help support existing and new town centre businesses, and an enhancement of the cultural offer. The Plan also focuses on encouraging high-skilled employment opportunities alongside housing development, with up to 26,700 jobs planned at several sites across the borough. These employment sites are being allocated where they have good connectivity, including by rail, along the A421 corridor and the A1 close to the Black Cat Roundabout.

Following a review of sites submitted for potential development, the sites allocated in the Plan for Submission are listed on the attached sheet.

You will see that there are no additional housing allocations for the North Bedfordshire villages, with growth focussed South of Bedford.

The amount of development being planned for is based upon the Government's standard methodology for determining housing needs. Over the 20-year plan period, 27,100 new dwellings must be planned for (1,355 per annum). Taking into account existing commitments (including an allowance for 'windfall') the number of dwellings to be delivered by allocations in Local Plan 2040 is around **12,275**. In addition to this, an appropriate buffer should be included, and across the plan period the Borough Council must be able to show a five-year supply of available housing land. When the plan is formally assessed, the Council must also be able to show that the choice of allocated sites will deliver these requirements.

Based on the estimated capacities in the table above, the allocations would provide a buffer of just over 4.5% of the plan's housing need number.

The draft Plan also recognises the progress with neighbourhood plans with "made" neighbouring plans including allocations for around 2,400 dwellings, which is slightly more than the Local Plan 2030 anticipated (2,260); these allocations are important in helping to meet the growth targets. Whilst no additional Key Service Centre or Rural Service Centre growth targets are included in the 2040 plan, the report identifies that local communities may decide to review or make new neighbourhood plans and allocate development sites to meet local needs. Should this happen, the additional growth will add choice and flexibility on top of allocations made in the Local Plan 2040 and earlier local plans.

Following the close of the imminent next stage consultation, a report of the main issues will be reported to a meeting of the Executive on 4 January 2023 along with any proposed minor amendments to the plan. If major changes need to be made (such as a substantial change to the level of growth or the addition of a development site) then the Regulation 19 consultation would need to be repeated so that the Examination Inspector is aware of any objections made by consultees. If the Executive is satisfied that, having considered the main issues raised during the consultation, the plan should be submitted for formal examination then it will be invited to recommend this course of action to a meeting of Full Council on 11 January 2023. If Full Council approval is given, the Local Plan 2040 and supporting documents will be submitted for formal examination. The examination of the plan commences on the day that the plan is received by the Planning Inspectorate; following consideration of any consultation responses on the modifications the Inspector will prepare a final report to the Council and, if it is found to be sound, the Council will be able to adopt the plan. The timetable will depend on the availability of an Inspector, the number and range of objections received, and the number of hearing sessions required, but it is hoped that the plan can be adopted in late 2023 or shortly thereafter.

The link to the Executive papers and draft Local Plan can be found at the following link. www.bedford.gov.uk/localplan2040

WARD FUND

I have spent my Ward Fund this year (2021/2022) on the following projects:

Harrold Parish – Repair to church clock £1,587

Odell Parish – Vehicle Activated Speed Sign £2,000

Podington Parish (for Fardish) – Vehicle Activated Speed Sign £2,000

Carlton Parish – Bench for children's Play Area and Jubilee Bin £1,017

Wymington – Vehicle Activated Speed sign £1,762

The Ward Fund should re-opened in March. If there are any community projects that could benefit from my ward Fund please let me know. I do try to spread the money evenly between the Parishes in the Ward if at all possible.

ROADWORKS AT A6/SAINSBURY ROUNDABOUT

At last the road works at these two roundabouts are coming to a close and traffic has significantly improved over the past week. It is anticipated that the work will be completed by the end of June 2022.

EAST-WEST RAIL

The final decision on which of the two route options will be chosen by EW Rail is still pending but it is hoped we will know later this year.

As set out last year both line options will cause irreparable harm to the north Beds countryside and to residents in the Poets area of the town. Not only will houses along the route both in town and the rural areas be required and compulsorily purchased, the line will run close to the Brickhill and Woodlands Park areas of Bedford. Villages along the route such as Ravensden will be cut in two whichever route is chosen. The 2 routes will both require deep cuttings and embankments/viaducts which will ruin the outlook for many and involve years of major civil engineering works for all of us. The end result will be a totally changed and vandalised landscape and ruined settings for many houses and families.

FLOOD GROUPS

Residents in some of the villages most affected by flooding at Christmas 2020 from the river and water run-off from the fields have been working hard together with the Borough Council Flood Resilience team to set up Flood Action Groups and these are now formed in those communities. These Flood Action Groups meet regularly and are now better prepared to meet the challenge of future floods.