

Borough Councillors Report – January 2024
Contact Borough Councillor Alison Foster by telephone on 07773371190
or email at ajfieldfoster@outlook.com

Bus Service

There have been numerous complaints for some months now from residents in Carlton, Harrold and Odell concerning cancellations to the Grant Palmer bus service to our villages. These cancellations have left residents unable to get to work, college or into Bedford for appointments and in many cases unable to get home in the evening without getting a taxi, which of course many residents cannot afford. The Grant Palmer website is not updated in a timely manner giving people adequate notice to make alternate arrangements.

Jim Wier, the Deputy Mayor and Portfolio holder for Transport in the Borough, has had, and is having a number of meetings directly with Government Ministers and the various bus companies which serve our area, in particular Grant Palmer. I have also met with Borough officers responsible for the contract, along with Jim Weir to look into the options available to us under the contract, in particular in respect of the non-performance of Grant Palmer's contractual obligations.

Jim attended the last Harrold Parish Council meeting on 13th December and gave residents an update explaining the work that has been going behind the scenes to resolve this problem for residents. He had a meeting scheduled for 8th January to coordinate how the three unitary authorities (Luton Borough Council, Central Beds Council, Bedford Borough Council) and the bus operators can work together to achieve better government funding and support, and improved operations for bus services.

Grant Palmer, owner and operator of the company also attended the HPC meeting. Grant explained that the various road works around the Borough, including Paula Radcliffe Way had resulted in many of the delays to the service, requiring last minute re-scheduling. He apologised for the poor service residents had received from his company, explaining this was caused by a shortage of bus drivers, a complaint made by the other bus companies too. To combat this latter problem, Grant said he had significantly increased his drivers' salaries, offering them additional benefits as well, such as health insurance, further education opportunities etc. This he hoped would encourage more drivers to join his company. Grant accepted his company had recently been giving a poor service and apologised profusely. He hopes that now the A6 works have been completed and more drivers join his company, that things will improve. I also mentioned to him the poor updating system run by his company, particularly at weekends and that the system must be updated in advance of cancellations to allow people to make alternative arrangements. He undertook to improve things.

Universal Studios

You will have seen media coverage around purchase of land in the Borough by Universal Studios. The land is at Stewartby/Kempston Hardwick at the old brickworks site and comprises approximately 420 acres. Universal have confirmed that they are in the early stages of exploring its potential feasibility for a theme park and resort. More detailed work will be required however, and I don't have more information to share with you at this time. Universal will be working on wider stakeholder and local community engagement over the coming months including with the Borough Council and Councillors.

It is good to see potential investment in the Borough and will hopefully bring a lot of employment opportunities to Bedfordshire. The Borough Council will want to ensure that the plans align with the needs of our residents.

New Leisure Service Partnership

The Council has now signed a new 2-year contact with the charitable social enterprise Greenwich Leisure Limited (GLL) to manage and operate leisure facilities across the Borough, ending the 10-year fusion contract.

The Council will be working with provider to ensure our leisure facilities to modernise our leisure facilities.

Bedford Borough Local Plan 2040

The Planning Inspector has responded to the previous administrations Local Plan 2040. The plan has been found to be unsound and the Inspector's report can be found [here](#).

This is the second time the Local Plan has been sent back by the inspector and the Council will now take time to consider its response and how it intends to proceed.

The main reasons it had been sent back are as follows:

- The Inspector disagreed with the previous administration Local Plan 2040 that the degree of harm under policy HOU5 (Abbey Field, West of Elstow) would result in less than substantial harm.
- A421 concerns regarding delayed delivery – the Inspector is of the view that while he agrees activity on the identified project with National Highways could be delivered at some point, he believes there remains a lack of clarity about whether the projects would be delivered to a timescale that would be aligned with the growth proposed in the Plan.
- He disagrees with the presumed build out rates Little Barford or Kempston Hardwick are based on justified assumptions that are soundly based.

Unfortunately, this does leave the Council potentially exposed to speculative planning applications.

Council Capital Programme

At Full Council on (Wednesday, 29th November) the Executives Capital Programme was sent back to the Executive after members of the Council voted and carried forward an amendment to “delete all” of the Capital Programme.

The following programmes were removed:

- Primary Care Estate funding
- Town Centres Regeneration funding
- Leisure Sites funding
- Leisure Complex & Asset Refurbishment funding
- Bedford to Milton Keynes Waterway Canal Link
- Sharnbrook (Primary) School funding
- A6 Paula Radcliffe Way Highway Corridor funding
- Cemetery Provision contribution

The budget will be under discussion at the Full Council meeting on Wednesday 10th January.

The Greater South East Net Zero Hub

In an initiative funded by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) - the Greater South East Net Zero Hub is collaborating with the Council seeking Bedfordshire-based installers to join its growing supply chain dedicated to delivering energy-efficiency measures, renewable energy solutions, and low-carbon heating.

Details on the DPS process and specific requirements for installers can be found on the Greater South East Net Zero Hub website at www.gsenetzerohub.org.uk/supply-chain-procurement/.

Homelessness recruitment drive

Due to cuts that took place before the 2023 local elections, the Council's homelessness service had been facing overspends reaching £6 million, a significant backlog of cases and lack of expertise and employees in the service.

In order to address the lack of expertise and overreliance on agency staff due to cuts that took place last year – the Council is now launching a recruitment drive to hire skilled caseworkers dedicated to providing expert homelessness advice and assistance.

For more information about homelessness, please visit www.bedford.gov.uk/housing/housing-advice/housing-advice-overview.

Consultations

Bedford Borough Council has begun a public consultation on its annual budget proposals.

The Council has stated that the budget focuses on the themes of a “one council” approach and remains committed to protecting services, transforming service quality, improving organisational and process efficiencies, realigning resources to priorities and improve customer service.

Take part at www.bedford.gov.uk/budget2024-25.

The Council is also planning a consultation on the Council's the Trees and Development SPD for public consultation for a minimum of 6 weeks.

The SPD supports existing policies in the Local Plan 2030 and will provide guidance to ensure that trees are adequately addressed in the development process.

Council Financial Overspend Update

The Council facing significant financial challenges with a £12.188 million overspend that occurred before the 2023 local elections.

The financial picture remains challenging however, the Council has further reduced the overspend from £8.3 million at the end of June 2023 to £4.6 million at the end of September 2023 - equivalent to 2.9% of the Council's net budget.

The Council is continuing to work towards balancing the budget for the end of the financial year.

Borough Council announces new option to apply for postal and proxy vote applications

National government is making significant improvements to the process of applying for postal and proxy votes, aimed at enhancing accessibility and efficiency for electors. Since Tuesday, 31 October, residents in Bedford Borough now have the option to apply for a postal vote through a simplified online application form at www.bedford.gov.uk/your-council/elections-and-voting/postal-voting.

A421 Community funds/work

National Highways have announced a £2 million legacy fund to support communities around the Black Cat – these funds will go towards improving the local communities, the environment, and the local economy.

The two funds available are:

- Community Fund – This is for not-for-profit groups or small voluntary and community organisations, with grants of up to £15,000 being available to help support the local community.
- Social Value Fund – This is available for all not-for-profit organisations with grants between £15,000 and £200,000. It is designed to maximise the wider benefits of the scheme by funding projects that enhance economic prosperity, improve the environment, enhance community wellbeing and support equality, diversity and inclusion.

More detail can be found here: [Leaving a positive legacy](#)

- To make room to build the A421-A1 northbound link road there will be new restrictions at the eastern end of the A421 which involve the removal of the central reservation.
- Foundation work has started on the eastbound carriageway through this area of the central reservation.