

Borough Councillor Report September 2024 – Sue Abood

News from the Council

Council meetings have just restarted following the summer break. While the next full council meeting isn't until the beginning of October, the various overview and scrutiny committees and specialist committees have begun to meet again.

The Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee that I sit on met on 9th September when we received a presentation from the Chief Executive, Chief Nurse and the Director of Midwifery from Bedford Hospitals Trust. The report was regarding the improvements that have been made at both Bedford Hospital and the Luton and Dunstable Hospital maternity units following a CQC inspection in November 2023 which found maternity services to be inadequate. The full report was released in July. The report from the hospital trust detailed the improvements that have already been made and how policies and procedures have changed to prevent the issues highlighted in the CQC report recurring. The executive seemed aware of the issues that had led to the whistleblowing that prompted the inspection and were disappointed that some of the issues discovered by the inspection were not raised at the time of the inspection, but some 4 months later. We have asked the executive team to report back to the committee in the New Year to inform us on progress of their quality improvement programme.

The Licensing Committee and General Licensing committee will be sitting on 19th September and as part of the meeting will be asked to discuss the abolition of the need for illuminated roof signs for private hire vehicles licenced with the Borough Council, whether to adopt targets and/or incentives to increase the number of taxis and private hire vehicles that are Ultra Low Emission Vehicles (ULEVs), and to consider the progress made to date to assess the demand for accessible taxis and private hire vehicles.

Telecare - The Executive's decision to charge for the Telecare service from 1st October 2024 for users who do not have Care Act eligible needs, has been paused – for now.

In July, Liberal Democrat Councillors successfully argued in an exceptional call-in meeting that the decision to start charging over 2,000 vulnerable people around £200 a year for the vital emergency helpline telecare service must be reviewed by the council. We were backed by Labour councillors in our fight.

This service helps people to stay in their own homes, and the Council's impact assessment highlighted a particularly harmful impact on rural areas, women, the elderly, and those with disabilities. This will now be considered at a future Council Meeting in October.

This whole fight against the decision to charge for Telecare services began as a resident in this ward brought the issue to me as a concern. I'm really proud that we have been able to make our voices, and those of our residents, heard on this matter.

Local plan update - The Westminster government is proposing reforms to the planning system.

Firstly, there will be a new Standard Method for housebuilding targets. We would share this independent briefing from Council Officers:

“The new Standard Method number for Bedford has reduced. This is welcome and goes some way to vindicating our view that the previous number was too high. This number is obviously still a large (25%) increase on our Local Plan 2030 number of 970, which we believed properly identified local need, but it is at least based on a fairer algorithm that takes its cue from an area’s current housing stock, not it’s past (over-)performance in delivering housing.”

The Government’s Planning Inspector responded unfavourably to the proposal to change the housing target from the 1,355 in the submitted plan to the 1,310 given in the latest annual revision.

Bedford Borough is arguing for the extension to the pause in examination to be maintained given the exceptional situation regarding Universal and National Highways’ confirmation that they may commit to supporting highways improvements and “The government is [also] proposing to remove the benefit of previous over-supply in calculating five-year land supply; and to remove the right to only show a four-year supply whilst a plan is at examination. Both changes would hurt us badly.”

Finally, there is a national consultation on proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system. This is available for parish councillors (and individuals) to complete [here](#). The deadline for this is 24th September.

Corporate Plan - The Bedford Borough Council “Corporate Plan” sets the strategic direction for Bedford Borough for the next four years and councillors can only stop measures passed by an elected Mayor that contradict this plan or the Budget – that is why it matters.

Back in July we called on the Council to:

- * include all residents in the plan – not just selected groups,
- * include rural areas in the economic considerations,
- * include tackling climate change, housing, our rivers, education and skills that were not well covered or missing.

I am pleased to say that many of our changes have been adopted but there is still no mention of tackling climate change (just dealing with its consequences), skills and education, or protecting our waterways.

Planning consultation update – Community Involvement

The council is revising the adopted Statement of Community Involvement 2019, which is a document that sets out how and when local communities can get involved in the planning process. It explains who will be consulted, how that consultation will happen and when it will take place both in respect of new planning policy documents and individual planning applications.

The survey is [here](#) and all comments must be received **by 5pm on 27th September**.

Reminder of the Village Agents at Beds Rural Communities Charity (BRCC)

While I know members of our parish council are aware of the great work the BRCC do, I wanted to add a link to their website where the Village and Community Agents are listed as they can help parishioners access the services and support they may need. <https://bedsrcc.org.uk/what-we-do/health-wellbeing/village-community-agents/>

Rural England Grants –

Just a reminder that there are still Rural England Grant Schemes available for rural communities to bid for. More information can be found on the Council's information page -

<https://www.bedford.gov.uk/business/invest-bedford/rural-england-prosperity-fund>

The next meeting dates to consider grants are 14 October 2024 and 11 November 2024.

Any enquiries and applications can be sent to BedfordUKSPF@bedford.gov.uk.

Universal Proposal for their theme park

As you know, we have been invited to a meeting with Universal Executives on Wednesday 18th September. I will be attending as Borough Councillor and parish councillor and this will be my fourth meeting with them. All Borough Councillors were invited to an update session earlier on this month when councillors who had not been directly involved with initial conversations could ask any questions and receive an update on the situation.

Local Issues

The speed sign on Ridge Road continues to provide data. Between mid-July and mid-August the figures showed, once again, that approximately 16% of drivers were driving past the sign over the speed limit. This information is being sent to the council.

A request has been received for a bin on Ridge Road where the popular dog walking route through the gate and down towards the industrial park meets Ridge Road. The bin requested was specifically a dog waste bin, but these are no longer provided by the council, and instead they provide a large mixed waste bin which houses a wheelie bin inside. This may be something the parish council may wish to consider.

Having chased BPHA, I am currently waiting for an update on the surveyors visit to the land behind 41 – 47 West End Road. I understand from the Lease and Contracts Manager that I have been dealing with that the inspection has been carried out and that she is querying something with the surveyor. Once she receives the information she needs she will be in touch again.

I am chair of the Joint Burials Committee for this year and we undertook an inspection of the cemetery on 12th September before our quarterly meeting. Two other members of the parish council attended the meeting also.

The Wootton Neighbourhood Chat group are starting up some Memory Gym sessions at The Hub at Wootton Methodist Church, Cause End Road, Wootton. These will be held on the first Monday of each month between 2.30 and 4pm to support people in the community that have memory loss through age, stroke or dementia, and their carers. They are being supported by Tibbs Dementia Foundation. The first session is taking place on Monday 7th October and anyone from the local area is welcome to attend. The cost is a £1 donation which includes tea/coffee and biscuits. Please do spread the word to anyone who may be interested.

I continue to undertake casework for individual residents and, as always, my surgeries take place on the 3rd Saturday of the month, 10 – 11am opposite the Cross Keys in Wood End and 11.15am – 12pm at Gibraltar Corner. The next surgeries are being held on Saturday 21st September.