

## **Borough Councillor Report – October 2024 – Cllr Sue Abood**

### **News from the council**

Council meetings have ramped up in the last month, including having the first Full Council meeting since the summer break.

### **Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

The Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee that I sit on met on 7<sup>th</sup> October. As part of this meeting we discussed the Denny Review. The Denny Review ([linked here](#)) is a community led engagement programme that started during the pandemic in July 2020 to understand what health inequalities were experienced in Bedfordshire, Luton, and Milton Keynes, and why. The Review was commissioned following a call from the Descendants of Windrush in Bedford Borough, who invited the then Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group to a meeting to demand action was taken to tackle health inequalities, given the disproportionate impact Covid was having on their community. Reverend Lloyd Denny, a pastor from Luton and a former Public Participation Board member for Luton Clinical Commissioning Group, was invited to lead this community-led review of inequalities. The review report was published in September 2023 and since then the ICB has changed how it operates, how it is structured and how it thinks. The findings of the report are embedded in everything the ICB does, including in the ICS – the integrated care system, which includes partner organisations such as the Borough Council, voluntary organisations, and Public Health etc.

The review highlighted that people most affected by health inequalities included:

- Gypsies, Roma people, Irish Travellers
- People living in the region's 64 most deprived areas
- People with learning or physical disabilities
- Migrant people
- LGBTIQ+ people and;
- People who experience homelessness.

The voices of these groups was heard in the review report and these have led to four areas for action:

- Language and communication – including translation/interpretation services. It highlighted the need for simpler communications to meet literacy and health literacy standards, the need for personalisation with regards to the mode of communications and recommendations around culturally appropriate design and imagery.
- Access – was highlighted as an area of focus, not just relating to the difficulty people were experiencing in accessing appointments, but in terms of the Victorian estate prevalent in BLMK and challenges with understanding how health and care services worked for people who needed additional support, or for migrant people who did not have experience of navigating the health and care system.
- Representation – was highlighted as an area for attention, with people feeding back that there was little diverse representation on patient groups and at senior levels within the health and care system, which led them to believe that the 'NHS was not for them'.

- Cultural competency - a consistent theme throughout the report was that residents do not feel understood by the health and care professionals that served them. Residents from all seldom asked groups reflected that their experiences could often become a barrier to accessing services, because they felt mis-understood, were treated differently, or encountered unconscious bias and racism.

During the meeting, Revd Denny discussed the review and members of the ICB talked about the work that has been ongoing since the report was published. The committee were reassured that work is ongoing to address the concerns raised in the report and the committee have asked the ICB to return in six months to further update them on the progress made.

During the meeting we also discussed the worrying decline in the number of children who are vaccinated against Measles, Mumps and Rubella. Children routinely have an MMR at about a year old and then another at 3yrs 4 months. In order for herd immunity to work, it's essential to have 95% coverage of two doses in the population. You may have seen in the press that there have been measles outbreaks in certain areas. Within England, the coverage of children with two doses of the vaccine at age five has fallen to 83.9%. Coverage in Bedford Borough is slightly higher at 87.5% but take up of the vaccines has been declining of late. Coverage does vary across the borough though and between GP practices. The ICB is working on increasing the uptake rates with various tactics. A new immunisation provider has just started work and a slight uptick in vaccination rates has already been seen. There is hope that this will continue. The committee have asked for an update in the New Year on vaccination rates.

Worryingly, it was announced two weeks ago that the Bedford, Luton and Milton Keynes area has the fourth worst ratio of GPs to Patients in the country. We are aware that we have missed out on 8 GPs in the last couple of years as there were no places for them. We are continuing to push the executive for the promised new GP surgeries which should help to alleviate this issue.

### **Telecare**

Following our call in of the decision to charge telecare users without a social care plan for the service, the issue was due to come to full council on the 9<sup>th</sup> October for debate. Telecare is the emergency buttons, pull cords and monitors that elderly or vulnerable people can have in order to summon help or assistance in an emergency. The day before the papers for full council were published, the executive rescinded their decision to start charging and they say they will be reassessing the situation in light of the government cutting the winter fuel allowance. The announcement of this cut in Winter Fuel Allowance was made the day we submitted the call in – but it took two months for the executive to rescind their decision. This is a bit of a local victory as it was a resident in Wootton who originally alerted me to the proposal to start charging and we have been fighting the decision since.

### **Full Council**

Full Council met on 9<sup>th</sup> October for a lengthy meeting. The most contentious items on the agenda were the new Corporate Plan, the Treasury Management Annual Report, and the Medium Term Financial Strategy. A recording of the meeting can be found here -

<https://councillorsupport.bedford.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=124&MIId=6502> . All council meetings are live streamed with the recording available afterwards.

The Lib Dems and Labour councillors voted for an objection to the draft corporate plan for various reasons including the omission of vulnerable people from the plan, no commitment to tackle climate change only to address the challenges brought about by it, no mention of enhancing and protecting our 'blue' areas just the green areas, no mention of mental health, no Equality Impact Assessment being submitted, and most importantly, no KPIs that measure the success or otherwise of the focus areas of the plan. A majority of Full Council voted to send the plan back to the Executive to be reconsidered in the light of the objections made. While this is happening, the Corporate Plan set by the previous administration is still in force as that runs until 2026. The corporate plan is an important document as it allows councillors and the public to hold the council to account on whether they are achieving what they say they will do, so it needs to be correct.

The Lib Dems, Labour, Green parties and one independent councillor voted for an amendment to the Treasury Management Annual Report. The amendment stated that council, while noting the report, expresses its concern at the Treasury Management position, in particular:

- \* Net borrowing/investment went from £10m investment to £55m borrowing during the year.
- \* External Debt was £88m at 31 March 2024, up £28m in 1 year.
- \* External Debt is forecast to be £153m by March 2027

and that this situation was continued in the current year with:

- \* External debt reaching £107m in July
- \* Capital Financing costs forecast to overspend by £1.4m
- \* 4 out of 7 Maturity Structure indicators being breached

The amendment expressed the concern on the impact these issues will have on vital service delivery as reserves are used up and borrowing costs rise further and therefore a majority of full council did not approve the report.

An objection was also put forward on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) which stated: Full Council notes:

- \* The substantial savings identified as being needed by the Executive
- \* That the size of the challenge has been made worse by the actions of the executive in running down reserves and driving up borrowing costs

In accordance with Procedure Rule BP2, Full Council informs the Mayor that it has the following objections to the proposed MTFS:

- \* The lack of an effective efficiency plan to reduce operational and back-office costs
- \* The need to change course now to protect residents from the triple hit of:

- High council tax rises
- Increased or new fees for services, such as Telecare and Green Waste
- Cuts to services

The Lib Dems, Labour, Green parties and one independent councillor voted for the objection meaning that Full Council instructed the Executive to reconsider the strategy in the light of these objections and respond to Full Council on or before 27 November 2024.

Given the issue of councils being declared bankrupt around the country, it's concerning that the amount of borrowing is increasing. For every £1million borrowed, £100,000 is charged in interest. Paying the interest on this borrowing comes out of the council's budget, thereby affecting the amount of money available for vital services. It is a particular issue when the borrowing is for what have been deemed 'vanity projects' such as a new leisure village in Bedford.

I also attended the Special Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) which sets the RE syllabus for Bedfordshire. There is nothing to report from that meeting.

### **Local Issues**

As you'll be aware, the plans for the suggested double yellow lines in Wood End have been received from the council. The placement of the yellow lines needs discussing and we can then go back to the council to start the consultation process.

The land behind 41 – 47 Wood End Road. I have heard back today (15<sup>th</sup> October) from BPHA regarding the land. The valuer has valued the land at £1000 plus costs. Unfortunately they have a minimum purchase value of £5000 plus costs so that would be the minimum they would be able to accept for it. They have been discussing the issue internally and propose that it may be more beneficial for the Parish Council if they proceed on a long term lease basis for a peppercorn rent rather than a sale. They have asked if we would be open to considering this as an option and they can send further details over if we are.

The speed sign continues to provide data. Over the last month, the highest speed was 79 mph between 3 and 4pm on a Saturday afternoon. I have recently learned that in order to be added to the list of areas needing average speed cameras, over 15% of the motorists need to be speeding. The last two downloads from the sign have shown 15.8% of motorists exceeding the speed limit. This last month this has decreased to 13.72%. This is good from the perspective of cars driving slower, but I would like to get the road on the list for ASCs. I'll continue to monitor the data each month to see what the trends are.

I am still looking for organisations or groups who may wish to take advantage of some of my ward funding. The deadline to apply for funding is mid-December, so if you know of anyone who may benefit, please do let me know or ask them to contact me. I can provide a copy of the criteria for recipients of the money if you know of anyone who might benefit. By way of example,

last year's money was spent on the speed indicator sign, a bus shelter, a dropped pram kerb, and money was given to the Cubs, Brownies and Rainbows.

The first Memory Gym session run by the Wootton Neighbourhood Chat Group was held on 7<sup>th</sup> October. 35 people attended which is really encouraging. These sessions will be taking place on the first Monday of each month between 2.30 and 4pm supporting people in the community that have memory loss through age, stroke or dementia, and their carers. It is a £1 donation to attend which includes tea or coffee, biscuits and cakes. Please do let anyone that may benefit from this social session know.

I continue to undertake casework for individual residents and, as always, my surgeries take place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> October.