

Borough Councillor's Update – January 2016

**Contact Borough Councillor Alison Foster by telephone on 07773371190
or email at ajfieldfoster@gmail.com**

Council Budget 2016/17

The Mayor's Executive will set out its proposed 2016/17 budget for the Borough Council at its meeting on the 20th January. The plans will then be debated and voted on at a meeting of all councillors on the 3rd February. The budget will include consideration of an array of savings proposals totalling just under £1.3m which have been the subject of 2 public consultations. It may also include plans to vary Council Tax.

An initial consultation ended on the 14th December on efficiencies totalling £0.689m. The full details of the plans can still be seen at www.bedford.gov.uk under the 'Council and Democracy' and then 'Consultations' sections.

The Chancellor's Spending Review at the end of November confirmed a 'real terms' (i.e. including inflation) reduction in resources for local government over the course of this Parliament. Specific resource reductions for the Borough Council were confirmed via the Government's Local Government Finance Settlement in December and will come at a time of higher demand for services, particularly in relation to adult social care. As a result, the Council has set out additional savings proposals totalling £0.6m for 2016/17. These were put to consultation on the 7th December and residents have until the 8th January to comment under the 'Consultations' section of the Council's website as outlined above.

The fresh round of proposals include plans to reduce the budgets for street cleansing (i.e. litter collections, sweeping etc.) and grounds maintenance (i.e. maintenance of parks, amenity areas and sports pitches). In addition to these proposals there will be reductions in the Council's workforce which do not require public consultation.

Councils will also, from next year, have the choice to levy an extra 2% Council Tax payment which will be used for social care costs only. This can be in addition to the existing power to increase Council Tax by 1.99% (a rise of 2% or over is subject to a referendum), meaning that local authorities can now increase their precepts by up to 3.99%.

Bedfordshire Police

The Chancellor has decided to protect police budgets as part of the Spending Review. This means that forces in England Wales will receive an extra £900m in funding by 2019/20, thus alleviating fears of a reduction of resources for Bedfordshire Police in the coming years.

Parish and Community Special Constables

In early 2015, Northamptonshire Police introduced 'Parish Special Constables'. These officers are volunteers recruited from within their local communities, with all the powers of warranted police officers, for example the power of arrest; to issue fines and stop speeding cars etc. This scheme is a success in Northamptonshire and I would like to see it rolled out in Bedford Borough. Parish Special Constables will be particularly useful in our rural areas which rarely see police officers who are often too busy in the urban areas of the county to deal with issues such as illegally parked cars, speeding and low level anti-social behaviour in our villages.

At the Borough Council's meeting in December, I asked the Council to support a Motion seeking to introduce a similar scheme in the Borough. The introduction of Parish or Community Specials would provide a sustainable and relatively low cost solution to the lack of visible policing our residents complain of, they would be able to provide reassurance by their presence in the community and knowledge of local issues.

I am pleased to say the Motion received cross party support and the Council's Chief Executive has now written to Bedfordshire's Police and Crime Commissioner to request the implementation of Parish or Community Special Constables serving their specific parishes or local communities.

Council Library Strategy

The Mayor's Executive agreed at its meeting on the 16th December that the Council will undertake a review of how its library service will be provided in the future.

At the beginning of 2016, work will be carried out to understand how the library service is used in terms of service usage, demographics and geography. This part of the review will also consider the needs of key stakeholders such as staff, parish councils and any groups affiliated to the libraries and it will identify potential partners for the delivery of the service going forwards.

An initial consultation will begin in the spring which will focus on identifying users' views and opportunities to change the service. The results will be considered in April and service options will be developed and subject to a further consultation between May and September. A strategy is scheduled to be drafted between September and October.

NHS Review

A joint committee of Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire councillors received an update at the end of November in relation to the ongoing review of NHS services in Bedfordshire.

The review began in early 2014 at the behest of NHS England and hospital regulators. The intention was stated at the outset to amalgamate services between Bedford Hospital and Milton Keynes Hospital whilst better integrating GP and social care services as a means of securing efficiencies and improving service quality.

Nearly two years later, the review has been narrowed down to 2 options which could see the transfer of services from Bedford to Milton Keynes or vice-versa. The Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, the body responsible for organising local NHS services, has, however, been working with local service providers to put forward an alternative option for a 'Modern District Hospital' which could see Bedford Hospital expand links with other hospitals and strengthen the integration of community services.

At the meeting the NHS representatives set out a timetable for the remainder of the review. Further 'testing' of the options will continue to take place until January 2016, which in essence means the clinical and financial implications of each option will be assessed. A full public consultation is scheduled to begin in summer 2016.

Car Parking Charges

The Borough Council has revised a number of its town centre car parks charges from January 2016 with the standard 2 hour charge set to increase from £1.60 to £1.80. Despite this, there will

be reductions to season ticket charges and it will also be free to park from 6pm onwards every day.

In addition, ongoing charges at Queen Street multi-storey car park will be reduced.

Energy Advice

Energy bills and keeping warm can be difficult for some people as the temperature starts to drop. If you would like any advice on bills and keeping warm you can call the Home Heat Helpline. The line is open 9am-6pm Monday to Fridays on 0800 336699. Calls are free of charge from landlines.

Finally I would like to wish all residents of the Ward a very Happy New Year.

Please do get in touch with me if you have any issues or concerns I may be able to help with.