

Borough Councillor's Annual Report 2015 / 2016

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

Budget and Council Tax

Bedford Borough councillors agreed the Council's budget for 2016/17 at its meeting on the 3rd February.

The budget was formulated in the midst of reduced resources and rising demand for services, particularly in relation to adult social care. As a result, officers estimated in October that the Council would be facing a £9.4m spending gap. The budget contains measures to meet the Council's spending pressures to ensure it sets a balanced budget in the coming year.

The budget includes an array of savings proposals totalling just under £1.3m which were the subject of 2 public consultations. It also increased the Council's Council Tax precept by 3.99%. with a 1.99% rise as part of the Council's overall Council Tax levy and an extra 2% to cover adult social care costs; a new revenue raising mechanism granted to local authorities by the Government for the first time from April. The Borough will, therefore, effectively increase Council Tax by 3.99%, although this comes down to 3.94% when parish council precepts are factored in.

The Bedfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner has also chosen to increase Bedfordshire Police's precept by 1.99%, as has the Bedfordshire Fire & Rescue Authority. Taking into account each of the precepting authorities, the average Band D property Council Tax will be £1,634.44; an overall increase of £57.33 or 3.64%.

School Structural Review

Plans were approved in January for the Borough to move to a 2 tier education system following a public consultation and negotiations between the Council and schools over admissions arrangements.

Bedford Borough is currently one of a few local authority areas in England and Wales with a three-tier system. Despite strong Ofsted ratings, the Borough has consistently struggled when it comes to GCSE performance. This was evident in 2015 with 52% of pupils at the Borough's state schools achieving the key standard of 5 A* - C grades including English and maths, against a national average of 53.8% and the Statistical Neighbour average of 57.3% (i.e. a comparison with 10 authorities with similar characteristics to the Borough).

There are varying opinions as to why GCSE results are not commensurate with the Ofsted ratings. Some have pointed the finger of blame at the three-tier system, arguing that the extra transition is unnecessarily disruptive to a child's education and that it is harder to attract and retain teachers as the system is different from most areas.

The Council has, therefore, set aside £25.566m to make the necessary changes to school sites over the period 2016/17 – 2018/19. Of this sum, £17.064m will be spent on lower schools for 87 classrooms on 33 sites, while middle schools will receive £4.482m and upper schools £4.02m.

The scheme is part of a broader school investment programme, including £10.572m to continue the programme of removing temporary classrooms and funds for new school sites to be based at Wixams and Land North of Bromham Road (adjacent to the Western Bypass at Biddenham).

Most schools will be part of a 2 tier system from September 2017.

Local Plan 2032

Work has continued in the last year towards the Council's Local Plan 2032 which will set out how the Borough will accommodate anticipated growth in housing, jobs and infrastructure.

As part of this process, the Council issued a 'call for sites' in October, requesting suggestions from residents on possible land for development. Over 600 sites have been put forward in total although not all of them will be included in the draft plan for development. It is estimated that land will need to be found for between 4370 and 6040 new homes.

See www.bedford.gov.uk/localplan2032 for more information.

Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group

The Bedfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group (BCCG), the body responsible for organising health services in the County, reported in June that it had recorded a staggering £43.2m spending deficit.

An array of reasons for the debacle have been highlighted, including wildly inaccurate financial assumptions, contract disputes with other bodies and the failure to realise efficiencies. As a result, NHS England stepped in and issued formal 'directions', which means in practice that it will oversee the BCCG's budget and governance arrangements. This included an agreed budgetary position for 2015/16 to bring down the spending deficit to £20m which, as of February, is on target to be achieved.

NHS Health Review

A review of NHS services in Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes progressed very slowly during the course of the year.

It began in early 2014 at the behest of NHS England and hospital regulators with the intention 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.

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 BCCG has, however, been working with local service providers to put forward an alternative option for a 'Modern District Hospital' which could see Bedford Hospital strengthen links with community services, including the provision of GPs on site.

A full public consultation is scheduled to begin in summer 2016.

Magistrates' Court

It has been confirmed that Bedford Magistrates' Court will close by March 2017.

In June 2014 the Judicial Business Group, the body responsible for organising the courts system, took the decision to move all cases, other than those relating to family matters, from Bedford Magistrates' Court to Luton Magistrates' Court in an attempt to make savings.

In July 2015 a consultation was held with a view towards making the changes permanent, as well as moving family hearings to the Bedford Employment Tribunal. The changes have been opposed by all political groups on the Council as well as Alistair Burt MP and Richard Fuller MP given the potential effect on access to justice and increased anxiety and inconvenience for those directly affected by a case. The move has also been criticised for being inefficient due to increased travel times for professionals such as the police, local authority officers and lawyers.

Infrastructure

The Council has said works are progressing well on the Bedford Western Bypass, with the official opening scheduled for the spring. The road is set to link the A6 at Clapham with the A428 and A421.

Plans are still being developed for the East West Rail line with a view towards works commencing before March 2019. The line will link Bedford with Milton Keynes and Oxford, with the possibility of it being extended to connect Bedford with Cambridge and therefore the rest of the eastern region.

The Government has agreed a new contract with East Midlands Trains to continue to run services between London and the North of England, stopping at Bedford, until 2018. East Midlands Trains has pledged to invest £13m in providing extra services and freezing some ticket prices. Furthermore, the electrification of the Midland Mainline is to continue after the Government decided to freeze the process in the summer in order to develop the plans.

Bedfordshire Police

The municipal year began with a referendum on the Bedfordshire Police & Crime Commissioner's proposed 15.85% Council Tax precept increase for 2015/16. This was rejected by voters.

In December, the Chancellor decided to protect police budgets as part of the Spending Review. This means that forces in England and 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.

Broadband

Last summer, BT announced the areas that will benefit under the second phase of the superfast broadband scheme which is being funded by the Council and the Government.

The first phase is seeking to extend superfast broadband coverage (above 24Megabits per second (Mbps)) to 90% of premises and at least basic provision (2 Mbps) to 100%. This phase is now drawing to a close. The Council provides monthly updates on works undertaken to superfast broadband cabinets at www.bedford.gov.uk/broadband.

The second phase, as noted above, seeks to increase coverage to around 97% of premises by 2018 and will cover many rural communities that were left out of the initial phase. Details of the areas included can be seen at the above link.

Employment

As of January 2016, the number of Jobseekers Allowance claimants in the Borough was 1824 or 1.8% of the working age population. This is down from 2.2% in January 2015.