

Borough Councillor Update – January 2023

Council Tax

Council Tax was raised by 3.99% in the current financial year, the 6th highest increase of all unitary authorities. The Council now collected more Council Tax than anticipated (£1.26 million) which is now being carried forward into 2023/24 budget

Bedford Borough Council raise Council Tax

At Full Council on Wednesday 1st Friday, the Council moved forward with a Council Tax increase of 2.90%. Which is made up a Core Council Tax increase 0.90% and the Adult Social Care Precept of 2%. The resulting increase in Council Tax takes the average Band D Council Tax to £1,737.92.

An alternative budget to freeze an increase in Core Council Tax (0.90%) was submitted by the Conservative Group as they felt the budget had over-estimated the extent of inflationary pressures (12%), for which £17m was included in this budget.

Evidence from the Bank of England, OBR, OECD and other economic forecasters are predicting that inflation has peaked and will drop as low as 2.5% by the end of the financial year.

Rural Bus service amendment rejected by Council

At Full Council on Wednesday 1st Friday, the Conservative Group tabled a second amendment which switched £100,000 from the Communications Department to the rural Bus Service, this would be cost/revenue neutral

The £100,000 would then be spent on helping to improve rural bus services which have been left underfunded and with reduced or heavily altered services. This was rejected by the rest of the Council.

Bedford received multiple grants from the DFT and £2 bus fare.

The Council accepted a grant of £69,509.50 from the Department for Transport to protect socially necessary bus services from January to March.

Additionally, the Council has also accepted a further £66,058 from Active Travel England/Department for Transport. The funding will be used to develop an active travel scheme and development, public engagement on schemes and data collection and evidence. The funding also provides one full time Active Travel Officer for one year.

A grant of £74,166 for 2023/2024 has been accepted from the DFT which allows 2,308 children to be train in cycling proficiency from learning to ride to Level 3 Bikeability (on road cycling). Bikeability in Bedford is delivered by an external provider, Outspoken. Bikeability level training will teach children more advanced skills which enable them to navigate more complex situations and roads.

Bedford Borough Council receive £149,403 from Defra

The Borough Council is receiving £149,403 in grant funding from the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) to continue active travel work with the aim of improving air quality in Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs).

Central Government approve £11.3m of the Borough's Business Cases under Bedford Town Deal

Following a successful bid, Bedford Borough received £22.6 million from central Government for the Town Deal. Four of these business cases, which were submitted in 2022, have been approved by Central Government, giving the green light to start delivering the projects.

These projects include the Midland Road regeneration and public realm improvements, the regeneration and restoration of St Paul's Square, and improvements to the Greyfriars junction which total £11.3 million of the total funding.

Bedford Town Footfall for December falls below COVID levels/Multi Storey care parks fall below 50% usage

Footfall for the Town Centre during December 2022 was lower than the footfall levels in December 2021 by 3.7% when we were beginning to exit lockdown. Since 2017 there has been a decrease of 46.15% for footfall in December. For comparison Rushden Lakes saw a 5% uplift in footfall during December in 2022 and an increased number of shoppers from Bedford.

Car park usage for Bedford's multi storey car parks (MSCPs) have also struggled significantly with the majority of them being less than half full during the holiday period. During the busy Christmas period (November and December):

- Allhallows MSCP averaged a usage rate of 25.85%
- Lurke Street MSCP averaged a usage rate of 34.70%
- Queen Street MSCP averaged a usage rate of 21.15%
- River Street MSCP averaged a usage rate of 69.95%

For these 4 car parks this gives an average usage rate of 38.66% for November and December 2022 months.

Attainment Gap

Bedford Borough Council's Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report on the attainment results for Bedford Borough which have fallen behind significantly when compared nationally.

You can read the report here:

<https://councillorsupport.bedford.gov.uk/documents/s64913/Item%2006%20-%20Education%20Performance%20Note%20January%202023%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

Residents will need photo ID to vote in person at elections in May

Electors voting in person at polling stations will need to show photographic ID to vote at this year's local elections. Accepted forms of ID include a UK, European Economic Area (EEA) or Commonwealth passport; a UK, EEA or Commonwealth drivers' licence; and some concessionary travel passes, such as an older person's bus pass or an Oyster 60+ card.

'Riverside for All' project

Riverside for All is a £1.5 million project that is aimed at improving and developing links alongside the Great Ouse from Priory Country Park to Kempston Outdoor Centre.

The plans include refurbishment of playgrounds, planting projects, footpath repairs, improvements to Longholme Lake, new signage, and refurbishment to infrastructure along the riverside, incorporating investment from other projects at the same time.