

Town and Parish Council

COVID-19 update

Central
Bedfordshire

7 May 2020

1. Planning Updates

Local Plan News

Recent communications between the Inspectors and the Council discussed the potential impact of COVID-19 on the submission of new evidence by the Council. In our response (EXAM 103) we stated we were still working towards the 30th April deadline, but that it was impossible to say whether resources might be affected. Unfortunately, this crisis has had an impact in terms of officer resource, as well as on our consultants. As such, we have been unable to complete this work within the expected timeframe.

We advised any delay would be minimal and that is still the case. We expect to be able to submit in the next week – a maximum 2 week delay.

A decision is yet to be made in terms of the public consultation that was due to follow this submission and whether or not any arrangements could be made for this to progress

Development Management

Following the Covid 19 Act, new regulations have been introduced which enable councils to operate their democratic decision-making virtually.

We have been working towards holding all formal Member decision making meetings virtually as soon as possible and have now successfully trialled the technology to enable us to do so.

In advance of the trial, in order to avoid suspending all decision making and to try to avoid building a back log of decisions and ultimately delay economic recovery in Central Bedfordshire, we instituted a temporary model for the consideration of some planning applications.

This model was to enable some applications which would normally have been considered by the Development Management Committee to be shared with a small Member panel. The panel, which comprised two Conservative Councillors and one Councillor from the Independent Network, met last week and made recommendations to the Council's Chief Executive on the use of his emergency powers.

In establishing this purely interim arrangement, the Chief Executive made clear that he would be especially sensitive to any applications which were likely to be contentious and that he would not make any decisions on any applications which fell into this category. He also confirmed that he would only exercise emergency powers to make decisions after taking account of the views of relevant Members.

The outcomes of this process have been published on the Council's website which were two applications (based on the professional advice of Planning Officers which was supported unanimously by Members) being refused. A further three applications were deferred to the next Development Management Committee as a result of there either not being a unanimous view of Members (in two cases) or because of a concern raised by a Parish Council that it should have the opportunity to present its views on a case.

Details of each case can be found on our website at www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/delegated-decisions

A1-M6 Link Road

We have heard this week that the application by Luton Borough Council seeking permission to judicially review the Central Beds decision on the A1-M6 Link Road application has been refused by the Court.

In drawing this conclusion the judge also made an order for costs against Luton Borough Council.

There will now be a seven day period during which Luton can decide whether to renew their application against this decision. If they decide not to do so this will provide certainty for our authority to progress its work on this piece of infrastructure.

2. Mobile Testing units in Central Bedfordshire

As part of the Government's plan to increase testing, mobile testing units, operated by the Armed Forces, will travel around the UK to increase access for essential workers.

Locally, units at Biggleswade Hospital and Cedars School in Leighton Buzzard. These units are to support essential worker testing only.

The number of new mobile units is being scaled up after a successful pilot last week. Mobile facilities can be set up in under 20 minutes. Specially trained Armed Forces personnel collect swabs at the mobile sites, to be sent for processing. Those tested will receive results within 48 hours.

These mobile units add to the facilities already operating at Steppingley, Bedford and Luton (for employer referrals) with a mega testing facility at Milton Keynes (for self-referrals).

Anyone aged 65 or over with coronavirus symptoms or someone who cannot work from home and has coronavirus symptoms (for example, construction workers or delivery drivers) can apply (self-refer) on the government website www.gov.uk/apply-coronavirus-test. Anyone with coronavirus symptoms can also apply if they live with an essential worker, a person aged 65 or over, or someone who travels to work.

Essential or key workers can be referred for testing by their employers.

Tests need to be done in the first five days of having symptoms, although it's best to apply for the test in the first three days as it may take one or two days to arrange.

3. Boundary Commission Update

In the unprecedented situation in which the nation finds itself, commissioners have considered carefully how to proceed with electoral reviews which are part way through the process, and those which we have in our future programme.

We are fully equipped for home working and, where reviews are at a stage where we do not require further external information or input, they are progressing as normal.

We have considered carefully how to proceed with electoral reviews that are part way through the process but do require further external information and input, and those which are about to commence. In doing so we have been especially sensitive to two considerations:

- the capacity of individual local authorities to engage with us - particularly while they adapt to new ways of working - in order to avoid distracting them from their critical task of delivering essential public services
- confidence that we can consult in ways that enable appropriate input from local residents and organisations in these unprecedented circumstances.

As a result of these considerations, the Commission has decided to pause consultations temporarily. The pause will allow us to identify arrangements for proceeding with reviews whilst respecting the two considerations mentioned above.

As the first period of consultation on new electoral arrangements for Central Bedfordshire has closed, the Commission will still consider draft recommendations at its May meeting. This is clearly an evolving and unprecedented situation, but our current expectation is that the publication of the draft recommendations will be delayed until we can be confident that we can consult in ways that enables appropriate input from all local stakeholders. Over the coming weeks, we will consider how and when we might carry out effective consultations and what this means for the extent of any delay, and we will keep in close contact with you throughout this period.

We are informing all affected local authorities, parishes and stakeholders about the approach we are now taking. We will put information about how we are proceeding on individual reviews on the appropriate pages of our website. We encourage all those we are contacting to also use their own channels to spread awareness.

4. Community Asset Grant Scheme

The full list of approved projects under CAG Bidding Round 1 is now available on [the website](#)

Almost £240,000 has been allocated in grants to support local infrastructure projects through the first bidding round for our Community Assets Grant Scheme. Letters are on their way via email to the 15 successful bidders which relate to projects as diverse as a memorial hall centenary project, improved facilities for a Men in Sheds initiative, adult outdoor gym kit and improvements to play areas. Views of local councillors were sought on all eligible bids which were scored by officers against the published criteria and determined in order to make sure that there was no more than one successful bid per ward. We have also written to those bidders who were not successful in this round, providing information not only on the outcome but with advice about aspects of the bid that they may wish to enhance in any future rounds. The list of approved projects is published on our [website](#). Timescales for future bidding rounds have been impacted by COVID-19 but will be confirmed as soon as possible.

5. VE Day Celebrations

Friday 8 May marks the 75th anniversary of VE Day – the official end of the Second World War in Europe, and we want everyone to be able to commemorate this special day safely.

As many planned celebrations to mark the occasion have been cancelled, the UK Government has announced revised plans to commemorate the day. A template pack has been produced so that the public can hold a 1940s style afternoon tea and make their own festive bunting. Royal British Legion is encouraging the UK to join in with a doorstep rendition of Dame Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again'. There will also be a two-minute silence at 11am. HM The Queen will also address the nation.

As we face some of the most challenging times since the end of the Second World War, now more than ever it is important to come together and unite, of course whilst observing the Government's safety guidelines. They are encouraging as many people as possible to take part in this national moment of thanksgiving and celebration, in honour of our Second World War generation.

A number of 'virtual' celebrations have been arranged in Bedfordshire and you can view them on the [Lord-Lieutenant's web page](#). Further information, videos and photos will be added as they are received.

You can also follow the event via the Lord-Lieutenant's Twitter feed [@LLieutenantBeds](#)

The High Sheriff of Bedfordshire will also be covering the VE Celebrations on her [website](#) which will include words and images from family members and friends as they remember the day.

The Royal British Legion's [website](#) also has details of events taking place including:

- A [live VE Day 75 live stream](#) at 11.15 am
- A [UK-wide singalong](#) to Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again' at 9 pm
- A [VE Day learning pack](#) for children aged 7-14 years

The [VE Day 75 website](#) also lists several activities that will be taking place.

6. Funding for Charities (Covid-19)

There has been lots of information circulating regarding the eligibility of voluntary sector organisations for the various temporary rate reliefs and grants from Government in response to the coronavirus pandemic which we thought it would be helpful to bring together for Town and Parish Councils.

- **Bedfordshire Coronavirus Emergency Fund** - grants of up to £7,500, available for voluntary and community organisations that are based in Bedfordshire & Luton to 'help them deal with emerging issues in the community as a result of the continuing threat of coronavirus.' Project costs and core costs can be supported. More details [here](#)
- **Small Business Grant Fund** - This is a £10,000 grant for businesses in receipt of small business rate relief or rural rate relief.
- **Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund** - This grant scheme offers a grant of £10,000 where the rateable value is £15,000 or less, with the grant increasing to £25,000 where the rateable value is between £15,001 and £50,999. A wide range of premises fall under the 'retail, hospitality and leisure' definition, including charity shops, cafés, sports grounds and clubs, live music venues, theatres, tourist attractions, etc, so it is well worth checking your eligibility for the grant. [COVID 19 Support for businesses](#)
- **The Coronavirus Mental Health Response Fund** will provide grants of £20,000 or £50,000 for organisations to continue to provide mental health services, or to provide additional support. [Click here.](#)

- **The National Survivor User Network** will also be providing grants up to £1,000 ‘to support peer support, community action and mutual aid for mental health during Covid-19’. This fund can support user-led organisations (ULOs) and smaller, unconstituted community groups in England, who might not otherwise be eligible for a larger grant from The Coronavirus Mental Health Response Fund. [Click here.](#)
- **Sports England - Community Emergency Fund** – ‘This new fund aims to help community sport and physical activity organisations who are experiencing short term financial hardship or the ceasing of operations due to the ongoing coronavirus crisis.’ The types of organisations eligible include local sports clubs forced to close at short notice but who are facing ongoing costs around maintenance and utility bills, and voluntary and community sector organisations who deliver or enable sport and physical activity. Awards will be between £300 and £10,000. [Click here.](#)

Team Beds and Luton have been running workshops for organisations looking to apply to the above fund, and a video covering the key points covered within the workshops is available [here.](#)

