



Information Session: Have You Say On Bedford Borough Council's Priorities

Date and Time: 25/03/2024, 6–8pm

Location: Queens Park Family Hub, Marlborough Road, Bedford, MK40 4LE

Topic: Bedford Borough Council Draft Corporate plan 2024–27

Participants: Claire Halliwell (Communications and Communities Manager), Antigua Riley Corion (Community Engagement Officer), Deborah Shrimpton (Community engagement and Social Action Officer), Stevington Community Hub, Faces Bedford, iCash Bedford, Be Active Beds, Youth Voices, Menopause Alliance, Beds (Great Ouse Valley Environmental Trust (GOVET))

Introduction

Residents, community groups and services were invited to meet with Bedford Borough Council's Communities Team to discuss the priorities and objectives listed in the Council's draft corporate plan on a page. The plan consists of four main priorities, each with a series of objectives:

- Promoting Health and Wellbeing
- Supporting Families and the Vulnerable
- Stimulating Economic Growth
- Protecting the Environment

These priorities will act as the golden thread aligning all council departments, ensuring that these priorities are at the heart of everything we do, and every service that we provide. For this reason, we want to hear from our partners, the voluntary sector, residents and young people to hear the voices of our wonderfully diverse community, and ensure that our priorities reflect the needs of Bedford Borough

What is a Corporate Plan, and How Does It Affect Me?

The Corporate plan is an internal planning document that outlines Bedford Borough Council's priorities, objectives, and approach to collaborating with communities, partner organisations, and businesses.

The Service plans throughout the Council will follow the corporate plan and should reflect the values and priorities of the work of all Council departments and employees. The aims of these external engagement sessions are to ensure that the corporate plan reflects the needs of the community.

External engagement will take place between March and June and during July/August the results will be analysed. In September, the cabinet will consider the final draft and the Full Council will consider the draft in the Autumn.

Supporting Families and The Vulnerable

The group were invited to discuss the priority, and although they felt that the priority and objectives were reflective of the needs of the borough, they felt that the language was not clear or inclusive. The priority details *‘adopting a “family friendly” approach prioritising their needs in crucial decision-making processes and across all services with a focus on prevention.’* The group felt that it was important that the detail in service plans outline that the council must empower communities and let them know that they have a voice that can influence the way the council works with and for them.

Everyone agreed that the objectives were reflective of the needs of the borough, however, it was felt that the language was not inclusive or clear. The main comments regarding the language of the priority and its objectives were:

- The title itself feels exclusive as many residents do not feel that they are part of a family, and those that the council may see as vulnerable do not identify as ‘vulnerable’ – is this referring to marginalised groups?
- The first objective regarding school achievement is not clear, is this statement about the school’s achievement as an institution, or the pupil’s achievement?
- As well as achievement, the plan should name ‘attainment’ as an objective – the issues around the boroughs school attainment has a knock-on effect on communities, starting with parents who have to give up working to homeschool and support their children.
- Achievement is now measured in so many more ways than just academic achievement, can the language of this objective reflect this?
- The second objective around opportunities and services names ‘Looked After Children’ and ‘Adults’. If these are opportunities and services for ‘all’, then why would those two groups be named?
- The third objective mentions homelessness, in the detail of the homelessness strategy this should be defined.
- The words ‘SEND’, ‘diverse’ or ‘access’ are not included anywhere here.

Overall, the conversation showed that the group were happy with the priorities and felt that with the suggestions made around inclusive language they would be in complete agreement with the priority.

Protecting The Environment

Participants felt that the protecting the environment priority was strong and clear. The point was raised that as well as enhancing and protecting green spaces, the council should also be aiming to protect the rivers. The River Ouse is currently over the E.coli limit, and without protecting the valley we will be unable to use our rivers as an attraction to bring visitors into our town. There was also a comment on the rural networks and the need for transport solutions, as this has been difficult for rural communities with many residents unable to get to and from hospital and dentist appointments to meet their needs. Other participants praised the work that has been done on the busses this year, and how well it has been communicated by Cllr Jim Weir.

Stimulating Economic Growth

Everyone in the room felt strongly that these priorities did reflect a real need to increase the footfall, opportunities, jobs, and pride in the Borough, and that this must start with our town centres. Despite the agreement that stimulating economic growth does start with our town centres, the point was raised that there was no mention of other areas, or rural communities. Participants felt that in improving our town centres, independent shops and local businesses should be put first and encouraged to trial empty units within the town centre, this led into a larger conversation about how we can raise community spirit and pride.

The group again discussed the health of the river being a key factor to consider when promoting our rivers and parks as a link from the town centre into surrounding areas. Safety was also seen as a priority within the objectives here, and making the town centre appealing to young people and families to visit should include ways to make the area feel safer on darker days and winter evenings.

Promoting Health and Wellbeing

The group felt that this priority was reflective of the need of the Borough, and that the focus must be on tackling health inequalities when promoting health and wellbeing within our community. The point was again raised that the language could be more inclusive, and that if not all groups are mentioned, that the language should make it clear that **all** people will be supported to live well. It was raised that the language used by Sporting England is best practice in relation to health, and the terminology can be redefined in many cases much more broadly, to be more inclusive and reflective of real-life experiences - e.g., 'physical activity' is no longer just your football and netball groups and activities, it could mean walking to the shop, or an older person leaving the house for the day, etc.

Although they agreed with the objectives, they did feel that the following should be included in the wording of the objectives:

- Some mention of empowering communities to access funding or support to work with their communities in grassroots settings
- Physical literacy
- Mental health should be named within the priority and objectives (there is currently no specific mention other than in the title (wellbeing))
- A commitment to clearer messaging and education within the community about what opportunities and support are available.

Moving Forward

Thank you to all those that came along to represent their communities, and the groups that they support. We have received great feedback about the overall experience engaging with the council on this topic, and want to give the community, our partners, and other statutory services the opportunity to have their voices heard and support us in getting our internal plans right.

The group felt overall very positive about the draft corporate plan, although they do feel that some of the objectives are ambitious and will take time, dedication, and money to achieve alongside a service plan that is aligned with these priorities and objectives.

Further sessions include:

- Meeting with older people, vulnerable adults, carers and unpaid carers: Thursday 28 March, 6-8pm, The Queens Park Family Hub
- Meeting with environmental groups and Park Friends: Time and location TBC
- Meeting with local businesses and landlords: Time and location TBC
- June Community Network Event: meeting with the wider community and voluntary sector.