

Monthly Borough Report for GDPC Report December

- **Season's Greetings**

This year has fled by, and I have been involved in many outside projects in addition to my portfolio of Environment, Highways and Transport. For the past 18 months I have been working on behalf of the Borough with Central Beds Council, Luton Council, Milton Keynes City Council and North and West Northamptonshire on forming a broader and far-reaching body, that can support wider strategic economic growth than as individual authorities.

The six authorities have signed an expression of interest to become a devolved authority with a combined authority Mayor. This would lead to greater autonomy and the routes to better and more accessible funding. The new combined authority would have 84,000 businesses across our area and generate over £49bn for the UK economy. The white paper on devolution will be with us soon and our area has been identified as a good fit.

Unlike areas where established Combined Authorities exist, our area does not benefit from existing revenue support for regional working. Having last month established the South Midlands Business Board, and already started work on a new economic strategy for the region, we would encourage the government to ensure that areas without an existing devolution agreement are appropriately funded to undertake this work at a regional level.

We also look forward with bated breath to the decision on a deal that would light the blue touch paper for the Universal Destinations & Experiences theme park in Bedford Borough. The transformation that this would bring to the economy and jobs is off the scale. Creating 10,000 jobs and attracting 8m visitors per year will transform the whole eastern region.

On a more local level the year saw the first step of the reduction to £60 of the open space management charge while next year will show a zero charge. The removal of FirstPort by Barratts and DWH is a further step in the right direction, and I will continue to push for fair charges and better communications with the remaining management companies especially those recently taken over by FirstPort.

I would wish all residents and families and friends of all those living in Great Denham happiness, peace and health in this festive season.

- **Cleat Hill**

The Mayor and Bedford Borough Council are continuing to support residents following the Cleat Hill gas explosion that took place on the 19th October 2024. The Mayor has also raised important questions and issues surrounding the incident with relevant Ministers.

To address the financial pressures of dealing with an emergency, Bedford Borough Council has expressed an interest in the Bellwin scheme which is intended to reimburse the cost of local authority actions taken in the immediate phase of an emergency.

- **Wixams Station/Universal**

Wixams Station is proceeding smoothly and is being funded by S106 resources until the New Year. A decision on Universal is also being anticipated in the New Year and, if positive, would fundamentally change the station. Increasing its size with financial costs/management being taken up by central Government.

The Mayor and Council officers continue to have ongoing meetings with representatives from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Universal.

- **Flooding Alliance**

In response to the recurrent and devastating flooding affecting various parts of Bedford Borough, the Mayor and North Bedfordshire MP have teamed up to spearhead a new flooding alliance.

The collaborative committee which will include key stakeholders such as Anglian Water and the Environment Agency aims to cut through bureaucracy to address the region's persistent flooding challenges through a united, long-term strategy. The key objectives are as follows:

1. Flooding and Flood Prevention – Developing strategies to mitigate the impact of heavy rainfall on communities.
2. Flood-Resistant Housing – Exploring measures to protect properties from future flooding events.
3. Improving River Quality – Raising the standard of river health across the region.
4. Addressing Pollution – Tackling pollution that degrades water quality and impacts the environment.

- **Leisure Strategy**

For the first time in its history, Bedford Borough Council now has a Sport and Leisure Strategy 2024–2034 which presents a transformative approach to creating a healthier, more inclusive, and active community.

The strategy is rooted in the principles of inclusivity, sustainability, and community collaboration, aiming to enhance the well-being of all residents by offering accessible opportunities for physical activity, sports, and cultural engagement while providing high quality and modern leisure facilities.

- **Buses**

The Borough Council has conducted an in-depth review of the Bus network which has found that many rural routes are underutilised, with low passenger numbers during various times of the day indicating the system that does not accurately serve the needs of residents.

The review has provided the Council with an opportunity to reduce these redundant routes, adjust schedules to align with demand with aim to create a more reliable/financially sustainable

service overall. There will also be no reduction in overall funding for bus services in Bedford Borough. This is just one example of underutilised routes which show 336 journeys with no passengers. We have received additional funding for buses from the DfT and we will be looking at how we can provide better connectivity throughout the Borough on an ongoing basis.

	Journey's Per day	Journey's Per Week	Journey's Per month	Difference	% usage
Willington	5	30	120	-120	0
Great Barford	5	30	120	-120	0
Cople	4	24	96	-96	0

- **Oasis Beach Pool**

The Council conducted an in-depth review of its leisure portfolio which has recommended Oasis Beach Pool for closure. The primary reasons for the recommendation are due to years of disinvestment, preceding 4th May 2023 local elections, that have led to the facility deteriorating exponentially, compounding issues and the costs of repair/maintenance.

An example of maintenance failure can be seen in the facilities outdated heating systems which require more energy to operate resulting in higher running costs. Oasis has seen an increase in its operational costs and particularly the energy costs which have reached £1.2 million. Additionally, the Producer Price Index (PPI), which tracks the costs of materials and fuels purchased by manufacturers, has risen to 145.9, a 45.9% increase over 9 years since January 2015.

To conclude continuing to operate Oasis would cost £900,000 annually with £7.4m just to bring it up to standard. At the time of writing, no decision has been made on the future of Oasis Beach Pool.

- **Temporary Accommodation (Invest to save initiative)**

The Council has made a strategic investment (£6.5m) into Temporary Accommodation, acquiring 31 self-contained apartments, offering secure, affordable, and supported living environments for individuals and families facing homelessness.

The initiative provides affordable supported temporary accommodation for homeless individuals while reducing the reliance on costly and less suitable nightly or hotel accommodations. The properties include:

- 52 Chandos Street:
 - 10 two-bedroom apartments designed to meet modern standards for family living.
 - Projected annual savings of £248,124.
- 34 Alexandra Road:

- 12 apartments, including one- and two-bedroom units, designed for both individuals and small families.
- Projected annual savings of £325,781.
- St. John's Terrace:
 - 9 two-bedroom apartments, ideal for small families.
 - Projected annual savings of £228,528.

Taken together, there is an estimated annual cost saving of £802,433 when compared to alternative accommodation methods. Additionally, for Chandos Street – The Council can potentially receive a 40% discount on the acquisition of the property subject to meeting all of Local Authority Housing Fund funding criteria.

- **Strategic Agreement with BPHA**

Bedford Borough Council is embarking on partnership with BPHA to develop much-needed affordable and sustainable housing across multiple sites. This collaboration includes the redevelopment of the former Robert Bruce and Margaret Beaufort Middle School sites, the Prebend Street Car Park, and the sale of land near the former Greyfriars Police Station.

The partnership emphasises the need for housing to meet local needs with modern, energy efficient homes.

- **Town Update**

Due to adverse weather conditions the Christmas Light Switch on has been rescheduled to the following Saturday, 30th November 2024.

There will be various other festivities and a wide array of events, from performances to markets over the festive period. More information can be found at <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/your-council/about-council/christmas-and-new-year-bedford-2024>

- **Prestigious Gold Award for Armed Forces support**

The Council has been recognised by the Ministry of Defence and achieved the gold award for upholding the Armed Forces Covenant and fostering an inclusive, supportive environment for service personnel, veterans, and their families.

- **Consultation on Council budget**

Residents and businesses are invited to share their views on the Councils budget proposals for 2025/26.

The budget consultation will run from Thursday 21st November to Friday 20th December, more information can be found at www.bedford.gov.uk/budget2025-26.