January Monthly Borough Report For GDPC

- **Open Space Management Charge**

The Facts

The Country Park in Great Denham of 200 acres contains football pitches parking, dog bins grass cutting, and trees and shrub care. The commuted sum paid by the developer for 20 years of maintenance was £2,570,000

So, £2,570,000 divided by 200 acres = £12,850 per acre divided by 20 years = **£642.5** per acre per annum to maintain.

In Great Denham and Kempston West, Council owned open spaces equal 28 acres. In 7.5 years, the residents have paid **£2,134,168** divided by 28 acres then divided by 7.5 years = **£10,163** per acre per annum to maintain. This charge was set to continue in perpetuity. How can anyone think that this is fair?

A recent report by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) recommended a number of reviews that would make the setting of any "special area charges" more accurate and fairer. They highlighted that the Council's Green Space Strategy had not been updated since 2012 and that the review was based on data from 2007 and therefore needed to be reviewed again. The information held on the identification and amount of open spaces in the Borough was also highlighted as out of date and should be addressed by review. A proposed Governance Review of the Kempston Rural Parish area could also dramatically sway how the allocation of "special area charges" would be allocated.

The Liberal Democrats have picked out of the many recommendations by CIPFA just the one on the Open Space Management charge and how perhaps that should be treated, to call in, to a scrutiny committee. They want the charge reintroduced to the residents of Great Denham and Kempston West.

7th February 2024 The Full Council voted to drop this charge by reducing it by half in the 24/25 financial year and removing it altogether in the 25/26 financial year which starts in April 2025. They raised objections to the removal of this charge which were defeated. Not being happy with that the Lib Dems had the decision called in to the Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee. The committee had no concerns about the decision to remove the charge. When the CIPFA report was made available the Lib Dems called it into the Budget & Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This committee also said it had no concerns with the decision.

Why? The Council Executive recommended deferring any implementation of changing the current "special area charges" for a year until all the other recommendations in the CIPFA report could be addressed.

The recommendations in this document are not only well-founded but also essential for the effective and fair management of the Council's resources by addressing these critical areas and the need for the recommended reviews.

- **Parking error**

An error on the fees and charges report that showed a £2 charge for Sunday parking had not been spotted by any Council members before the new year.

The error has now been corrected to show no charge as originally intended.

- **East West Rail**

On the 15th January 2025, Bedford Borough Councillors where presented with a motion to officially withdraw the Council's support for the currently proposed EWR route.

Previously, on the 2nd June 2021, a majority of Councillors voted to officially support EWR and the current route despite the concerns raised by residents regarding the risks and potential harm this route would do to the Borough countryside.

At that meeting a Councillor put forward an amendment demanding a better consultation process and a more comprehensive evaluation of all route options before declaring any form of support.

This motion was defeated and Councillors proceeded to vote in favour of EWR.

At the January 15th Full Council 2025, a majority of the Councillors voted down the motion to withdraw support for EWR. The votes are as follows:

For the Motion (16)
- Councillors Atkins, G. Coombes, Foster, Frost, Gambold, Gribble, Layne, Mahboob Din, Martin-Moran-Bryant, Rigby, Simmons, Sira, Spice, Towler, Walker and Weir

Against the Motion (25)
- Councillors Abood, Atiq, Bywater, Caswell, L. Coombs, Crofts, Edmonds, Foley, Headley, Hendrickx, Masud, McHugh, McMurdo, Meader, Nawaz, Oliver, Rider, C Royden, M Royden, Sawyer, Sultan, Thapar, Valentine, Vann and White

Abstained (2)
- Councillors Abbott and Akhtar

- **Capital Programme**

The Full Council, 15th January 2025, the Council voted unanimously to support the Capital Programme that balances fiscal responsibility with ambition.

The revised plan included a strategic reduction in projected borrowing from £125 million to £88.2 million. Additionally, many "invest-to-save" projects are tied to tangible, revenue-generating assets, such as Wixams Station ensuring that the programme is financially sustainable.

The report also applies a 15% discount rate to anticipated capital receipts, acknowledging the risks of over-reliance on this source of funding and mitigating overestimation. Additionally, the Executive has committed to ensuring expenditures are only made when receipts are guaranteed, or alternative funding is secured.

- **5-year land supply/Local Plan 2040**

Until December 2024, Bedford Borough Council had been able to use the housing target in its Local Plan 2030, of 970 per year to maintain its 5-year land supply.

In order to replenish its land supply, the Council needed to refresh its Local Plan, which it started in 2020 with the Local Plan 2040. However, the Planning Inspector rejected the former Mayor’s Local Plan 2040 twice, with the last rejection on 23rd November 2023 over “fundamental concerns about the soundness of the Plan.”

Due to the plan being rejected twice and the introduction of new planning regulations and housing targets by central Government in late December 2024, which has increased the Borough’s housing target to 1,202 per year – an increase of almost 25%. Bedford Borough Council has had to announce that it no longer has a five-year supply of land for new housing.

The impact of the planning changes and rejection of the formers Mayor’s Local Plan 2040 on Bedford is that the council can now only identify a 3½-year forward supply of housing land.

What that means is that, until the number of permissions is increased to reach five years under the new regime, a “tilted balance” will apply for the determination of planning applications.

In effect, less weight can now be given to the council’s policies on where development can take place, and developers are likely to submit applications for sites that are not supported by the council’s Local Plan. The government will expect these to be approved unless there are very strong technical reasons why they should not be (such reasons might include flooding, highway or heritage impacts, for example).

This change may potentially put pressure on rural areas of the Borough to accept new housing proposals that would previously have been resisted as not being in conformity with the council’s plans.

Additionally, the Council is looking to address the Planning Inspector's concerns regarding the Local Plan 2040. However, improving this plan will cost an additional £1 million for the current Council to put right.

- **Improvements to Children's Services**

The Bedford Borough Council Children's Services have made significant updates and improvements following the MacAlister Review and the revised Working Together 2023 guidance.

These included:

- Creation of the Connect Team – A new multi-disciplinary unit combining social workers, mental health practitioners, and family support workers to provide early and tailored intervention for families in need.

- Stronger family networks – A significant increase in Special Guardianship Orders, ensuring children remain within extended family settings whenever possible.

- Better support for care leavers – Expansion of the Staying Put initiative, allowing young people to stay in stable homes beyond 18, improving life outcomes.

- Enhanced safeguarding structures – Establishment of Lead Safeguarding Partners (LSPs) across agencies to improve decision-making and accountability.

- Greater collaboration – Introduction of multi-agency child protection units to streamline support and prevent crises.

- **Budget 2025 – 2026**

The budget will be debated on Wednesday 5th Feb by the Full Council and a balanced budget will need to be agreed. Currently, the Liberal Democrats are concerned about the administration's views on short-term borrowing and the breaching of prudential indicators – especially in the less than 12 months borrowing. There is an outstanding payment of £24m from the DfE which is scheduled to arrive in April 2025 which will reduce the short-term borrowing of the under 12 months indicator.

Extract from The Treasury Management External Advisors

"Officers continue to take advice from Arlingclose in relation to the maturity structure of borrowing. ***Arlingclose advise that the most cost-effective option for the Council is to continue to borrow short term. Long-term borrowing could be structured to eliminate any breaches in the maturity of debt indicator; however, this would result in higher costs to the Council over the longer term.***

Of 355 Councils in the UK that borrow Bedford is the 238th lowest borrowed.

Comparison with our neighbours of borrowing per resident

	Borrowings	Population	Cost per Resident
Bedford Borough	£106,000,000	189,000	**£561**
When DfE pay £24m in April	*£82,000,000*		***£434***
Milton Keynes	£411,000,000	288,000	**£1,427**
West Northants	£587,000,000	426,456	**£1,376**
North Northants	£432,000,000	360,381	**£1,199**
Luton	£719,000,000	224,800	**£3,198**
Central Beds	£697,000,000	295,500	**£2,359**