

Monthly Borough Councillor Report for GDPC Report January

- **New Year Message from the Mayor**

As I approach 18 months as your Mayor, I want to take a moment to reflect on all that we have achieved together, acknowledge the challenges we've faced, and look ahead to the opportunities and milestones that 2025 holds for Bedford Borough.

Serving this community continues to be the greatest honour of my life, and I am always inspired by the resilience, compassion, and determination of the people who make our Borough so extraordinary. Whether its heading to a local school, opening a new business in our town centres or getting to chat with residents, I'm always inspired by what everyone puts into our Borough.

This past year has brought moments of celebration and progress. One of the most significant achievements has been signing the contract for Wixams Rail Station, a landmark project that will transform travel for residents, create new opportunities for businesses, and strengthen our local economy. The purchase of the former Debenhams site will breathe new life into Bedford town centre, and the summer's River Festival was a testament to our community spirit, drawing record crowds and showcasing everything that makes Bedford Borough such a vibrant place to live and visit.

Yet, it hasn't always been an easy time. The recent flooding and the tragedy at Cleat Hill have both been sobering reminders of the challenges we face as a community. My thoughts remain with those affected, and I am grateful for the tireless efforts of volunteers, emergency responders, council staff and neighbours who stepped up to help in times of need. Their actions reflect the very best of us.

Our work to address these challenges continues. From flood preparedness to tackling homelessness through projects like Charis House and the winter night shelter, we are making real progress in ensuring everyone has the support and security they need.

As we look forward to 2025, I am filled with hope. A new schools in Kempston, road improvements throughout the borough, and continued investment in our town centres are just some of the ways we are shaping a prosperous and connected Borough.

So, I hope you can see why I feel so optimistic about Bedford Borough's prospects for the year ahead. These remain challenging times for many of our residents, and I never lose sight of that. But I also know that growing our economy and attracting investment along with raising aspirations for our young people are among the most impactful ways we can make a difference.

As your Mayor, I want to take a moment to give a huge thank you to everyone who volunteers in our community. Your time and effort make a massive difference, and we are so fortunate to have you. Volunteering is at the heart of what keeps Bedford Borough thriving. Whether you're helping at events, supporting local charities, mentoring young people, or visiting with seniors, your work makes our Borough a better place to live.

Together, through kindness, ambition, and collaboration, I am confident that we can make 2025 a year of progress, pride, and opportunity for everyone in Bedford Borough.

I wish you and your loved ones a safe, hopeful, and happy New Year.

- **Bedford Council looking at the implications of devolution white paper**

While Bedford Borough Council wasn't mentioned, the white paper does promote a shift towards larger unitary councils. It said new unitary councils must be the "right size" to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity, and withstand financial shocks.

For most areas this will mean "creating councils with a population of 500,000 or more", but decisions will be on a "case-by-case basis". Bedford Borough Council was asked if it believed it could disappear through devolution. A borough council spokesperson said: "The Devolution White Paper was published on Monday and we are currently looking at the implications. "The white paper deals with the establishment of new Strategic Authorities. We have put in an expression of interest outlining our interest in potential devolution arrangements but there is still a lot of detail to uncover. "These discussions are at a very early stage and our focus will always be on ensuring that any future arrangements align with the best interests of people in Bedford borough.

"The White Paper also introduces full unitisation of England. "The focus is on two-tier areas and the creation of new unitary authorities," they said. A key aspect of the framework is the duty to produce a Spatial Development Strategy to guide development at a strategic level.

The borough council was asked if this meant it would cease to be a Local Planning Authority.

The spokesperson said: "In relation to Spatial Development Plans this is reintroducing spatial plans across larger areas (as has happened in the past). "There are no proposals to change the Local Planning Authority responsibilities. "The proposals are to work in a similar way to the role of the mayor in London," they said.

Tomorrow (7th January 2025) I along with others from the group of six will be meeting with Baroness Taylor to discuss issues around devolution and what the next stages might look like along with timescales.

- **New Cabinet appointments made**

Following the resignation of Cllr. Graeme Coombes from the Cabinet, for personal reasons, Mayor Tom has made the following changes to his Cabinet:

- Deputy Mayor and Finance Portfolio Holder: The existing Deputy Mayor, Cllr. Jim Weir, will take over the Finance Portfolio role.
- Environment Portfolio Holder: Councillor Nicky Gribble to the Cabinet as Environment Portfolio Holder.
- Corporate Services Portfolio Holder: The Cabinet has been expanded to include a new role of Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services, Cllr. Marc Frost, with responsibility for Transformation, Procurement and Performance.

As a result, the new Cabinet is formed of:

- Mayor Tom Wootton - Elected Mayor, covering Democratic Services and Rural Communities

- Councillor Jim Weir - Deputy Mayor and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Corporate Services
- Councillor Nicola Gribble - Portfolio Holder for Environment
- Councillor Jane Walker - Portfolio Holder for Valuing Families: Children's Services
- Councillor Robert Rigby - Portfolio Holder for Valuing Families: Adults Services
- Councillor Sarah Gallagher - Portfolio Holder for Customer Experience (inc. Leisure, Recreation & Culture)
- Councillor Phillippa Martin-Moran-Bryant - Portfolio Holder for Housing and Regulatory Services
- Councillor Andrea Spice - Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth, Planning and Prosperity (inc. Town Centres)
- Councillor Martin Towler - Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhoods and Communities: Health and Wellbeing
- Councillor Marc Frost – Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services (Transformation, Procurement and Performance)

- **Back Channel Bridge**

The s106 signed well before construction started in 2008 called for an additional cycle and footbridge between Great Denham and Hillgrounds in Kempston. For various reasons this never came to fruition but the funding which was index-linked largely remains in place. I have been working with planners and engineers at the Borough to deliver improvements to the "back channel" bridge to improve the walking route for residents of Great Denham and for residents of Kempston. The placement of ramps for the current step arrangement has been discussed as well as improvements to the footpath from the Kempston Mill bridge to the back-channel bridge. We agreed the material for the path at an onsite meeting today but we now have to redesign the ramps as Bidwell's are being less than cooperative on permission to site the ramps outside the exact line of the "right of way" footpath. I will be discussing with engineers what this might look like and at what cost.

- **Aggressive shoplifting Sainsburys**

Several incidents over the past few months of aggressive shoplifting have taken place in our local store. Over the Christmas period, a couple of incidents took place that can only be described as a threat to both staff at the store and residents shopping in the store. I've written to the CEO of Sainsbury's and the PCC I have asked for a senior police Officer to meet with me and the store manager, and someone from Sainsbury's security team. There has been a positive response from both parties, and I will keep the PC informed of how the situation is being addressed.