

February/March GDPC Monthly Report

- **Celebration held for new Muslim Burial Grounds in Kempston**



Local community groups and the Mayor of Bedford Borough today marked the official opening of the dedicated burial grounds for the Muslim community - a project supported by local residents and community leaders. Project leader Parvez Akhtar said; "This project has been five years in the making and without the support of Bedford Borough Council and the Mayor, it would not be possible. Many bigger councils up and down the country don't have such a facility, and it is a testament to the community and our council that we can boast about this burial ground."

"It was really pleasing to have cross-party support at full council for this project and I look forward to the official opening in the summer where we hope to invite everyone for a big celebration." Other attendees at the event included councillors, as well as MPs Mohammad Yasin and Richard Fuller. Mayor of Bedford Borough Tom Wootton stated; "This initiative goes far beyond land and planning approvals. It is a long journey and many different people have helped on the way. It embodies our commitment to respect, inclusion, and meeting the diverse needs of every community member."

Just as our Christian community has traditionally enjoyed access to consecrated burial grounds, it is essential that our Muslim residents receive the same provision. "It was really pleasing to have support by all councillors from all groups on a cross-party agreement. The event brought together local leaders, faith group representatives, and residents whose advocacy was instrumental in realising this project."

- **Electric Vehicle Charging Points**

Bedford Borough Council has today, Thursday 20 February, launched a tender for the installation and operation of new electric vehicle (EV) charge points across the borough. This initiative is part of the council's commitment to supporting residents in the transition to electric vehicles and is being delivered through the government's Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) scheme. The council has secured £1,010,000 in funding from the government for this project. This funding will be combined with private investment from the successful charge point operator.

Through consultation, the council's EV Strategy has identified key locations for an initial 256 chargers, predominately 7kW, across the borough. Working closely with the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV), the council anticipates the chosen operator will match the grant funding with private investment, delivering a minimum of a further 256 public charge points over the term of the contract, which runs until 2040.

Councillor Nicola Gribble, Portfolio Holder for Environment at Bedford Borough Council, said; "This is a significant step forward in our commitment to creating a sustainable transport network for

Bedford Borough. By increasing the number of public charge points, we are empowering residents to make the switch to electric vehicles with confidence.

“This project, supported by government funding and private investment, will not only improve air quality but also contribute to our wider efforts to tackle climate change. We believe this initiative will be instrumental in supporting residents as we move towards the 2035 deadline for the end of new petrol and diesel car sales.”

The tender process is expected to take several months, with the contract award anticipated in Summer 2025 and the new contract beginning in the Autumn.

This investment will create an accessible charge point network for residents across Bedford Borough, making it easier for them to switch to electric vehicles. The increased availability of charge points in local areas will be a significant benefit, supporting residents in making the transition to cleaner, greener transport.

The LEVI scheme aims to increase the number of public charge points, particularly for residents without access to their own off-street parking. This will provide charging opportunities for all residents, supporting the national move towards electric vehicles in line with the end of new petrol and diesel car sales in 2035. This project forms a key part of the council’s EV Strategy 2024-27, which can be found at www.bedford.gov.uk/electricvehicle

- **Financial and Service Pressures**

Demand for local authority services and the complexity of people’s needs have grown for many services. The population of England grew by 5% between 2015-16 and 2023-24, whereas Bedford Borough grew by 17.6%. At the same time, demand increased over and above population growth for temporary accommodation (TA) (84% increase, now 880 individuals and families in Bedford Borough in TA); education, health and care (EHC) plans for 0 to 25-year-olds (140% increase); state school pupils with special educational needs (14% increase); children looked after (19% increase); and new requests for publicly funded adult social care support (15% increase). Most local authorities told us they are seeing a rise in complex cases in services such as adult social care and homelessness. There are also signs of an increase in children with more complex needs. Against this national and local picture the council tax increase of 4.99% was agreed at the Full Council on 26th February. We have a tough couple of years ahead with an identified funding gap of £25m up to 2029.

- **Devolution**

In light of the local elections that are taking place in many of Bedford Borough’s neighbouring authorities, the Council’s Executive has determined that it would not be prudent to proceed with detailed discussions on devolution at this time. The elections could result in changes in leadership and potentially bring new perspectives on devolution which would impact discussions.

Bedford Borough Council remains open to constructive dialogue with our neighbouring authorities and the Government regarding potential devolution opportunities as long as this is able to bring tangible benefits to the Borough.

- **Debenhams**

Internal works at the old Debenhams building are proceeding smoothly with upgrades to toilets, electrics, and repairs to the building’s windows and roof underway near completion.

Once the space is safe and functional the Council will be opening the Tourist Information Centre and Corn Exchange Box Office in the repurposed 'cosmetics' section of the old Debenhams building potentially on the 1st April.

The Mayor and Executive are actively exploring potential business opportunities for the rest of the site.

- **Council Town Centre Initiative**

The Council has created a cross-department working group that brings together the Environment, Events, Economic Development, Markets, Highways, Trees, Buses, Licensing, and Property at a dedicated collaborative team aimed at improving our town centre.

- **New SEND School**

On 10th February 2025, Bedford Borough's officially opened the new state-of-the-art SEND school in Kempston and welcomed its first 60 pupils.

The new school is located on the site of the former Robert Bruce Middle School on Hillgrounds Road. The Council stepped in to provide the £24m needed to construct the school after the Department for Education (DfE) failed to provide the initiative funding.

This ensured the project did not stall further, the DfE have also committed to reimbursing the Council for the cost of the school in April 2025.

- **Flood Reserve**

Last year the Council's Executive conducted a detailed review of the Council's financial reserves to ensure they were not inappropriately allocated.

The review identified an opportunity to re-allocated £150,000 worth of reserves that were being held without a clear purpose. These resources were invested into a new £150,000 Flood Reserve, which will enable the Council's flood team to work more efficiently, deploying funds rapidly wherever flash flooding occurs.

- **St Paul's Square and Traffic**

Work is underway on both the south and north sides of St Paul's Square that will see the area benefit from new paving slabs, improved kerbs, and wider pedestrian walkways. Simultaneously, work is nearing completion at Midland which will then transition to phase 2 of the development that would be improvements to shop fronts (the road will be fully open during this phase).

Due to these major works, increase congestion has become a concern for residents when navigating the Town Centre. Council is closely monitoring congestion and has already made adjustments to the timing of the traffic lights at the bottom of Town Bridge, significantly reducing queues. Further adjustments will be made as needed.

Additionally, the emergency gas works at Ashburnham Road increase congestion in the area however, these works have been completed easing traffic flow.

Further information on closures are as follows:

- April 2024: There will be overnight closures to enable essential right-turn improvements from the bridge to the embankment.

- July 2024: Once this work is complete there will be a 24/7 closure of the south side of the square during school's summer holidays to minimising disruption to road users.
- Overnight closures: Throughout the project there will be overnight closures for general resurfacing, updates on these will be shared well in advance.

It is important to note that the current Mayor and Executive cannot revise these plans, the scheduling was inherited and any changes to or revisions would risk losing the funding for the works.

- **Boast for Highways maintenance**

The Council have invested into high-tech jetting units to improve road maintenance, enhance flood prevention, and reduce long-term repair costs. These new units are set to begin operation next year and can potentially clean thousands of gullies across the borough, preventing blockages, reducing surface water flooding and potentially reducing potholes. At night, they can be converted into salt spreaders to keep the roads safe during winter by improving gritting operations.

- **Invest to save/Routes**

The Council has also invested into innovative technology solutions like QRoutes. This software is a dedicated programme that assists Council officers in optimising bus routes.

Since its introduction, the Council is now on track to achieve a £750,000 in savings for the 2024/25 budget and an additional £300,000 in children's social care transport—totalling a £1 million reduction in the 2025/26 transport budget without cutting services