

February Monthly Report

- **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 £23m 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 schools 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/QRoutes**

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