

## **Borough Councillors Report – April 2023**

### **Tom Wootton becomes Bedford Borough's New Mayor**

Bedford Borough held local elections on Thursday 4 May 2023. Boundary changes saw an extra six seats across the borough.

The results are as follows:

Mayor:

- Tom Wootton (Conservative)

Councillors:

- 14 Labour councillors (+3)
- 13 Conservative councillors (+2)
- 13 LibDem councillors (-2)
- 3 Green councillors (+1)
- 2 Independent councillors (+1)

One seat is currently undecided, Wyboston, this is because the winning candidate there, Tom Wootton, was also elected mayor and so has relinquished his seat. A by-election will take place soon to decide the Councillor here.

### **Thousands of Woodland Trees failed (2019 - 2021)**

Approximately 40-50% of Bedford Borough's woodland plantations (trees) have failed to take root and died between 2021 -2022 – this is double the expected 20-25% trees that are naturally lost.

The majority of losses were at Jackman's farm with the losses attributed to the extreme summer conditions last year. Watering of large-scale whips isn't industry standard as it is currently deemed less environmental friendly to water large scale sites like Jackman's farm compared to replacing in year 1 and 2.

The Borough does look to replant any lost trees during the summer months each year.

### **Government money used to successfully finish heritage works on historic Goldings Building**

The improvements were delivered as part of the Bedford High Street Heritage Action Zone which is a joint project between the Government backed SEMLEP and Historic England in partnership with BedfordBID and Bedford Borough Council.

The works, which started in 2022, include repairs to the second-floor window, reinstatement of the window on the first floor, a renewed colour scheme for the renowned painted letters on the front façade and installation of bespoke traditional gold 3D lettering above the fascia.

The shop is however, empty with no store currently located in the new building.

### **Conservative Councillors call for the local plan 2040 to be paused pending national planning policy changes**

Bedford's Conservative Councillors had called on the previous Mayor to pause progress on the current Local Plan 2040 as a result of changes to planning policy by central Government and the passage of the Levelling Up & Regeneration Bill, likely to become law later this year.

The current plan proposes a vast swathe of new housing from Kempston Rural, through Stewartby, Wixams, Wilstead, Shortstown to Cotton End which could negatively impact the character of many rural villages and landscapes.

Conservative Councillors believe there may be an opportunity to re-think the plan pending legislative changes.

Owing to changes in Bedford Borough Council as a result of the elections, new Mayor, more information will be made available in the future of the Councils positions.

### **Government extends £2 Bus fare scheme**

The Department for Transport (DfT) led scheme caps all adult single fares at £2 and all return fares at £4 on bus services operated by participating companies. The scheme has now been extended to June 2023.

In Bedford Borough, the following operators have signed up for the scheme:

- Stagecoach
- University bus (Uno)

### **Update on future of former Beales and Debenhams sites**

The Debenhams site has been closed for 2 years and Beales has been closed for 3 years.

The Council are considering ideas first put forward in the Conservative Group's 2019 response to the Town Consultation which put forth the idea of splitting up large commercial units in smaller stores or separating spaces into retail and living accommodation.

The Borough is considering dividing up the two former department stores into smaller retail units.

The Council is also considering how the block - known as Mayes Yard - could house shops or leisure outlets, with apartments on the upper floors.