Cotton End Parish Council

***Draft* Minutes of the Meeting of the Cotton End Parish Council held on Thursday, 15 October 2026 at 7.30pm in the Village Hall**

Present: Councillors A Merel (Chairman), A Murray, L Seymour, A Simpson.

Also Present : V W Hislop (Clerk) and Borough Councillor Coombs.

26/127 APOLOGIES AND REASONS FOR ABSENCE

i. Cllrs A Stimson and G Bangher had sent their apologies.
ii. Both members' reasons for absence were approved.

26/128 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

26/129 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2026 were confirmed as a true and accurate record, and signed by the Chairman.

26/130 CO-OPTION TO FILL A CASUAL VACANCY

This Item had been withdrawn.

26/131 PUBLIC SESSION

None present.

26/132 UNITARY AUTHORITY REPORT

Cllr Coombs updated the meeting on various matters, including the Best Value Inspection Report - which was published today - his work on the bus service situation, and empty homes. His full written report is at Annex A to these minutes.

26/133 PLANNING

i. New applications: 26/01507/FUL: Gorse Farm - renovation of existing outbuildings within curtilage of an existing dwelling to enhance existing annexe (sic). The Parish Council had no objection or comment to make and **agreed** to leave the matter to the planning authority. **Action: the Clerk.**

i. a). 26/01846/PIP: land at Wood Lane - erection of 1-5 self build or custom build dwellings. Cllr Murray had drafted an extensive objection (previously circulated) to the application, and it was **agreed** that this should be submitted to the planning authority. **Action: the Clerk.**

ii. Applications decided by Bedford Borough Council: none.

iii. Neighbourhood Development Plan: review and update: no business was discussed under this sub-Item.

26/134 FINANCE AND RELATED MATTERS

i. To receive the bank reconciliation: it was **agreed** to receive the report. Cash at the bank was £39,316.98.

ii. To approve the accounts to be settled: the following were **agreed:**

Village Hall hire 2026/27 - £270.00
Clerk's net October salary - £432.77 (post-meeting note: £447.03)
CPM Invoice 5804 - £156.00
HMRC PAYE - £126.37 (post-meeting note: £290.64)
(Additional to the above, reported, the following were **agreed**:
Blue Parrot Payroll Services - £18.00
npower - £192.06
Andy Muskett Ltd - £71.40
Reynold's Landscaping Services Limited Invoice SI 2225 - £336.00
RBL (wreaths) - £50.00 (payment details awaited).)

iii. External Audit: (Post-meeting Note: the external auditor had not completed its work by the statutory deadline of 30 September, and had recommended to the Clerk to place a notice on the external website regarding the PC's consequent inability to publish the AGAR and Completion of Audit 2025/26, which he had actioned on 2 October in his capacity of Responsible Financial Officer to the Council.)

26/135 CRIME STATISTICS AND SPEED CAMERA DATA

The latest two sets of crime data were **noted**.

26/136 REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE AND IMPROVEMENTS, AND PLAYING FIELD AND VILLAGE HALL MATTERS

High Road (south) bus shelter: to consider demolition/alternative future use. It was **agreed** that the Clerk should investigate insurance cover, and obtain an estimate for making the shelter secure as a store. Reconnection of the electrical supply would need to be factored in also. **Action: the Clerk.**

26/137 HIGHWAYS RELATED MATTERS

The only highways matters were to note the telcon the Clerk had had with Peter Simons regarding the High Road scheme to be brought forward, and the communication from Andrew Prigmore in relation to the installation of a public electric car charging point in Wood Lane.

26/138 COMMUNICATIONS

i. Co-option: application and withdrawal. The potential candidate's decision, and his reasons for the decision, were **noted**.

ii. Complaint and response: to consider next steps. Discussion ensued about the Public Space Protection Order in place, and Bedford Borough Council's role and responsibilities, and it was **agreed** that the Clerk should reply accordingly. **Action: the Clerk.**

iii. Bus shelter demolition. This was dealt with under Item 26/136 above.

iv. The Clerk reported on the further communication from the residents who involved themselves in the village hall exterior works, and it was **agreed** that the Clerk would distribute the email together with a

suggested response. **Action: the Clerk.**

26/139 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Cllr Murray referred back to the discussion under Item 26/132, and it was **agreed** that the Clerk should raise a complaint with the ICO. **Action: the Clerk.**

26/140 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

12 November 2026.

The meeting concluded at 8.15pm.

Signed by the Chairman..... 12 November 2026

Borough Councillor Report: Cotton End Parish Council, Best Value Inspection Special

Oct 15, 2026 · @Leigh Coombs

Cllr Leigh Coombs, Borough Councillor for Shortstown Ward

1. The headline

On 15 October the Government published its Best Value inspection of Bedford Borough Council. The Minister says he is satisfied the Council is failing its Best Value duty in five areas: continuous improvement, leadership, governance, culture and use of resources. He is minded to send in commissioners for three years, and residents and parish councils can make representations until 28 October.

2. What commissioners mean

Commissioners are experts appointed by the Secretary of State to oversee a council that has shown it cannot put itself right.

- They would bring expertise in political and corporate leadership, transformation, governance and finance.
- Some would take direct powers over specified council functions. The inspectors recommended powers broad enough to cover finance and senior recruitment.
- The Council would have to agree an Improvement and Recovery Plan to the commissioners' satisfaction, with progress reported to the Minister every six months.
- The intervention would last three years, with powers handed back sooner if the Council shows real progress.

Councillors stay in post, the May 2027 elections go ahead and services carry on. But on the big money decisions, the final say moves away from Borough Hall.

3. How we got here

The inspectors found the Council in a difficult and deteriorating position, with a financial problem that is now large and urgent. Their findings on the administration are blunt:

- The Mayor has tended to avoid difficult decisions and conflict, and lacks the leadership skills to create a positive leadership environment.
- Decisions that would have helped the budget stalled or were reopened within the cabinet, including garden waste charges, parking charges, council tax support and leisure.

- Three cabinet members resigned in May 2026, two citing problems working with the Mayor and within the cabinet.
- The Council's statutory finance officer was at times left out of meetings where her advice was needed.
- The Council only accepted very late in the budget process that it needed emergency government money to set a budget for 2026/27.
- Plan after plan (a Corporate Plan, a Stability Plan, an Improvement Plan) has failed to set clear, shared priorities.

The report is particularly critical of the Mayor's failure to create a positive working environment, and of his Assistant, who inspectors found had gone beyond the role the regulations allow and risked undermining the Council's own finance officer. They are clear that the greater onus to build cross party working sat with the Mayor and his administration, and it did not happen.

4. What is critical in the report

- **Money.** The Council needed Exceptional Financial Support of up to £20m for 2025/26 and £25m for 2026/27, with a possible further £33m. This is one-off support that has to be paid for, and there is still a gap in the budget for 2027/28.
- **Savings by December.** Inspectors want enough savings identified by December 2026 to balance the budget for 2027/28 and beyond, or assets sold to cover the emergency support.
- **Narrow priorities.** Until the May 2027 elections, the Council is told to focus on four things: the budget, children's services, adult social care and the Universal project.
- **Culture.** Inspectors heard evidence of bullying and misogyny within the cabinet and across political groups, low staff morale and a blame culture where problems are not owned.
- **Staffing.** The 2026/27 budget already cuts around 120 posts (£4.2m), and inspectors warn the teams needed to deliver savings have been hollowed out.

5. What it means for Cotton End

My honest fear is that there will be little or no money left for discretionary services, the things the Council chooses to do rather than must do by law. With the focus narrowed to the budget, social care and Universal, the services that matter in villages like ours will be first in line.

- **Speed cameras.** Maintenance is funded for 2026/27, but last year's attempt to cut it and pass the cost to parishes (around £5,000 a year for Cotton End) will almost certainly return. Our A600 cameras are the busiest in the borough. Why should villagers pay through their precept to protect themselves from people driving like maniacs through the village, when the fines go to central government? I will fight it again.

6. Have your say

The Government is inviting representations from the Council and any interested parties, including residents, by 28 October 2026. The parish council may wish to consider making one.

7. Other local updates

- **Buses.** The new contracted bus package left our villages out, and families are already seeing children leave earlier and get home later from Bedford Academy. I am meeting the Council's bus officers on Friday 16 October and will put forward Cotton End's needs as residents have told them to me, so now is your chance to tell me what you need. I have found developer funding for Shortstown's buses, and if any of it can help Cotton End too, I will try. That money is tied to transport, so it cannot be swallowed by the wider budget.
- **Empty homes.** The empty property on High Road has been passed to heir hunters to trace the rightful owner. The Government has just announced stronger powers for councils to take over long-term empty homes, including a simpler tribunal process and stepping in sooner, and I want Bedford to use them. But the budget for empty homes across the whole borough is only £300,000, which is tiny against the scale of the problem. I will keep pushing so cases like ours do not slip as officer time gets stretched.

Contact

As always, please get in touch with any issue, large or small.

Cllr Leigh Coombs Borough Councillor, Shortstown Ward leigh@shortstown.co.uk