

Cotton End Parish Council

Minutes of the Meeting of the Cotton End Parish Council held on Thursday, 12 March 2026 at 7.30pm in the Village Hall

Present: Councillors A Merel (Chairman), A Stimson, A Murray, L Seymour, and K Watts.

Also Present : V W Hislop (Clerk), Borough Cllr Coombs, Shortstown Parish Cllr Middleton and two members of the public (residents).

26/025 **APOLOGIES AND REASONS FOR ABSENCE**

- i. Apologies were received from Cllrs Bangher and Simpson.
- ii. Both councillors' reasons for absence were approved.

26/026 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

26/027 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2026 were confirmed as a true and accurate record, and signed by the Chairman.

26/028 **PUBLIC SESSION**

A resident asked what could be done about incidences of illegal live-streaming in the Social Club. Cllr Merel noted that this matter was a serious breach of the rules and that the practice was unlawful. He stated that it may be put on the agenda for the April meeting.

A resident - the Chair and Clerk of the Village Hall Trustees, and representing the Social Club - explained that the Management Committee member who had set up the streaming had resigned, and that another had been written to, as well as all Club Members. Notices had been placed on the notice board and on all tables.

Turning to another matter, the resident expressed that she wished to discuss a proposal to move the Village Hall into a community interest company (CIC). Cllr Merel stated that this subject was not on the meeting's agenda, and that the Parish Council had an extremely narrow role in relation to the Village Hall. Cllr Merel would discuss with the Clerk post-meeting, who would set out the Council's status, terms of reference, etc. in writing. **Action: the Clerk.**

26/029 **UNITARY AUTHORITY REPORT**

A written report had been received from Cllr Gallagher (attached at Annex A). Cllr Coombs gave an oral report, highlighting the Budget, Council Tax increase, Best Value Inspection, etc. (Annex B). Cllr Coombs was asked by Cllr Stimson to see if he could source a second hand speed display sign.

- 26/030 PLANNING**
i. New applications: none.
ii. Applications decided by Bedford Borough Council: none.
- 26/031 FINANCE AND RELATED MATTERS**
i. To receive the bank reconciliation: it was **agreed** to receive the report. Cash at the bank was £29,345.74
ii. To approve accounts for payment: the following were **agreed**:
Clerk's net March salary - £425.85
Clerk's mileage September 2025 to March 2026 - £61.92
Steven Morris, Land Registry fee - £14
Local Councils Insurance Policy renewal - £986.09
BATPC New Clerks Finance Course - £35
HMRC Month 10 PAYE - £122.78
(Additional to the report, M J Hughes, works to seal off bus shelter - £210.)
- 26/032 CRIME STATISTICS AND SPEED CAMERA DATA**
The latest crime statistics had been distributed previously. No speed camera data since the December report had been received.
Action: the Clerk.
- 26/033 REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE AND IMPROVEMENTS, AND PLAYING FIELD AND VILLAGE HALL MATTERS**
i. Trow Close fence - the Clerk was instructed to write to the residents, asking them to make-safe the fence. **Action: the Clerk.**
ii. Wood Lane ditch - it was **agreed** to issue a purchase order for periodic maintenance, and for a covering to be investigated.
Action: the Clerk.
iii. Island outside the Bell PH - Cllr Stimson confirmed that Tim Bradley would be mowing the grass qua a Parish Council volunteer.
iv. To note the order placed for sealing the former brick bus shelter, pending demolition. Previous agreement via email correspondence was confirmed by the members present.
v. To consider an offer by a resident to fund the installation of a bench to commemorate the inauguration of the Council in April 2018. This was welcomed and **agreed** on the condition that the bench should be constructed of composite material and be entirely maintenance free.
Action: the Clerk.
- 26/034 HIGHWAYS RELATED MATTERS**
i. To receive any update/progress on the road safety issues reported to Bedford Borough Council Highways - Cllr Merel reported that he and the Clerk had met with Andrew Prigmore and Peter Simons, together with Karen Headland. It was hopeful that Mr Simons would bring forward a proposed scheme in an attempt to improve the situation, albeit substantially limited as to what can be done.

ii. To consider any action regarding Amberleigh Gardens' gravel over-
spill - it was **agreed** that the Clerk should write to the proprietors.
Action: the Clerk.

26/035 COMMUNICATIONS

Letter from the Mayor dated 20 February 2026 (distributed previously) regarding the 2026/27 Budget and speed cameras, and budget considerations next year - Cllr Coombs offered to make representations to Borough Council members.

26/036 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Trow Close play area, and play area inspections generally - Cllr Seymour's email and photographs were discussed, and the works would need to be added to the other remedial works that are necessary. Cllr Stimson noted that Billy of CPM Playgrounds Ltd is currently on sick leave, and the Clerk suggested requesting Wicksteed to undertake an annual inspection. The Clerk was due to contact Bedford Borough Council also, to ask if more than 6 grass cuts could be undertaken this year. **Action: the Clerk.**

26/037 DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

9 April 2026.

26/038 NEED FOR EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Pursuant to s.1(2) of The Public Bodies (Admission to Meetings) Act 1960, The Council **resolved** in respect of **Agenda Item 26/039** that the public, including the press, should be excluded from the meeting on the basis that it was likely, in view of the nature of the business to be transacted or the nature of the proceedings, that if a member of the public were present during the item there would be publicity prejudicial to the public interest by reason of its confidential nature.

26/039 QUOTATIONS RECEIVED FOR GRASS CUTTING



The meeting concluded at 8.50pm.

Signed by the Chairman..... 9 April 2026

ANNEX A TO
PARISH COUNCIL MINUTES
OF 12 MARCH 2026

Monthly Report February

Council passes 2026/27 Budget

- Bedford Borough Council has approved the Mayor's 2026/27 budget, delivered against a backdrop of surging costs in adult social care, children's services and temporary accommodation and a £1.1m cut in Government funding.
- That includes additional funding for Children's Services and Adult Services, continues investment in roads and resurfacing, ASB Officers, and confirms the Council will continue to maintain speed cameras in parishad areas.
- Council Tax will rise by 4.99% (2.99% core + 2% Adult Social Care precept) to help meet unavoidable cost pressures, alongside ongoing efficiency work.

Exceptional Financial Support (EFS)

- The Government has published its latest list of councils receiving Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) for 2026/27. Bedford Borough Council has been given in-principle support of £58.0 million for 2026/27, with £22.0m (support agreed in-principle for 2025-26).
- EFS is a type of Government support that helps a council manage short-term financial pressures while it delivers longer-term savings and improvement plans.
- It gives the Council permission to effectively "go overdrawn" for a limited period of time, with the Council only paying back what it actually uses. In practice, if £22m is available but only £15m is used, then only £15m would need to be paid back.

New Finance and Improvement Executive Committee

- The Executive has set up a new Finance and Improvement Executive Committee to strengthen financial oversight and accountability, and to support delivery of the Council's improvement work.
- Meetings will be live-streamed, so residents can follow progress on the Council's improvement work and will include cross-party representation.

Best Value Inspection

- Bedford Borough Council will be undergoing a Best Value Inspection over the next three months. The Mayor and Executive have said they welcome the inspection and see it as a constructive form of scrutiny to help ensure residents get the best value services possible.

- The Council will cooperate fully with inspectors and treat this as an opportunity to strengthen performance, raise standards and improve reliability of services.

Garden waste collections restarting

- Garden waste collections (green-lidded bins) will restart from Monday 2nd March.
- As a reminder, items that can go in the green bin include grass cuttings, leaves, plants, weeds, flowers, hedge clippings and bark. Please do not put food waste, soil, rubble or large branches.
- More information on bin guidance and collection dates: www.bedford.gov.uk/BinsAndRecycling

Anti-Social Behaviour Officers

- The 2026/27 Budget includes £96,000 to fund two additional Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Officers in addition to the two ASB officers funded by Bedfordshire Police.
- Unlike the police-funded officers, who are focused on the town centre, the Council-funded officers can be deployed flexibly - to the town centre, Queens Park, Shortstown, or anywhere the need is greatest for patrols and early intervention.
- This builds on work since December, when ASB activity helped contribute to a reduction in violent and public order offences, making the town centre feel safer for residents, visitors and local businesses.
- The Council will also continue joint work through the Town Centre Task Force, bringing together Council services and Bedfordshire Police to coordinate intelligence-led action and prevention.

Open Space Management (OSM) charge will not be coming back

- As a result of the 2026/27 budget residents in these Kempston West and Great Denham will not be doubled taxed as the open Space Management charge will not be reintroduced in these areas.

International sport is back at Bedford International Athletics Stadium

- Bedford International Athletics Stadium (BIAS) has recently undergone a £700,000 refurbishment to improve the quality of the facility.
- The completed works include replacement of the running track and athletics surfaces, plus the purchase of maintenance and competition equipment, including repairs to the throwing cage.
- Following the improvements, on the 7th February the stadium had successfully hosted international level sporting event, showing that Bedford Borough is more than capable of attracting major competitions.

Universal development - growing local presence

- The Universal development is gathering momentum, with the organisation now taking space on the top floor of the Council building.

- This creates a stronger day-to-day presence in the Borough and should help speed up engagement with local partners and stakeholders.

Potholes and road maintenance (January 2026)

- The Council has delivered around 38,976 m² of carriageway resurfacing/patching and 5,113 m² of footway resurfacing, alongside other repairs and renewals.
- Teams attended 714 streets for carriageway pothole repairs (plus 13 streets for footway potholes) and carried out wider maintenance works on many additional streets.
- Routine gully cleansing continued with around 1,800 gullies cleansed, with extra drainage cleaning also completed as part of resurfacing schemes.

East Park Energy

- Bedford Borough Council is involved as the Host Authority, supporting the national Development Consent Order (DCO) process locally. Officers have advised they are currently preparing a draft Local Impact Report (this is still in preparation and not yet a formal submission).
- A Preliminary Meeting and public hearings are scheduled for 17 - 18 March 2026.

Fostering for Bedford Borough Council

- Bedford Borough Council is looking for more local families to foster, helping some of our most vulnerable children grow up in a safe, supportive home environment.
- The Council provides support for carers through Mockingbird, a group that gives foster families a stronger network, including respite, advice and practical support.
- Bedford has now launched its third Mockingbird Constellation, building on the success of the first two, which currently support 19 families who also support one another.
- The programme was developed by The Fostering Network and has been introduced locally with Department for Education funding.
- Foster carers may also be eligible for help such as Council Tax support and subsidised access to leisure facilities, alongside the usual fostering support.
- If you are considering taking on this important role, you can find out more information at <https://www.bedford.gov.uk/social-care-and-health/fostering/who-can-foster> or contact us fostering@bedford.gov.uk

ANNEX B TO
PARISH COUNCIL MINUTES
OF 12 MARCH 2026

Borough Councillor report from Cllr Leigh Coombs to Cotton End Parish Council

March 2026

1) Borough Budget Update

The Council's 2026 to 2027 Budget has now been passed, but only after a difficult and drawn out process. The first version was voted down at Full Council, and our group voted against it. A revised version was then brought back and approved, with our group abstaining. However, as the financial position worsened further adjustments were required and it returned for a third time. We abstained again on that final version.

During the debate I raised concerns about proposals to push the cost of speed camera maintenance onto parish councils. I am pleased to say I was successful in getting that funding reinstated into the borough budget. Parish councils should not be expected to pick up additional financial burdens for infrastructure that protects residents across the wider borough.

Unfortunately, the administration did proceed with removing funding for the Community Speed Watch van. This is disappointing. The van has supported locations in Cotton End recently and has been effective in identifying and deterring speeding motorists. At a time when residents consistently raise road safety as a concern, withdrawing this support feels short sighted.

More broadly, there remain significant concerns with the budget as agreed:

- Total borrowing is projected to reach around £227 million, placing long term pressure on the council's finances.
- Council Tax will rise by 4.99 percent this year, meaning residents have seen increases of over 15 percent in the last three years.
- The budget relies on exceptional financial support from Government to balance, allowing revenue pressures to be managed through borrowing and capital measures rather than sustainable income.
- A range of service reductions and savings proposals remain within the financial plan, affecting areas such as local facilities, highways maintenance and community support services.

In short, while a legal budget has now been passed, it is built on fragile foundations. I will continue to press for more sustainable financial planning, protection of frontline services and fairness for our communities.

3) Best Value Inspection

The Government has ordered a **Best Value inspection** of Bedford Borough Council. This is one of the most serious forms of central oversight available under the Local Government Act 1999 and is only used when there are sustained and significant concerns about a council's governance, financial management and delivery of services.

In Bedford's case this step reflects deep concerns over financial resilience, governance arrangements and the Council's ability to demonstrate it is securing continuous improvement in how public money is spent and services are delivered. Independent inspectors are now in place to assess whether the Council is meeting its legal duty to achieve economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

A Best Value inspection matters because it is **not routine**. It is typically triggered only when there are serious warning signs such as weak financial planning, governance issues, or persistent service delivery problems. Other councils have faced similar inspections in extreme circumstances, but it remains an uncommon intervention.

For residents this signals that the Government sees real risks in how the council has been operating. Independent scrutiny is intended to protect public services and taxpayers, but it also highlights the scale of the challenges facing the authority. My focus remains on ensuring transparency, accountability and that services our communities rely on are safeguarded throughout this process.

4) Governance, Planning and Leadership – Enough Is Enough

At Full Council Councillor Jon Abbott highlighted serious concerns about the continued delay in progressing an up-to-date Local Plan. Without one, the borough cannot demonstrate a five-year housing land supply, leaving communities like Cotton End exposed to speculative development and reduced local control.

At the same time, we have raised concerns about proposed constitutional changes which, in our view, risk limiting public voice and weakening councillor scrutiny rather than strengthening transparency.

These issues sit alongside:

- A Government-ordered Best Value inspection into the council's governance and finances.
- A chaotic budget process and spiralling borrowing.

- Council Tax rising by over 15 percent in just three years under this administration.
- Ongoing concerns about leadership, direction and delivery.

In response, our group launched the “Enough Is Enough” petition calling for the Mayor’s resignation. Independents and Green councillors have launched similar petitions, and Labour has also declared no confidence in the Mayor’s leadership. While petitions cannot directly remove a Mayor under the current system, they do reflect growing cross-party concern about how the borough is being run.

Residents deserve stable leadership, sound financial management and a council that listens. Enough is enough.

5) Highways

But the road sweeper has visited Cotton End this week. And I applaud the highways team for doing the very best they can with one hand tied behind their backs

6) Speed Cameras

You may have seen on Facebook the recent posts I have posted re speed cameras. Whilst I’m now very pleased Cotton End won’t have to fund the maintenance and calibration (without being able to budget for this) following my successful campaign with the Borough Budget, I was disappointed by the comments made by a resident towards the PC initially and then turned towards me. I have no idea what this resident has going on in his life, but you will hopefully have seen I supported the councillors here in replying to his strange comments.

His issue stems from the first camera being located past his home (probably) and into the 30 MPH limit. I agree it would be better located at the start of the houses however the cost of this design and move would be between £5k - £10k. The Borough haven’t the money to do this so funding would have to be found elsewhere.

This resident did indicate in one of his Facebook posts that I should never assume, so perhaps he is able and willing to fund this work. Who knows.

7) Open Space Management Charge. Whos paying?

The Budget included yet again the cost to pay for the open space management charges for the deputy Mayor's ward and part of Kempston West.

Just like some residents in Shortstown (and many other areas across the Borough) these residents brought homes with the legally bound clause of paying for the open space maintenance in their area.

Again just like Shortstown residents (and many across the Borough) when these home were built the developer didn't pay the Council the commuted sum and chose to set up a maintenance arrangement instead (this is all that's required under the NPPF (National Planning policy Framework)) thus the cost was to be born by the home owners in that area.

In the case of Gt Denham and Kempston west the option was given to the council "to act as a management company" so take on the maintenance and charge home owners in that area just as a private company would do (and as they do in Shortstown for example). This was well documented on the Boroughs website and would have been well documented in the home owners legal packs upon purchase. So no surprises.

Mayor Tom promised "to sort out open space management charges" in his first week in office back in 2023, but all he has done is move the cost of open space management charges from the deputy Mayors ward to... you.

Yes he fought hard against CIPFA, councillor call ins and moved the cost on to the general council tax fund. So now you pay for not only Cotton Ends open space through Parish precept (Gt Denham don't pay towards your open space) but you now pay towards Gt Denham's and Kempston West's local open spaces.

He hasn't done this for any other home owner in Bedford Borough facing the same costs on top of their council tax bills, just this one special area.

You might think "that's really unfair.." ... I think you are right.