

Wilshamstead Parish Council
Wixams Parish Council
Bedford Borough Councillor Report:

1. Coronavirus in Bedford Borough

Many COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted today but it is still important to exercise caution.

The Borough Council is asking people to:

- Get tested regularly
- Self-isolate if told to by NHS Test & Trace
- If you can, wear a face covering in public places
- Meet up with others outdoors rather than indoors

More information about the lifting of restrictions can be found at the Government website:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-coronavirus-restrictions-what-you-can-and-cannot-do>

2. Vaccine rollout

The vaccine rollout continues. There are a number of drop in centres available around the Borough where residents not yet vaccinated can go. Details of locations and times can be found on the BLMK CCG website:

<https://www.blmkccg.nhs.uk/drop-in-covid-19-vaccination-sessions-available-for-people-aged-40-and-over/>

3. East West Rail – Wixams Station

A rather bad tempered meeting of the Borough Council took place on 2nd June, in advance of the end of the East West Rail consultation.

My own concern has always been its impact on Wixams Station. At the initial consultation on EWR, there were five route options to consider, two of which went through Bedford Town Centre and three that took a southern route, broadly along the line of the A421.

At the time, the Mayor asked me to support a route through the centre of town, stating that a southern route might prejudice Wixams Station, either delaying it further, or turning it into a 'crossover' station, with EWR, and potentially outside of Wixams.

Taking the Mayor at his word, I supported the town centre option and welcomed the selection of route E when it was surprisingly chosen, despite it being the most expensive option.

However, the Mayor has now run into a wall of opposition from those living near the chosen route and just before the special Council meeting to discuss the issue, he suddenly

claimed that if an alternative southern route was chosen, houses in Wixams could be demolished. Not only do I believe this is appalling scaremongering, without merit or justification, it begs the question why the Mayor has not mentioned it until he came under pressure from those opposed to the route. The Mayor's claim has also been escalated from 'prejudicing' Wixams Station to 'house demolitions', and from potentially being outside Wixams to coming straight through Wixams. I no longer know which version of the Mayor's story I am meant to believe.

At the special Council meeting, in trying to defend their chosen route, the Mayor and portfolio holder, Cllr Headley attacked BFARe, the Poets Residents Group, Parish Councils, CPRE and others for their opposition.

None of this helps Wixams residents and playing politics with the station, with false claims and unsubstantiated threats, is wholly unacceptable.

In addition, a number of issues around EWR have also been raised in Parliament, by NE Bedfordshire MP Richard Fuller, including:

- The costings given by EWR and how they changed after the original route consultation, without members of the public being able to comment further on this.
- The lack of a proper environmental impact assessment and how this could lead to the scheme not meeting net zero carbon targets, and its impact on the North East Bedfordshire countryside.
- The Mayor's decision to not bring Bedford Borough Council's response to the original consultation to Councillors for a proper debate.
- Failure to account for other factors, such as how much emphasis will be placed on freight, how Covid will effect this and the use of polluting fuel.

The EWR consultation has now closed and a response from the East West Rail Company is expected later in the year.

4. Ward Boundary Review

The Boundary review closed on Monday 5th July. I have objected to the proposed three Councillor Wixams and Wilstead ward, which looks as though the Commissioners have just lumped together all the bits left over.

My objections are:

1. The proposed ward is unwieldy, putting a wide and disparate number of parishes together
2. I am opposed to 3 member wards in principle, as they are less democratic and favour political parties
3. The communities of Stewartby, Kempston Hardwicke and Elstow have no real connection with Wixams

4. Wilstead and Wixams have much stronger connections, having at one time been a single Parish
5. Having half of Elstow parish looks odd and is a poor split of the parish - which as stated, has no connection with Wixams
6. It's extremely disruptive to the existing ward arrangements and a less disruptive option is possible
7. A 2 member ward coving Wilstead and Wixams has better community links, is more easily represented, thus allowance better governance and can be created within the tolerance of electoral variance (just 3.7%)

I therefore proposed a 2 member ward, covering the parish of Wilstead and Wixams, with the following Polling Districts:

Wixams & Wilstead ward (2 members)

MA1	Wixams Parish	230 electors	(Currently Elstow & Stewartby ward)
MG	Wixams Parish	4520 electors	(Currently Wilshamstead ward)
MH	Wilstead Parish	989 electors	(Currently Wilshamstead ward)
MI	Wilstead parish	975 electors	(Currently Wilshamstead ward)
		Total: 6714 electors	(3.7% variance)

The final recommendations from the Boundary Commissioners will be released on 31st August.

5. Resurfacing around the roundabout between The Causeway and Fisherwood Road

I raised this issue yet again at a recent meeting of the Borough's Environment Committee, during a discussion on potholes. The Borough's criteria for resolving this suggests that the road surface around the roundabout isn't dangerous. I beg to differ. I have been promised a written response shortly.

6. Wixams Academy

A petition, containing 279 signatures, was recently presented to Bedford Council requesting the Council to take steps to ensure Bedford College Academy Trust (BCAT) meet their contracted obligations and ensures a 6th Form is provided at Wixams Academy from September 2022 onwards.

The DfE, clearly states that Wixams is a school for ages 11-19 and the Wixams Academy Funding agreement with the DfE clearly states "the planned capacity of the Academy is 824, in the age range 11-19, including a 6th form of 224 places". So it's clear that in the funding agreement, a legally binding document signed by both DfE and BCAT, that the DfE is expecting a 6th form at Wixams Academy.

There was a belated climb down by BCAT, probably realising that they were in an unwinnable position, and they have since stated in a letter to parents and carers (dated 5th May) that there WILL now be a 6th form from 2022.

However, there are some caveats:

1. They have stated quite clearly, that “There will be provision within existing buildings”
2. They also state “We have asked the Principal to find a solution within the existing accommodation”

Neither of these things is currently possible. There is no room in the existing buildings because the Trust has taken in so many streams at lower ages. By turning this over to the Principal, they are effectively washing their hands of the problem, knowing that what they are suggesting is not possible with the current school numbers.

A solution needs to be found, and quickly, and must include the building of extra capacity to ensure a 6th form can be accommodated from September 2022.

I’ve spoken to both the Council’s Portfolio Holder for Education and Chief Education Officer about this issue, asking them to ensure that we hold BCAT to account for delivering the 6th form on time.

At the Council meeting on 14th July, where the petition was debated, after prior discussion with the other political parties, we unanimously agreed a resolution to champion “the addition of a 6th form provision starting in September 2022 at Wixams Academy, to meet the needs of local residents”.

General Council Matters

Bedford Borough awarded £22.6m by Government for Town Deal

Bedford Borough will receive £22.6 million from the Government, following a successful bid for a Town Deal. In October 2020, Bedford Borough Council and Bedford Town Deal Board submitted their Town Investment Plan and this bid has been accepted.

The £22.6m will rejuvenate the town with a number of projects, including

- regeneration of the Station Quarter and Midland Road
- public realm improvements to St. Paul’s Square
- improvements to town centre junctions
- upgrades to local pedestrian and cycling infrastructure
- investment in health, science and digital skills and full fibre broadband.

Local Plan 2040 Update

The new Local Plan 2040 draft is now available. A consultation called “The Draft Plan: Strategy Options and Draft Policies Consultation” runs from Tuesday 29 June to Friday 3 Sept 2021.

Northern Gateway

Works started on Monday 28 June at the 'Northern Gateway' of Bedford, to ease congestion in this busy area and make roads safer for drivers, as part of the Transporting Bedford project. Clapham Road between Paula Radcliffe Way and Manton Lane will be widened to create an extra lane for traffic, and a specific left turn filter lane to allow traffic heading up Manton Lane to bypass the roundabout.

Improvements will also be made to allow people coming south on Clapham Road to turn right into Sainsbury's, which will also help to ease traffic on this busy roundabout. The Clapham Road roundabout itself will be widened to create more space for traffic to flow, and traffic signals will be installed to help ease congestion during the morning and afternoon rush hours. Improved pedestrian and cyclist crossings will also be installed, to make it easier to cross this busy junction.

These works are expected to complete in Spring 2022. To minimise disruption on this busy route, the majority of these works will be carried out using temporary lane closures, ensuring that the route can still be used throughout.

Resurfacing works will also be carried out as part of this project, early next year, which will require phased overnight closures of the route. These will be carefully phased to ensure they are carried out with the minimum inconvenience to road users and the surrounding businesses and residents. Originally, the scheme was intended to make journey times through the junction quicker at peak times but the focus is now on providing consistent journey times.

New Bike Shelter Opens in Bedford Town Centre

A new bike storage shelter has now opened in Bedford town centre, near Harpur Square complementing the bike racks that are already there.

To access the shelter, cyclists need to email sustainable.transport@bedford.gov.uk with their full name, address in Bedford Borough and phone number. They will then receive details on how to access the unit and will need to download the 'Okey Access' app on their smart phone.

The bike storage unit uses secure encrypted Bluetooth and 'Near Field Communications' to communicate between your phone and the shelter, you do not need internet access. This is the UK's first ever cycle hub to feature an app-based locking and booking system that can be managed from your smart phone or tablet.

Cllr. Graeme Coombes
Wilshamstead ward
July 2021