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Date: 28th October 2026

Emailed to: James.Blythe@communities.gov.uk and interventions@communities.gov.uk

Dear James

Bedford Borough Councils representation on the Best Value interventions

We are writing to respond to your invitation to make representations to the Secretary of State under section 15 (9) of the 1999 Act about the Report and the proposed intervention package.

The Council recognises the seriousness of the findings set out in the Inspectors' Report and the importance of demonstrating sustained and measurable improvement. We are committed to addressing the issues identified and to ensuring that the Council secures continuous improvement, financial sustainability, effective governance, and the organisational capacity required to deliver good outcomes for Bedford's residents.

The Council acknowledges that the Best Value Report identifies significant issues that require a sustained response and commitment to drive improvement with pace and momentum. While the Council has a different perspective on some aspects of the Report's tone and conclusions, we accept the recommendations and our priority is to address the findings and demonstrate through action the seriousness with which we are responding.

We remain committed to working constructively with the Ministry, the Improvement and Assurance Panel and, should the Secretary of State determine that intervention is required following consideration of our representations, with the appointed Commissioners. Should Commissioners be appointed we would ask that this is done as soon as possible to support our improvement journey.

Our objective is clear: to secure sustainable improvement, restore confidence in the Council's governance and financial position, and ensure that the organisation can discharge its Best Value Duty effectively and sustainably as quickly as possible.

More specific comments are set out in Appendix A which is attached to this letter on the Best Value Report and the proposed Directions.

In summary, the Council:

a) accepts the requirement for a comprehensive Improvement and Recovery Plan and acknowledges that the Council has already committed to do this,

b) accepts the need for robust external monitoring, challenge, and assurance.

c) accepts the need to review its improvement governance, capacity, and capability.

d) accepts enhanced oversight of financial recovery and transformation.

e) accepts appropriate access, information-sharing, and cooperation requirements.

The Council welcomes the statement that the intention is for the Authority to continue to lead and deliver its own improvement wherever possible, with Commissioners providing oversight, challenge and support and exercising their powers to secure improvement.

Bedford Borough Council is committed to demonstrating through action and delivery that it can address the shortcomings identified, restore confidence in its governance and financial sustainability, rebuild organisational capacity and secure continuous improvement for the residents and communities it serves.

The Council will cooperate fully and constructively with the Secretary of State, the Ministry and, should Directions be made, the Commissioners appointed under them.

In drafting this response all political groups and the Council's Corporate Leadership team have had an opportunity to consider and comment on the response.

Yours sincerely

Tom Wootton
Elected Mayor
Bedford Borough Council

Laura Church
Chief Executive
Bedford Borough Council

Cllr Henry Vann
Leader, Liberal Democrat Group
Bedford Borough Council

Cllr Abu Sultan
Leader, Labour Group
Bedford Borough Council

Cllr Ben Foley
Convenor, Green Group
Bedford Borough Council

Cllr Graeme Coombes
Leader, Conservative Group
Bedford Borough Council

Appendix A

Best Value Report

The Council acknowledges that the Best Value Report identifies significant issues that require a sustained response and commitment to drive improvement with pace and momentum. While the Council has a different perspective on some aspects of the Report's tone and conclusions, our priority is to address the findings and demonstrate through action the seriousness with which we are responding. It has been challenging for some individuals who have been criticised in the report.

Please find below some of the progress that has been made since the Inspectors left in June.

Continuous Improvement

The Council has previously set out the focus on transformation through the appointment of the Deputy Chief Executive as the transformation lead for the Council and the back filling of his role. Additional capacity has been added to the Corporate PMO team with a focus on efficiency reviews and consideration of benchmarking data. This has identified a number of key themes which will be embedded into the revised Improvement Plan. The revised Improvement Plan will focus on financial sustainability, and focused improvement in adults and children's services. Work with Newton will focus on these two areas.

The Council recognises that it needs to provide a clearer account of its transformation programme and the improvements it is intending to deliver. A timeline for a new, focused Improvement Plan was agreed by the Executive in October. The revised improvement plan has not yet been shared with elected members as it has not yet been completed.

Use of data to drive decision making was a key comment in the BVI report and featured in the OFSTED and CQC outcome letters. The Council is working with I-Telligent I to provide real-time data to support decision making. Priority has been given by the Council to adults and children's services to support the improvement in these two areas.

Leadership

The Council recognises the importance of the leadership findings for both political and managerial leadership. We need to communicate our ambition for Bedford Borough, including Universal, more clearly and ensure it translates into priorities and delivery. Financial sustainability and improvement in children's and adults' services are our priorities.

Additional capacity has been added in to key corporate services including transformation, finance, and procurement to rebuild some of the core services. However, the Council acknowledges that this investment in some areas will be needed beyond the 2026/27 fiscal year and that there are other areas such as corporate communications and performance and analytics which will require a further review.

The Council remains committed to further cross party working but acknowledges that the external manifestation of this is combative. Support is continuing to be provided by the Local Government Association Peer Mentors with the support from Cllr Abi Brown. This aims to strengthen cross-party working particularly leading into the budget setting process. There are already examples of cross-

party working on issues such as the strategic leisure contract and more recently on the Mayes Yard project (Debenhams).

We are committed to further work on the Member/Officer protocol as a priority.

We have also focused work on a grip, momentum and assurance strategy to clearly set out the leadership approach that we require.

The Council was already designing a comprehensive Council wide leadership development programme as part of its People Strategy; this will be widened to ensure it encompasses the areas of improvement required set out in the BVI report.

Governance

Considerable progress has been made on the review of the Council's Constitution which seeks to simplify and clarify key elements. A number of amendments were approved by Full Council on the 7th October and a revised Key Decision threshold, and Contract Procedure Rules are being prepared by the Constitution Review Working Group for consideration at the November meeting and subsequent approval at Full Council. The Constitution Review Working Group is a good example of positive cross-party working in practice.

The Council acknowledges that some of the issues raised in the report will need to be addressed urgently and we will be developing a more detailed action plan.

Culture

The Council recognises the seriousness of the findings on culture and the need to address them.

Since the BVI team were in Bedford the Council has completed its own Employee Survey which involved a broad cross section of employees. The results have mirrored the key areas of focus from the Council's People Strategy which will continue to be delivered and embedded across the organisation. At the time of the BVI visit there were significant issues over the office working environment at Borough Hall and these have now been resolved. Four staff engagement events were held in October to focus on the staff survey outcomes and our transformation journey.

The Council's policies on bullying and harassment have been updated.

The allegations of misogyny have been taken seriously, and we have asked the Monitoring Officer to look at this matter together with the Member/Officer protocol and the guidance on the roles and responsibilities. There has been further work to support employees and encouraging reporting. To date there have not been any cases through the Council's process for officers or for Members since the BVI team were in Bedford.

The Monitoring Officer is already actively engaging with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Standards Committee regarding relevant aspects of the BVI report associated with Member conduct, particularly strengthening of the Member Code of Conduct.

Use of resources

The Council is determined to drive the pace and momentum of getting to a financially sustainable position but recognises the need for a clear plan to achieve this.

The Improvement and Assurance Panel continues to challenge the Council on its in-year budget position and the robustness of budget setting. A balanced budget was set for 26/27 based on £25m EFS, with an increase in the General Fund Reserve and provision for contingencies. An overspend remains against the agreed budget, with contingencies likely to be required to mitigate the current position. Reducing the overspend remains a priority.

The three significant areas of overspend are:

1. Children's placement costs where inflationary pressures are significant given the scarcity of placements nationally. This is already a significant area of work but will be supported by a strengthened approach to commissioning and procurement.

2. Home to school transport driven by SEND transport costs. This should be mitigated through the SEND reforms and the opening of a SEMH school in the Borough.

3. Housing benefit – being driven by Supported Exempt costs and the cap on Housing Benefit for temporary accommodation.

The Council has also worked to improve the borrowing position through reductions in the capital borrowing, managing the Council's borrowing profile taking on board advice from its external advisors and a focus on capital receipts and any required mitigations. This is an issue that other political groups continue to have concerns about.

The Council has recognised the need for external support on transformation and improvement, including on the financial position. Newton have been working alongside Adult Services and are shortly to be appointed as a partner for Children's Services. This will provide additional capacity, support, and challenge. You will be aware that Jim Taylor is also working with the Council and he is also focusing on Children's Services.

The Council commissioned the CIPFA Resilience Review on the recommendation of the S151 officer. Many of its recommendations have been delivered or incorporated as core elements of the Improvement Plan. While this reflects action taken in response to the review, the Inspectors' findings underline the importance of delivering the work and sustaining delivery.

Work has been undertaken by officers and Cabinet to progress setting a balanced budget for 27/28 which will still require some EFS support with an ambition to reduce the reliance on EFS as soon as possible. Initial progress has also been made on strategic plans for bridging the remaining gap in the MTFS for the following three years up to 30/31 which will rely on the delivery of a broad transformation programme. This four-year solution will be included as part of the budget presented for decision to Cabinet and subsequently Full Council over the next few months. The Council recognises that this needs to be delivered at pace and that all political groups will need confidence that savings can be delivered. There has been a focus on the delivery of savings in the current financial year but all groups want to have certainty on the delivery and that progress can be demonstrated.

Officer led workshops undertaken across all directorates have progressed this work using benchmarking data and challenge and, for Adults, the external support from our transformation partner, Newton. However, to date there has been limited wider political engagement and this needs to be a key strand of the next stages of work. This has been reflected in feedback from the Improvement Panel to push back publication of the draft budget to December which has been discussed and shared with Members.

Representations on Directions

The Council recognises the seriousness of the issues identified and the role of appropriate external intervention in securing improvement. These representations seek to ensure that the Directions provide a clear and effective framework for delivering sustainable improvement.

In particular, the Council considers that the final intervention arrangements should:

- Enable the Council to deliver value for money for local residents and deliver financial sustainability.
- preserve local democratic and managerial responsibility wherever this is consistent with securing Best Value.
- establish clear accountabilities between the Administration, Council and Commissioners.
- build upon improvement action already under way.
- provide an objective route to progressive de-escalation as sustainable improvement is demonstrated.
- Protect the unique and specific identity of Bedford Borough

The Council strongly supports the principle which states that the Council should continue to lead and deliver its own improvement wherever possible, with Commissioners providing oversight, challenge and support and exercising their powers to secure improvement.

The Council supports the development and implementation of a comprehensive Improvement and Recovery Plan to consolidate, strengthen and accelerate existing improvement activity, with clear outcomes, milestones, ownership, evidence requirements and measures of successful delivery. Clear and transparent criteria for assessing the adequacy and delivery of the plan would support a shared understanding of expectations.

In relation to Direction 2, the Council has already simplified the governance arrangements in relation improvement. The Mayor and Group Leaders now sit on the Improvement and Assurance Panel and a new Chair, Kim Bromley-Derry, has been appointed.

The Council supports a comprehensive assessment of its capacity and capability, which is included in the work being led by the Deputy Chief Executive. Sustainable improvement requires adequate corporate and service capacity, supported by a financially sustainable approach.

The Council supports regular formal reporting to Commissioners on progress against the Improvement and Recovery Plan. Wherever practicable, drawing on the same financial, performance and assurance information used by the Council would support consistent reporting and a shared view of progress.

The Council confirms that will put in place the support for the Commissioner Team and will engage fully and constructively.

The Council particularly welcomes the statement in the proposed package that, where Commissioners are satisfied that the Council is improving at a rate faster than anticipated, the Secretary of State will consider de-escalation. The Council asks the Secretary of State to establish, following appointment of Commissioners, objective criteria against which the case for reducing intervention can periodically be assessed.

Appendix B

Labour Group Statement

The Bedford Borough Labour Group strongly endorses the findings of the Best Value Inspection and recognises the seriousness of the challenges facing our Council. We believe this report must be a turning point, not an opportunity for further political division. As elected representatives, we have a collective responsibility to restore confidence in the Council, strengthen its governance, improve financial accountability and deliver better outcomes for residents.

We are committed to working constructively with the Government, appointed Commissioners, Council officers and colleagues across all political groups to achieve meaningful and lasting improvement. This must include stronger cross-party engagement, more effective scrutiny, greater transparency and clear mechanisms for accountability, while safeguarding the democratic rights of residents and the legitimate role of elected councillors in holding the administration to account. Political differences will remain, but they must never become a barrier to responsible decision-making or the delivery of essential public services. Our priority is not to defend the failures of the past, but to help build a Council that is accountable, financially sustainable and worthy of the trust of the people of Bedford Borough.

Appendix C

Green Group Statement

The Best Value Inspection report makes uncomfortable reading, highlighting the need for real change in how Bedford Borough Council is run. We know Bedford is not alone in facing financial pressures. Years of underfunding, and the spiralling costs of privately provided statutory services have left councils struggling nationally, but those problems cannot excuse failures in local governance and financial oversight.

As Greens, we believe in transparency, genuine collaboration and putting people before political interests. The route forward must be built on openness, accountability and proper scrutiny. We will work constructively with the commissioners, officers and councillors across all parties, but this cooperation will not mean avoiding difficult questions, nor shielding those in power from criticism. We must not lose sight of those whose well-being depends on the Council. Balancing the books matters, but so does protecting vulnerable people, tackling inequality and ensuring that the cost of recovery doesn't fall on those least able to afford it, or diminish their services.

Our residents deserve better, and we intend to fully play our part in making that happen.

Appendix D

Conservative Group Statement

The Bedford Borough Conservative Group recognises the importance of the Best Value Inspection findings and the assessment of the challenges facing the Council. These are significant, longstanding financial, governance and organisational challenges that will require sustained effort and clear accountability.

We accept our part in the collective responsibility needed to lead the Council's recovery. We recognise many of the challenges identified by the Inspectors, in particular the need to strengthen financial management and improve governance. While progress has been made, we fully acknowledge that further improvement is required, and the inspection reinforces the urgency of this work.

We are determined to build upon the measures already underway, implement the inspectors' recommendations and work constructively with councillors across all political groups, officers, the Government and any appointed Commissioners. Political differences must not stand in the way of the improvements residents expect and deserve.

Our priorities remain to restore financial sustainability, strengthen accountability, improve the Council's culture and demonstrate that through measurable progress for residents that will deliver meaningful, lasting improvement.

Appendix E

Liberal Democrat Group Statement

The Best Value Inspection has highlighted significant failings across Bedford Borough Council and has found that the Council is "failing to meet its Best Value Duty." Government inspectors said they "have no confidence that the necessary improvement will be secured without external intervention" and have found the council in "a difficult and deteriorating position." We recognise this report and its findings which follow an extensive inspection by independent Government inspectors who were sent in as a result of the financial crisis unfolding at the Council. For those who care passionately about Bedford Borough and all its residents and businesses it has been hugely distressing to see the council descend into this mess.

The inspectors highlighted other concerns – including some addressed to all Councillors – which need to be tackled head-on and which we will all shoulder the responsibility of addressing, some of which are not covered in the full response above. What the Council now needs is responsible, effective leadership to steer us out of this situation, restore public confidence, fix our broken services, and deliver an ambitious vision for Bedford Borough.

We should all accept the recommendations in the report and take responsibility to move forward and take action on these recommendations. For those of us committed to serving residents and delivering services, it is the best way out of the mess that has been created. What needs to be at the heart of the Council's response is care for residents and our Borough and we will continue to work with others to ensure that real change is delivered.