



**BEDFORD**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

# ***THE PERFECT SETTING***

How Bedford borough is creating  
the best environment for business



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*Dave Hodgson, elected mayor of Bedford*

#### Bedford's business case

CONNECTIVITY...	SKILLS BASE...	OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUSINESS...	A GREAT PLACE TO LIVE...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessible within two hours by half of the UK's population with new dual carriageway linking A1 and M1.</li> <li>• 35 minutes to Central London by train and close to Luton airport.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 50,000 students within 30 miles with top class education at all levels.</li> <li>• Almost one in three local people are educated to degree level.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 400 acres of business land either identified or in the planning process.</li> <li>• Centrally located in a technology &amp; innovation corridor.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• House prices are 13% below the regional average.</li> <li>• Historic town on the River Great Ouse with great shopping and buzzing arts and culture scene plus a myriad of rural villages spread across the borough's countryside.</li> </ul>

If bets were being taken on Britain's next big growth hotspot, the odds would be pretty short for Bedford. In fact, any sensible bookies will have closed the book by now.

Located just 35 minutes north of London by train and with excellent road links to the A1 and M1, it has below average house prices, a highly skilled workforce, jobs growth at more than double the national average and an abundance of business land ready for development. Its town centre is undergoing something of a renaissance and a major waterfront project will utilise the stunning River Great Ouse that runs through Bedford and is renowned for its rich rowing heritage.

Neighbouring Milton Keynes may well be able to boast that it's currently the UK's fastest growing town, but Bedford is hot on its heels and has a bit more history on its side. It's no new town though – devolution came to the borough 849 years ago in the form of a royal charter, the second oldest after Oxford.

Bedford's industrial heritage stretches back more than five centuries taking in everything from lace making to engineering. But the town isn't dwelling on the past and is now playing its part in driving forward cutting edge industries at the centre of The Golden Triangle between London, Oxford and Cambridge.

Its location in the UK's 'super region' of the greater

south east offers many competitive advantages, although it would be wrong to assume that Bedford can simply lie back and watch the investment come flooding in. Being in a major growth area means you're surrounded by towns and cities who are all vying to make sure they are the ones major employers choose to locate in.

Up until 2009, Bedford just wasn't competing. Since then it's had a succession of large firms move in and things are progressing so quickly its glossy brochure of strategic business sites, reaching its third edition, is out of date as soon as it printed. So what spurred the change?

Philip Simpkins, chief executive of Bedford Borough Council (pictured middle, opposite page), has no doubts as to what the catalyst has been. 'The best thing that's happened here is becoming a unitary in 2009,' he explains.

Formerly the council's director of finance, he describes the years running up to becoming a unitary authority as a 'war' within a two-tier system with opportunities being missed while neighbouring areas thrived from their greater freedom.

'One thing that became apparent to me during that process was since 1997, when Luton became a unitary, inward investment in Bedford had been virtually non-existent. Developers would be pushed from pillar to post between planning and highways.'

Within months of becoming CEO at the new authority,

he was joined by newly elected mayor Dave Hodgson, who has taken the economic development and regeneration portfolio ever since. With a shared vision for boosting Bedford's local economy, the borough hasn't looked back under their leadership.

'In the last five years we have been playing catch up and I think we have now caught up,' says Mr Simpkins. 'For example, we've brought B&Q here – I can't believe a town the size of Bedford didn't have one. There's also been Morrisons, Waitrose and many others.'

The town centre now has the lowest proportion of voids in the east of England, standing at just 5%, and there has been a 9% rise in footfall over the last year.

'We're getting back up to speed. I think we genuinely are open for business.'

'I know a lot of councils say they are but we work closely with key developers to make things happen.'

Bedford has had to rebuild its reputation since going unitary. The attitude across the development industry was 'just don't go to Bedford,' admits Mr Simpkins, who compares it to someone going into a shop and having a bad experience. 'You just don't go back if that happens.'

But its image is changing fast thanks to the council's proactive stance.

It's all part of the One Team approach adopted by Bedford and spearheaded by Mayor Hodgson and the





# Open for business

Strong, accessible leadership and a commitment to local growth are fast making Bedford Borough Council the local authority to do business with

CEO, who has also wrapped the head of economic development role into his team to drive home the borough's commitment to growth. A cross-service officer development group has been established to ensure any council activities that are site and development focused are carried out in a joined up way, led by the chief executive. The intention is to provide a united front and clear message to business that Bedford is a great place to locate and won't involve layers of bureaucracy to get there.

That means making sure the council's top brass – and heads of economic development and planning – are easily accessible to interested employers. Regular 'business breakfast' meetings and events with commercial agents have helped to build confidence and the One Team approach is paying dividends with the arrival of firms such as Vision Modular Systems and Lantmannen Unibake. They join longstanding Bedford companies like Unilever, Fujifilm and Charles Wells.

'Because we're not in a European development area or an enterprise zone we are not in a position to offer financial incentives,' says Mr Simpkins. 'So it's about selling the place, cajoling people, promoting the many good points.'

There are 25 strategic sites listed in Bedford's latest business brochure with some, like Elms and Viking Industrial Estate, well established while others are ready to develop. Because of its enviable connectivity the borough

has attracted numerous distribution depots but needs to address its lack of high quality office space to bring in more blue chip firms.

'We are seeing some speculative build in terms of sheds but not offices,' says Mr Simpkins. 'You have to have them signed up before anyone will apply for planning permission. It's all about sites, not buildings. Our approach is to find sites for businesses and to make it easier for them.'

At the forefront of selling the borough to developers, agents and businesses is Mayor Hodgson. A former businessman himself and Bedford resident since the age of nine, he admits that being an elected mayor brings a certain gravitas and he will use his position to oil the wheels of investment – even if it means pulling on the mayoral 'bling' to impress overseas delegations.

'It has a resonance, people know who to go to,' he says. The important thing is to make it clear to businesses that there aren't layers of local government red tape to wade through, he says, and that – with the exception of planning issues – the mayor will intervene if they find their path blocked.

'If we hear about someone who is interested in coming here, myself and the chief executive will go to see them. That's important. We want to find out what they do and also what we need to offer. It's about the wrap around services we can offer them.'

One example he gives is 'The Jobs Hub' – working with Jobcentre Plus to line up candidates for new openings to help speed up an employer's recruitment process. When a new restaurant was opening in the town recently, all 127 applicants turned up for interviews – something owner Whitbread had never witnessed before.

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'But the number one priority is we have to look after the businesses that are already here. We can't create all of the jobs we're aiming for through new businesses. If we look after our existing businesses they will then say it's a great place to do business and hopefully attract others.'

Included among Bedford's brochure of strategic business sites is one of the town's most notable landmarks – the huge Cardington sheds that were once used to construct airships and are now used to film Hollywood blockbusters as well as accommodating a new hybrid airship. During shooting for the latest Batman movie, Hodgson was able to joke that he was also the Mayor of Gotham City.

As far as making Bedford a place to do business is concerned, it's clear Mayor Hodgson and Philip Simpkins are proving to be a dynamic duo.





Mayor Dave Hodgson visiting Fujifilm's base in Bedford

## Matching skills with jobs

**B**eing a rapidly growing borough brings with it added pressures on local services – school places being among the most prominent.

It explains why Bedford Borough Council has created space for an extra 3,000 pupils over the last four years and has the same number again in the pipeline thanks to investment in new buildings and facilities that will top £48m by next year.

The council's proactive stance has won praise from Dr Peter Hansford, the government's chief construction adviser, who said recently: 'Replicating the approach pioneered in Bedford Borough across the UK could be truly beneficial for local communities and enhance the quality of the education we are providing.'

Read through any of Bedford Borough Council's growth strategy documents and you'll find education and skills feature prominently. But it's as much about matching the skills to local opportunities as it is raising standards.

With the sixth best lower and primary schools in the country and around 30% of the population educated to degree level, it could be argued attainment is less of an issue here than in many areas. While Bedford continues to push for even higher standards, the biggest challenge is to keep talent within the borough and provide local employers with the skilled workforce they require.

That's why the borough stages breakfast meetings between students and businesses where young people can find out about the opportunities on offer.

And the borough's growth and skills board brings together the mayor, chief executive, head of economic development, schools, college, University of Bedfordshire and employers to talk about whether provision is meeting employers' needs.

It's all part of addressing what chief executive Philip Simpkins calls a 'mismatch' between the courses on offer and the needs of business.

'We need to retain those skills workwise in the borough rather than people travelling for work to London or elsewhere. It's about aligning those skills with the demands of employers.'



## On the move

Major developments in Bedford and beyond are establishing the borough as a great place to work, rest and play

**M**ayor Dave Hodgson describes the Great Ouse as Bedford's 'jewel in the crown'. And it's on the banks of the river where some of the biggest changes are taking place in the town.

The former town hall, old council offices and a car park have been demolished and Riverside North is taking shape. The £50m development will see a hotel, cinema, restaurants, apartments and landscaped public spaces created in what the council hopes will add a new dimension to Bedford's offer to residents and visitors.

Close by, a state-of-the-art bus interchange, opened this year, has replaced outdated facilities described by Mayor Hodgson as 'an embarrassment' and has breathed new life into an important area of the town centre and better equipped Bedford for its rapidly growing bus use.

Elsewhere, a Townscape Heritage Initiative is helping to refresh the historic High Street area and most recently the oldest building in St Paul's Square, built around 1460, has been restored to create town centre homes. There are some 470 shops and major redevelopment schemes in the pipeline to improve the retail offer further.

Together with museums and theatres, it's easy to see why Bedford is becoming an increasingly popular place to live and work.

But an equally important factor is its connectivity. Creating a dual carriageway on the A421 link from Bedford to the A1 and M1 brings both within 10 minutes. A planned £1.5bn expressway linking Cambridge, Bedford, Milton Keynes and Oxford will enhance those excellent connections and is expected to accelerate the growth of jobs and

new homes. Fast rail links mean London is just 35 minutes away and a multitude of other major towns and cities are within two hours' reach. East West Rail – a partnership between Network Rail and local authorities including Bedford – will eventually establish a strategic link connecting East Anglia with central, southern and western England. It will bring fast links between Bedford and fellow growth areas such as Aylesbury and Milton Keynes.

And it's not just the physical connectivity that gives Bedford an edge. Thanks to sustained investment over the last two years, superfast broadband is heading towards 100% coverage.

One aspect of the borough both Mayor Hodgson and chief executive Philip Simpkins are always keen to highlight to prospective employers is the variety on offer to their workforces. Beyond culturally diverse Bedford are the small adjoining town of Kempston, more than 60 villages, 560 miles of countryside footpaths and 30 miles of waterways – 2,350 acres of accessible green space in total.

These are all vital factors in attracting businesses to the borough, says Mayor Hodgson, who believes jobs growth is king.

'I see it as key to the town – get growth in jobs and everything else falls into place: leisure services have more people coming to them, more people go to the shops and in turn we get a better range of shops. We can already see that Bedford is on the move with a new bus station in place after people saying for 30 plus years that it was the worst thing about Bedford.'

The borough saw jobs growth of 10% between 2000-10 – way above the national average of 4% – and that trend looks set to continue.