

Flitwick Town Council

Flitwick Town Council Strategy 2017 - 2019

Developing our Town for the Future.

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Throughout this document are references to 'we' and 'the council'. In the context of this strategy these mean the 17 elected independent councillors of Flitwick Town Council who own the vision and have signed up to the ambition and ways of working described. This is not to take away from the essential role of the Town Council Staff who will be responsible for most, if not all, of the implementing. Where we reference 'Flitwick Town Council' or 'the Town Council' we mean the combined efforts of the staff and councillors.

Flitwick Town Council Strategy 2017-2019

Developing our Town for the Future.

1. Introduction

This Strategy sets out the broad vision and ethos of Flitwick Town Council. This vision sits within both the wider and the local context. It provides the detail of where we want to get to and how we should get there. It aims to provide the framework within which the community, other councils, the voluntary sector and business can partner with Flitwick Town Council over the next 2 - 3 years.

The strategy provides enough detail to prepare annual work plans and budgets – while being flexible enough to seize new opportunities as they arise.

2. Vision:

‘To make Flitwick a great place to live, work or visit in Bedfordshire’

3. Mission:

‘To deliver services to our community efficiently and effectively’

4. Key objectives:

- A. Consistently deliver high quality services
- B. Communicate effectively with all stakeholders
- C. Ensure value for money in all operations
- D. Recruit and retain a high quality workforce
- E. Improve community development and service provision
- F. Provide activities and events to benefit all parts of the community
- G. Provide high quality conference, meeting, office and function facilities

5. Strategy context

This strategy describes our vision of a town which does not just rest on its laurels but looks for, and tries, new ideas and ways of doing things.

A place that is proudly independent and which puts local solutions first, but is also outward looking, seeking to build and maintain connections with the wider world.

We aspire to be a town which makes decisions with the long-term in mind and a Council looking to improve the lives of generations of residents to come and not one that adopts quick fixes aimed at electoral success.

5.1 The wider picture

Flitwick is not independent from wider national and international events and change. Local Community groups have already taken action in relation to refugees and food banks – we may be asked to do more.

While climate change may not directly impact beyond some increases in limited local flooding and more extreme temperatures, the increased global focus on protecting the environment and improving sustainability has a local context which needs to be taken account of within the services that the Council delivers locally.

Closer to home the National Government continues to pursue a policy of austerity. The full impact on all public services – health, education and social care included - will continue to dominate this strategic period. The decline in services increasingly fall on all aspects of society but especially the disabled, the old, the unskilled, the poor and the unemployed. Continued deep cuts to Central Beds Council budgets mean they will be able to implement increasingly less, beyond the legal minimum.

5.2 The local context

For at least 6 years Flitwick Town Council has taken the decision to protect its services by continually raising its Precept (Local Council Tax). We cannot expect to continue this in the future without the backing of residents who live in the area and businesses that operate in the Town. With more houses being built there will be an automatic related increase in total tax funding in the next few years, so raising individual banding rates may not be necessary. To gain increased clarity on this matter, we need to improve the channels of communication with all interested parties so that we have a clear mandate to deliver against agreed expectations, prioritising the use of the available budget.

During this strategic period, many of the new houses identified in the Central Beds Councils Local Plan will continue to be built and occupied. The current Flitwick population of over 13,400 is growing fast with significant housing developments already being build and others planned. This continued expansion will put significant additional pressure on a town centre constrained by geography; roads (for both travel and parking); on schools; health provision; transport; leisure and sports provision and on employment. As a Council we need to use the influence that we have to try and provide a degree of control over the balance of housing, infrastructure and employment opportunities, but ultimately decisions on these key aspects will lie outside the town.

Older more traditional employment opportunities are fading although they are being replaced by service industries, and an increase in small businesses.

The likely further development of the Industrial areas in the town and the proposed retail elements of the Town Centre Regeneration Scheme show the popularity of our location if land and premises become available in the right location.

Flitwick continues to have low unemployment, but it remains a significant employment challenge to prevent Flitwick's expanding population migrating to work elsewhere. So, there is a distinct danger that Flitwick will increasingly develop as a commuter town, making social cohesion more difficult.

We enter this strategic period with a generally low but increasing crime rate, a history of civic pride and an attractive local reputation as a welcoming place to live. However, the scale of the increasing population could put great pressure on the 'coherence' of Flitwick as well as its infrastructure. How the Town Council and the residents of Flitwick respond to this will be a key challenge if we are to build and retain a coherent town spirit.

5.3 The core of our strategy.

A central theme underpinning the council's approach will remain a focus on developing a great town to both live and work in.

What we do generally falls into three areas:

Improving Wellbeing: Encouraging a flourishing and active community of people and organisations who work together for mutual benefit.

Increasing Prosperity: Promoting a thriving business community, connected with each other and with the town, providing employment and prosperity.

Protecting the Environment: Maintaining and improving the attractiveness, variety and accessibility of the town's green spaces.

Wellbeing, prosperity and environmental sustainability are intrinsically interlinked. For example: we will look to focus business support in ways that enhance ethical, environmentally-sensitive business practice – strengthening the business, wellbeing and environmental sustainability together. Similarly, many projects which enhance wellbeing also enhance green spaces.

6. Our approach.

6.1 General context

We need to be bold when faced with local opportunities and future looking in initiating projects with a longer term goal. Unconstrained by any party-political agenda and without manifesto promises to maintain, we are free to respond to identified needs and make decisions on the basis of what is best for Flitwick. We will take opportunities as they emerge.

We will campaign, lobby and lead. We will support and champion causes that enhance the continuing sustainability, prosperity and wellbeing of the town and argue against those which erode these.

6.2 Staffing

We will ensure that Flitwick Town Council Staff have a wide range of skills and experience, draw on the expertise and guidance of councillors and work closely with individuals, groups and businesses within the town. The retention and recruitment of a motivated and committed staff is paramount to the successful delivery of the Town

Council's services and activities. We must ensure the staff are fairly rewarded, well treated, properly trained and suitably supported in the delivery of their duties.

We will not pay less than the 'living wage' and we will encourage our suppliers to do the same. Where appropriate we will also continue to employ apprentices.

6.3 Communication

We will encourage you to get involved. Your participation and engagement need to be more central to the thinking and approach of the council if we are to deliver more collective and connected community benefits. Staff will remain dedicated to expanding and improving this approach.

Our Annual Town Meeting allows us to demonstrate what we have been doing over the past 12 months and what our future aims are. But we need to ensure that we have open and active communication and feedback mechanisms that enable a quick response to resident's questions and enquiries on a daily basis. We will continue to use established communication mechanisms (e.g. Flitwick Papers, The Town Council Website and, social media, Community Notice boards, posters, flyers etc) to ensure wide awareness, and visibility of the Town Council's activities. We will look at the many emerging options for increased digital engagement using a wider variety of social media channels, other online feedback mechanisms, as well as increasing face-to-face access to Councillors.

6.4 Councillors

We are committed to ensure that our own processes, as a large group of independent councillors, exemplify a commitment to engagement and participation, embracing diversity and allowing debate and challenge. We want neither to stifle discussion nor bury dissent. We aim to work together effectively, be fair and participative and allow space for enthusiasm, learning and initiative.

As individual councillors we have overall duty and responsibility to make decisions that drive forward council business. We must abide by our own code of conduct, as well the common member-officer protocols. Being an active member means not only attending the scheduled meetings of both the council and its constituent committees, but pre-reading the necessary paperwork in order to make fully informed decisions.

6.5 Finances

Our outline strategy will drive the proposed annual precept change, which will be underpinned by the detailed budgets of our three key operating committees (Business Services, Corporate Services and Community Services). Value for money will be a primary motivation for delivering services, alongside sourcing local suppliers where possible.

We will provide a simplified version of our detailed budget, to ensure clear visibility and transparency of our key areas of spending.

The commercial operation of the Rufus Centre is an important source of secondary income for the Council. Increasing the Centre's profitability from both its tenants and the events that it stages is an important element in ensuring its overall financial viability,

as it is used as the location to deliver many of the Council's community services and activities.

6.6 Working with others

We recognise the crucial importance of building and maintaining working relationships with other local government bodies (e.g. Local Parish Councils and Central Beds Council) and will continue to do this, while always putting Flitwick first.

To ensure a cohesive approach to our community activities and services, it is equally important that we also work closely with other local groups and organisations (e.g. Flitwick Village Hall, local religious organisations, local schools, The Library and local businesses), which we will endeavour to do.

We will also try and enable others to be successful. We see the role of the Town Council is also to support and enhance the energy and commitment of its citizens and interest groups. Where appropriate we may provide specific resources, training, support, and advertising, to further their activities. We will be prepared to support the founding of activities and organisations to address the needs of the town.

6.7 Improving how we operate

We will continue to work to our existing core values in how we serve the community: Value for money; Inclusivity; Accountability; Community engagement as well as complying with statutory powers.

However, we will continue to experiment with how we promote and report on Council meetings, to better engage the public. We will assess the success of operating in different ways (e.g. Task & Finish Groups) designed to speed up the work of time constrained committees, adapting or adjusting them as required. The Town Council will regularly assess its operating policies with a view to enhancing our approach if it increases our effectiveness.

7. What are we planning?

7.1 Continue what we've been doing.... and do it better.

The Town Council has a good record of providing a wide range of events and services, across a broad spectrum, when compared with other local areas. So, we will continue to provide and where possible build on these existing traditional events (e.g. The Carnival, Classic Car Show). However, we are very mindful that the town is rapidly growing and we must look to ensure that our activities reflect and support the changing nature of the town and what its residents want. One current example is the 'Resident Driven Projects' initiative where we are asking for the local community to nominate projects that the Council will fund.

7.2 Improving wellbeing

We recognise that 'wellbeing' cannot simply be provided and that we need to work hard to create the conditions that enable both individual citizens and the whole community to flourish.

We will ensure we maintain our own high quality facilities for playing, walking, cycling and open spaces, recognising their wider benefit. We need to actively promote community resources (e.g. Manor Park, Flitwick Moor, Flitwick Woods, The Millennium Park) so that they are used more widely and don't remain hidden assets.

We have two current projects that will enhance our provision over the next few years, as well as serving to protect the town from further overdevelopment.

Over the next six years we intend to develop a new **Country Park and Burial ground** on the outskirts of Flitwick and in spring 2018 we will launch the **Flit Valley Walk** which links in with the wider developments planned as part of Greensand Country (link to their website) to provide a trail through previously inaccessible parts of the Town.

In terms of more general infrastructure projects which will have a major impact on the town, the key **Town Centre Regeneration** project (link to CBC website) being led by Central Beds Council and the **Market Towns** initiative we are jointly working on with them, have the potential to create major improvements for the centre of the Town through multimillion pound investment. We are clear that these projects also raise some local concerns in relation to increased traffic congestion and visual impact of the development, which we will work closely to monitor and ensure that resident's views are fully voiced.

We are also pushing forward a development in **Station Road** which will include much needed older people's accommodation, for those looking to downsize and the replacement of dilapidated community facilities.

The issues with access to Flitwick Station are well documented and the recent CBC consultation exercise has given all concerned a clear direction on which to try and work with both Network Rail and GoVia Rail to improve matters. We are liaising with our local MP to try and ensure the fundamental access flaws are dealt with alongside the other developments.

Concerns with the 'over-development' of the Town as a whole, particularly in relation to increased housing and the further strain it will place on existing Health and Education infrastructure, are not directly in our hands. However, our Planning Committee will look to influence future proposed developments to try and address these key areas, as well as protect remaining 'green areas' in the town, to try and ensure we get the right type and scale of developments in Flitwick. We recognise that accessing affordable accommodation is a crucial issue. This covers two areas: Firstly, the building of houses that are actually affordable to buy and to live in (rather than houses sold at slightly less than market value but still beyond the reach of many) – we will support initiatives that enable, low cost housing including self-build and rental accommodation, as well as encouraging developers to build high quality housing.

Our representative on the Health Centre Patient Group will aim to monitor operations and voice general concerns about the current health provision and the systems that support it.

Providing your feedback to the Bedfordshire Police and Crime Commissioner is also important to highlight local concerns about the lack of police presence in the town, which has a slow but rising crime rate. Offering to support local residents who may wish to initiate either Neighbourhood Watch or Speed monitoring groups has proved fruitless in previous years, but maybe with increased households may come increased interest.

Working closely with the Flitwick CBC Ward Councillors and the relevant Departments at Central Beds Council will help to keep the pressure on to improve local road and parking issues, which sit under their control.

We will also support activity which strengthens social connections and fosters networks and which creates a sense of belonging, such as sports, arts and social clubs. The launch and further development of the **Discover Flitwick website** by the Town Council is an attempt to provide a digital hub for use by local groups, organisations and businesses to promote their activities and services, as well as creating a shop window to advertise the benefits of our town for visitors and investors alike.

To underpin this, we recognise there is a clear need to build a shared – and shareable – understanding of the town’s needs and wants so that the Council can try and match its activities to local demand. Assessing social needs and then providing clear social value is a developing subject nationally and we will investigate if this has relevance to our own services.

7.3 Increasing prosperity

Traditionally, a key role of the Town Council has been to support local business and we recognise the importance of this. Our regular Flitwick Business Club acts as a forum for discussion and local debate, as well as a supply of potential sponsors for our many local events and services. We are looking to establish a supplier strategy which invites businesses that we employ to submit to a framework which clarifies good practice (Socially, economically and environmentally), this could eventually lead to the development of a ‘good business’ award.

We will continue to invest in the development of the Rufus Centre itself, to ensure that it continues to be an attractive venue for commercial events and conference facilities and that it provides good competitive rates and services for our tenants. One area of planned investment is the redevelopment of the **Rufus Centre website** so that it is more mobile friendly and SEO targeted. We are also reviewing options to improve the fabric of the building to increase its usability and to increase revenue. It is a fantastic space that is a significant resource for all the community. There is work and meeting space for existing and fledgling community groups, alongside the town council offices. We offer premises for businesses and access to local information for anyone who needs it, as well as a flexible space to hold ceremonies and celebrations. We intend to safeguard its future continued wide use by working with the Environmental Officer at CBC to ensure that we are a ‘good neighbour’ to the increasing number of residents who are moving into that developing area of the town.

New large scale developments in the Town include what is called ‘S106’ money that can be used to develop appropriate and needed local facilities. These monies are paid directly by developers through to Central Beds Council and should be used to mitigate

the effects to mitigate the effects of any development in the town by providing community amenities. We are investigating what funds are currently held by CBC so that we become more focussed on applying for the funds to be used within our town, rather than in other parts of the county.

7.4 Protecting the environment

Over the next six years we intend to develop a new Country Park, alongside maintaining our many other existing green spaces. This sizable new development is likely to require us to create a more comprehensive long term plan for all our green spaces to provide for both the plants and animals that live there and the people who enjoy them. We recognise there are clearly different needs in the town centre as opposed to the 'wilder' areas of our estate and aim to provide for each appropriately. The Country Park will significantly alter the balance of responsibility from traditional park maintenance to a wider range of needs. For many in the community these 'recreational areas' are the 'face of the council' which receive both the bulk of praise and complaints. We will provide the support necessary to ensure our team can carry out their work and to provide a cleaner greener town.

We do not underestimate the considerable investment, ongoing maintenance and improvement work that will need to be carried out by existing council ground staff and outside contractors to make the 'Country Park' a reality. So, we intend to consult with residents on the detailed plans for the Country Park to ensure that we maximise the considerable opportunity this site offers, ensuring it provides practical and flexible use for future generations.

7.5. Tailoring our ambitions

We recognise the priority of continuing to deliver the services which are valued locally as well as taking advantage of opportunities as they arise. The significant upcoming projects present the council with a real challenge: do we expand on what we do or concentrate on what has been started?

Some needs increasingly arise as a result of public sector cut backs and others out of changes to our local and national economy. Wherever possible we will seek to lobby and persuade the current providers to continue or improve the services they offer. However, we recognise as a last resort there may be occasions where we need to find ways to do it ourselves with new and innovative solutions enabling the community of Flitwick to help itself.

Conclusion

This is going to be a difficult next couple of years, as traditional services deplete and Flitwick itself changes. For many this would indicate the need to retrench, reduce and resign ourselves to making a minimal impact. However, we believe that you have elected us to continue the optimistic and ambitious approach which has proven successful in the past. We believe this strategy meets that need while also providing a pragmatic approach that fully recognises the context in which we operate and the potential for improving the town in the future.