Club Statement: Real Bedford Ceases Lease Negotiations with Mayor Tom Wootton and Bedford Council

Today, I informed the council and Mayor Tom Wootton that we are ceasing all negotiations with them regarding our ground lease. I am also calling for Mayor Wootton's immediate resignation due to his unacceptable handling of this matter, specifically with the effective ban he wants to place on women's football.

This decision follows the receipt of new lease terms last Friday that are not only unreasonable but discriminatory. The proposed terms include a significant, arbitrary increase in rent and oppressive rules that could force us out of our current ground within three years. Most disturbingly, the terms include clauses that ban women from playing football at our ground.

In January, after two years of lengthy negotiations that had concluded with agreed-upon terms, the new Mayor instructed the council not to renew our lease. This instruction came after he met with Bedford Town Football Club representatives and made plans to allocate our facilities to them, a meeting held shortly after his induction as Mayor.

Despite these challenges, we pursued a renewal in good faith, agreeing to virtually all conditions proposed by the council and all extensions they required to the deadline. It seemed we had reached an agreement when Mayor Wootton finally consented to grant us a new 15-year lease on April 26th. However, the terms we received last Friday were shocking:

- An excessive and uncompetitive rent increase, far surpassing that of our neighbours at Bedford Town.
- A planned additional £10,000 annual rent increase from the third year, signalling a clear intent to displace us without providing alternative grounds.
- Vague termination clauses that give the council undue power to evict us.

The most alarming clause states that the council will **terminate our lease** if our ground is used for anything other than **“senior men's first-team football"**, despite the council being fully aware of our ladies' team playing at the ground.

This is a direct attack on our women's team, which has just won a league and cup double and is contenders for a historic treble.

Jill Upton, Chair of Real Bedford Ladies commented "It's outrageous to penalise female football in this way. To reach a reasonable standard in the Women's pyramid, teams have to rely on men's clubs sharing their grounds. It is politics of the 1960s to prevent women playing at a ground on the basis of their gender."

Real Bedford has prioritised women's and girls' football, investing heavily to ensure competitive play and equal opportunities, including a commitment next year to stream all ladies' home games. The actions proposed by the Mayor undermine these efforts and reflect an outdated, misogynistic viewpoint, consistent with his patronage of the exclusive, male-only club of dorks who meet on D'Parys Avenue, perhaps they can invite Joey Barton as a guest speaker.

Mayor Wootton's tenure has been characterised by incompetence and conflicts of interest, demonstrated by his mishandling of the River Festival and meddling in the East West Rail project. He has also imposed a maximum Council Tax increase during a financial crisis while planning a £50m debt-inducing sports complex without a sound business plan. No longer shall the Mayor treat our town like a fiefdom with behaviour more suitable to Moscow than Bedford.

In response, we are also calling out Cllr Sarah-Jayne Gallagher and the Mayor's assistant, Trevor Roff, for their roles in obstructing the progress of Real Bedford. Their actions reveal a conflict of interest that cannot be overlooked. We invited all of these people to visit our club, we even planned a specific day for them, with them only to cancel the evening before and not make new arrangements. We have though seen pictures of them on social media enjoying their visits to Bedford Town, including Cllr Sarah-Jayne Gallagher in a Bedford Town shirt.

These people seem to have forgotten their mandate as elected officials. They have a duty and honour to serve the best interests of the people of Bedford, not their friends, families and cronies. So it is time to remove these rent-seeking vultures from their positions within the council.

In the two years since we started this project:

- Our men's team has achieved back-to-back doubles.
- Our ladies just won the double and are competing for a historic treble.
- We have attracted a $4.5m investment from US billionaires Cameron & Tyler Winklevoss, a record investment for a non-league football club.

- We recently ran an event in Bedford that significantly boosted local business and attracted people worldwide to the town.
- We have invested significantly in youth football, supporting Real Bedford girls and Bedford Park Rangers.
- We established a hardship fund, so money is never a barrier to young people playing football in Bedford.
- We just announced the Bedford Development Fund to invest in local young, talented people in the fields of sport, arts and business, issuing our first grant to a local young racing driver.
- We have been covered by major news publications worldwide, shining a spotlight on Bedford.

We are clearly a net good for Bedford, and any obstruction to us will damage opportunities for people in the town.

We know what the response will be. They will claim the mysoginistic clause was an error and apologise, it is not an error. They will claim the site isn't suitable for two teams, despite offering a 15-year lease and us working with the league on fixture scheduling. They will claim our names are not on the lease, which they have been aware of over two years, which we have agreed that the new lease is required to put our names on. Any attempt to worm out of this should be ignored. The only acceptable action is for these people to resign and for the town to elect competent and unconflicted people who will work in the best interest of Bedford.

We refuse to engage in any more closed-door dealings and insist on transparency and fairness in how this issue is resolved. As such, we will now engage with The FA and our lawyers.

We acknowledge the efforts of council CEO Laura Church and the planning department, who worked hard to resolve this in difficult circumstances. We also thank Alan Young from Beds FA for his support over the months on this issue

These disgraceful acts will not undermine Real Bedford. We remain committed to fighting for our club and for the town.

For further inquiries, please contact us at **hello@realbedford.com**.
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Chairman
Real Bedford Football Club