



Local Plan 2032

Planning for the future

**Bedford
Town Centre
Discussion Paper**

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'Planning for the future'

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Introduction

Bedford Borough Council is preparing a new local plan that will identify the amount and location of new development that will be needed until 2032. The local plan will also contain planning policies that will be used to help make decisions on planning applications.

The Council is asking the public about the main issues that the borough faces. The comments we receive will be used to help us write the draft local plan. We intend to publish the draft local plan later this year when we will invite comments from the public. Any representations we receive will be sent to the Secretary of State who will carry out a formal examination of the draft plan before it is finally adopted, probably in 2016.

However, before we draft the plan, we would like to discuss with key stakeholders what it should say about Bedford town centre. The new local plan will replace policies in the Council's current plan for the town centre: the Bedford Town Centre Area Action Plan, 2008¹, which now needs updating to respond to new issues.

We have prepared this discussion paper to explore the issues facing the town centre and to consider the approach that the local plan should take. The comments you make at this stage will help us to prepare the policies that will be included in the draft local plan.

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http://www.bedford.gov.uk/environment_and_planning/planning_town_and_country/planning_policy_its_purpose/town_centre_area_action_plan.aspx

Questions for discussion and comment are shown in boxes throughout this document. Please write or email your response to the address given at the end of this paper before 24 February 2014.

Issues facing Bedford town centre

There has been much discussion in the press in recent years about the future of town centres. Some are predicting the end of the “High Street” as we know it and think that there is too much retail floorspace. Others are saying that there should be more community uses and housing in town centres in addition to a good range of shops.

Town centres across the country have seen an increase in the number of vacant shop units. Although some of this increase is no doubt due to recent financial pressures in the national economy, it is also likely to reflect wider pressures for change in retailing such as competition from internet shopping and large supermarkets. Furthermore, Bedford suffers from a retailing perspective due to its proximity to larger centres at Milton Keynes and Cambridge. In Bedford the increase in shop vacancies has been stabilised and recent planning applications indicate that there still is a demand for new shops in Bedford, particularly located out of the town centre where there is more space for large shops with adjacent free car parking. This demand for more shopping floorspace may be further fuelled as population increases over the period of the local plan. Changes to planning rules have made it easier for certain buildings to change to other uses without the need to apply for planning permission. For example, changes from shops to offices or restaurants/cafés, and changes from offices to flats are now permitted development (some of these changes are only allowed for a temporary period).

Through the Citizens’ Panel, residents have identified the following key improvements needed to encourage greater use of the town centre: a better variety of, and better quality, shops, a better bus station and more independent shops.

Bedford town centre is an important destination, not just for shopping, but also for culture and various events. With so many people travelling there, traffic congestion is a key challenge, particularly during peak times and during school terms. Some of this is made worse by traffic passing through the centre but, for those visiting the centre, it is important that there is sufficient car parking available. It is also important that there is good access by public transport and for cyclists. A safe and attractive environment for pedestrians must also be considered.

The issues facing Bedford town centre can therefore be summarised as whether there is too much retail floorspace or not enough of the right type, the range of uses allowed in the town centre, competition, access, congestion and the environment.

Question 1. Do you agree that we have identified the main issues facing Bedford town centre? Are there any others we have missed?

Vision

It is important that we have a vision for how we want Bedford town centre to be in the future. This does not necessarily have to be a new vision: the Council has produced a number of strategies for the town centre such as the Empty Shops Strategy² and the Strategy for Bedford High Street³. However, the vision of these documents is best captured in the Bedford Economic Development Strategy⁴. From this document an appropriate vision that remains relevant for the foreseeable future and therefore could be included in the new local plan is –

The traditional heart of the town centre will have been recreated and its townscape and heritage quality maximised, making it a multi-functional destination for people of all ages at all times.

Bedford's Growth Plan 2013⁵ recognises the critical role that the town centre plays in helping attract and deliver economic growth. It aims to –

Create a distinctive, attractive and multi-functional town centre for the future.

² http://www.bedford.gov.uk/business/economic_development/strategies,_plans_and_research.aspx

³ http://www.bedford.gov.uk/environment_and_planning/planning_town_and_country/planning_policy_its_purpose/high_street_strategy.aspx

⁴ http://www.bedford.gov.uk/business/economic_development/strategies,_plans_and_research.aspx

⁵ http://www.bedford.gov.uk/business/economic_development/strategies,_plans_and_research.aspx

This remains an appropriate objective for the town centre that could be included in the new local plan.

Question 2. Do you agree that these would be an appropriate vision and objective for the town centre that should be included in the local plan? If not how should they be changed?

Strategy

One of the priorities of the Bedford Economic Development Strategy⁶ is to “improve the town centre by delivering new investment and maximising its townscape and heritage quality”. It states that regeneration of the town centre is a key priority and that this requires major investment in key locations of the bus station and riverside areas. Bedford’s retail offer needs to be improved to meet the demands of modern retailers. The High Street in Bedford urgently needs regeneration and restoration to its former glory. The town centre offer must build on its distinctiveness and embrace the changing role of town centres in tomorrow’s society. Getting to and from the town centre must be simple and create a positive impression. We need to:

- Build on the Borough’s key strengths within the town centre – its unique Charter Market status, townscape, heritage and riverside setting.
- Create a distinctive retail experience in Bedford, not competing with other neighbouring areas, but complementing and building on its strengths.
- Redevelop to optimise key sites within the town centre to provide an improved retail and leisure offer alongside improved transport interchanges.
- Improve traffic management to reduce congestion and tackle poor air quality, promote alternative transport options and improve car parking provision.
- Welcome visitors and shoppers to our town.

⁶ http://www.bedford.gov.uk/business/economic_development/strategies_plans_and_research.aspx

One of the aims of Bedford's Growth Plan 2013⁷ is to promote the vitality of Bedford's Town Centre. The Growth Plan will achieve this through a series of key actions. These, together with many practical initiatives already being taken, together form part of the ongoing strategy for Bedford town centre.

Town centre development schemes include:

- Bus station area – £8.8m replacement of the bus station to improve facilities for passengers, together with new public toilets, improvements to shopfronts and landscaping.
- Riverside North – £50m redevelopment to provide a cinema, hotel, flats, restaurants, shops, open space and footbridge over the river.
- High Street improvements – £3m Townscape Heritage Initiative programme to facilitate repairs to buildings and reinstatement of traditional shopfronts, bringing vacant upper floorspace back into productive use.
- Progress Ford site, The Broadway – planning permission for care home.
- Castle Quay / The Higgins, Bedford – new flats, shops and £5.8m museum / art gallery refurbishment recently completed.

Car parking improvements include:

- New surface car parks at Greyfriars and Prebend Street.
- Refurbishment of Allhallows multi-storey car park.
- Two hours free parking on Saturdays and longer opening hours.
- More convenient payment systems at multi-storey car parks.

Transport and access improvements planned for the town centre include:

- Completion of the Bedford western bypass with the A428 – A6 link.
- High Street traffic reduction and environmental improvements.
- Traffic management modelling and review.
- Railway station remodelling.
- New river crossing planned at Batts Ford.

⁷ http://www.bedford.gov.uk/business/economic_development/strategies_plans_and_research.aspx

Other ongoing initiatives that aim to support Bedford town centre include:

- Bedford BID – an arrangement for town centre businesses to identify projects and services that will add value.
- Bedford Town Team Portas Pilot initiative – training for businesses, start up grants, shopfront improvement grants and use of empty shops.
- Bedford Borough Empty Shops Strategy – aims to provide a coordinated response between the Council and key stakeholders in reducing empty shops and finding viable uses for them.
- Markets – Bedford a town of markets initiative.
- Building on key cultural strengths and town centre events in line with the Bedford Economic Development Strategy.

Question 3. Are there any relevant current initiatives for Bedford town centre not mentioned above?

Policy approach

The local plan provides an opportunity to build on these current initiatives and bring planning policy up-to-date in the light of the issues facing Bedford town centre. It will enable a policy approach which recognises Bedford town centre as a destination of choice for a wide range of activities and not just shopping. Although it is not in the Council's power to make specific retailers come to Bedford, we can ensure that there is space for the shops and other uses that want to locate here.

Consolidation of the retail area

- We think that it is important to ensure that the central core of the town centre is kept for predominantly retail activity. By maintaining a cluster of good quality shops this will ensure that there is a successful, efficient focus for retailing in the town centre. Policy could be used to prevent changes from retail use within this defined area.
- Surrounding this central core is a more mixed area of shops, café/restaurants, offices and service uses. It is in this area that most vacant units are found. Given the changes in retailing taking place, it would seem appropriate to take a different approach to planning this area. Policy could be used to encourage a wider range of different uses appropriate to the town centre. Although retail uses would still predominate, other uses could be allowed, such as leisure, community and residential uses in

appropriate locations. This would ensure that vacancies are kept to a minimum, enhance the attractiveness of the town centre and encourage more people to visit.

Question 4. Do you agree with the policy approach of consolidating and protecting a retail core whilst allowing a wider range of uses on its fringes? If not, what approach do you think should be taken?

New retail development

Expected population growth means that there may be a requirement to plan for additional retail floorspace in Bedford. The amount that may be required will be determined in a separate study by consultants employed by the Council. Some of this could be located in or next to the town centre if underused sites are put forward for redevelopment. There may be opportunities to regenerate existing shopping areas if owners agree. Remaining additional floorspace could go to local centres and retail parks in the Bedford urban area. New retail development could provide the larger modern units required by some retail operators.

Question 5. Are there any areas in or near the town centre where you think that new retail floorspace could be provided if needed?

Bedford's riverside

Integrating the riverside environment with the town centre will encourage greater use of this prime asset and will enhance the environment of the town centre.

Other retail issues

The local plan also gives the opportunity to update various other borough-wide retail policies such as for farm shops, speculative retail proposals, change of use proposals, amusement centres, take away restaurants, etc.

Question 6. Do you have any other comments on the policy approach for the town centre and shopping that should be taken in the local plan?

What happens next?

We will be drafting the local plan later this year and your response to the questions in this document will help us to write new policies for Bedford town centre. The Council supports the active involvement of local groups in planning. This could include through neighbourhood planning whereby a neighbourhood forum produces its own statutory neighbourhood development plan. Please contact the Council if you think that a neighbourhood planning approach is appropriate for the town centre.

In addition to the specific questions we have asked, we would also like to hear any other comments that you have concerning planning the future of the town centre.

Please send your response to the questions highlighted in this document and any other comments to:

email – planningpolicy@bedford.gov.uk

*letter – Bedford Borough Council
Consulting Bedford
FREEPOST ANG5840
Bedford
MK40 1ZD*

This is a freepost address and no stamp is required. All responses must be received by 5pm on 24 February 2014.

If you have any questions about the consultation you can also telephone us on 01234 718569.

Questions for response

Question 1. Do you agree that we have identified the main issues facing Bedford town centre? Are there any others we have missed?

Question 2. Do you agree that these would be an appropriate vision and objective for the town centre that should be included in the local plan? If not how should they be changed?

Question 3. Are there any relevant current initiatives for Bedford town centre not mentioned above?

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