BEDFORD
BOROUGH COUNCIL

A unique opportunity to shape the future of Bedford Central Library

Environment and Sustainable Communities

We want your views

Bedford Central Library is at the heart of Bedford Borough's library service. It supports reading and learning, provides study space and digital access, hosts activities and events, and helps connect people with information, opportunities and each other.

As part of developing the draft Bedford Borough Library Strategy, we have been looking at how Bedford Central Library can best meet the needs of residents and communities across Bedford Borough in the future.

Libraries are changing. While borrowing books remains important, our Libraries Needs Assessment has highlighted the importance of the wider role Bedford Central Library plays within the Borough's library network and the growing demand for:

- Services for children and families
- Learning and study space
- Digital access and support
- Community activities and events
- Health and wellbeing activities
- Flexible and accessible community spaces

Bedford Central Library continues to be a valued and well-used facility. However, it was designed for different patterns of library use. The main library is located on the first and second floors, it can be challenging to create flexible spaces for activities and events, and the building is not as visible within the town centre as it could be.

This creates an opportunity to consider how Bedford Central Library could continue to evolve to meet the needs of residents now and in the future.

What does the evidence tell us?

The Libraries Needs Assessment shows that Bedford Central Library plays a vital role in the Borough's library network. It accounts for almost 60% of all library visits, delivers almost half of all library activities and events, provides the largest concentration of digital access, and serves a wide range of users including children, families, students, workers and older residents.

We have an opportunity to develop the Central Library provision and create spaces where activities and services can be run for people of all ages. This will include activities to support children and families, health and wellbeing, learning, and services that help local people with challenges they face.

What are we consulting on?

We are consulting on three possible approaches to the future development of Bedford Central Library. These options represent different ways of responding to the needs identified through the Libraries Needs Assessment and the draft Library Strategy.

We want to understand what you think the benefits, concerns and implications of each option might be before any recommendations are made and any final decisions are taken.

Bedford Central Library today

Bedford Central Library was built in 1972 and is arranged over two floors. There is a small entrance lobby only on the ground floor, with the main library areas located on the first and second floors, including books, study space, public computers, the children's library and local studies.

The building was designed for different patterns of library use and it can be challenging to provide the type of welcoming, adaptable spaces now used for learning, digital support, community activities and services for children and families. The library is also less visible within the town centre than it could be, and the current layout can create accessibility challenges for some people. As with many buildings of its age, it also requires ongoing investment in maintenance and repairs.

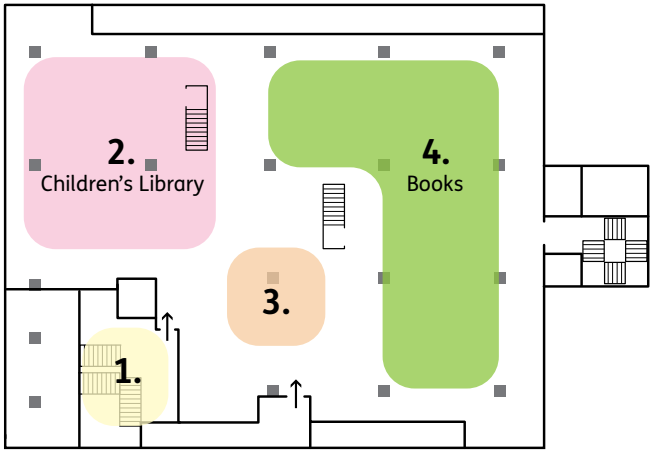
Current library layout

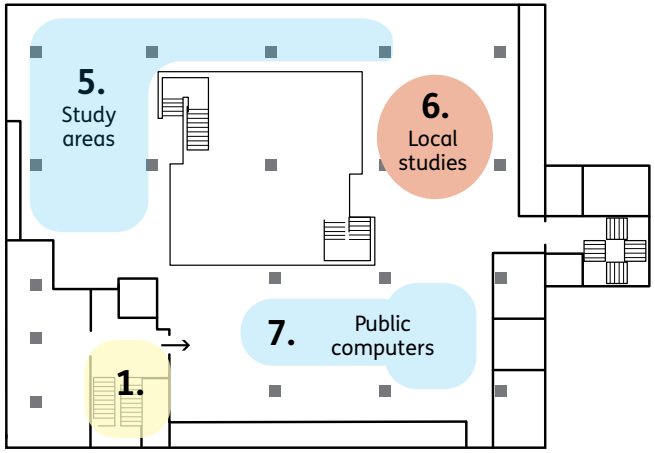
2. The children's library is the most well-used part of the library. Like the rest of the library, it is tired and there is an opportunity to create a larger area supporting a greater range of activities and events.

3. Communal seating area

5. The existing study space is well-used at different times but is not very space efficient. Modern library study areas are flexible spaces that support individual focus, collaborative group work and community learning.

1. The library entrance is at ground floor, with stairs, a lift and escalator to the public library areas on the upper floors. This can present some accessibility challenges and makes the library less visible in the town centre than it could be.





6. Local studies is an importance part of the library offer, but the current area takes up a lot of space compared to the amount of use it gets, and the Council recognises there is some overlap with Bedfordshire Archives.

1. The lobby at ground floor also creates some empty space and can get crowded with buggies and pushchairs at certain times of the week.

4. The current library area is tired and does not make the most effective use of the space. We want to create a library space where people can read, relax and work in a welcoming and comfortable environment, and which can support a range of activities.

7. Public computer provision occupies a significant amount of space, but usage is relatively low compared with the number of computers and the amount of space taken up.

Future development of Bedford Central Library

What are we trying to achieve?

We want to develop a more modern, accessible and flexible Central Library that meets the needs of current and future users. To do this, we have identified three potential options for the future of Bedford Central Library:

- Relocate the library to the Howard Centre
- Develop the library in its current location by moving the main public library to the Ground Floor
- Retain the library in its current location on the first and second floors and improve the facilities where possible.

How would this be funded?

We have identified up to £4.5 million of Local Regeneration Fund (LRF) grant funding that could be used to support the future development of Bedford Central Library, subject to the relevant funding requirements.

All three options have been identified on the basis that they could be delivered within the available grant funding. The options differ in how the funding would be used and the potential benefits and considerations they may present.

The LRF grant funding creates an opportunity to invest in Bedford Central Library that would not otherwise be available.

What do we want to know?

We are interested in understanding:

- What benefits you think each option could provide.
- What concerns you may have about each option.
- Which factors are most important to you when considering the future of Bedford Central Library.
- How well each option supports the needs identified within the draft Library Strategy and Libraries Needs Assessment.
- Whether there are other issues the Council should consider before reaching any conclusions.

There are no right or wrong answers. We want to understand the different views, experiences and priorities of residents, library users and stakeholders. Your feedback will help the Council understand the potential benefits, concerns and impacts associated with each option.

Consultation responses will be considered alongside the Libraries Needs Assessment, Equality Analysis and other relevant evidence before any final decisions are made. Any future recommendations will also be subject to further feasibility work and development of a business case.

Option 1 – Relocate Bedford Central Library to the Howard Centre

What is being considered?

This option would involve relocating Bedford Central Library to a new location within the Howard Centre in the town centre. A new library could be created by combining vacant units and using the connecting mall area to provide a modern, accessible and flexible library in a visible ground-floor location.

The space being considered is smaller than the current main public library areas, at around 915m² compared to around 1,400m² for the main public library floor areas in the current building. However, it would be designed differently to reflect how people use libraries now, with a greater emphasis on accessibility, learning and study space, digital access, community activities, and services for children and families.

A future library in this location would continue to provide core services such as book lending, public computers, study space, activities and events, and a local studies provision. A smaller footprint would mean less space overall for books, but evidence shows that demand is concentrated on particular categories of stock while some areas are used less frequently. The library would continue to provide a broad lending offer while prioritising the books and resources residents use most often and balancing this with demand for other services and spaces.

Under this option, we would look to either lease the existing library building to a third party or make it available for development as part of the Mayes Yard regeneration scheme.

Potential benefits

- Improved visibility within the town centre.
- An accessible ground-floor location.
- Opportunity to modernise the library environment.
- More flexible spaces designed around current library use.
- Improved facilities for children and families.
- Enhanced study, learning and digital provision.
- Adaptable space for activities, events and community use.
- Convenient access to parking and facilities within the shopping centres.
- Opportunity to locate the library alongside other services and businesses in the shopping centres.
- Potential support for wider town centre regeneration and increased footfall.

Potential considerations

- The proposed library would be smaller than the current public library space.
- Less space would be available for books and other resources.
- Decisions would need to be made about the balance between books, study space, digital facilities and activity space.
- Involves moving away from a purpose-built library building into a different type of town centre environment and bringing together spaces that are currently separate through a unified design.
- A change of location and layout may affect how some people currently use the library.
- Future arrangements for heritage and local studies provision would need to be determined.
- Some users may value aspects of the current library building and layout that could not be replicated in the proposed location.
- Any relocation would need to be carefully planned to minimise disruption during the transition.
- Relocating the library would require decisions about the existing library building, and the long-term future of the building and site would need to be determined.

Option 1 – Relocate Bedford Central Library to the Howard Centre

Under Option 1, the library layout would focus on creating a range of distinct but connected spaces that support reading, learning, digital access, community activity and family use.

Design ideas

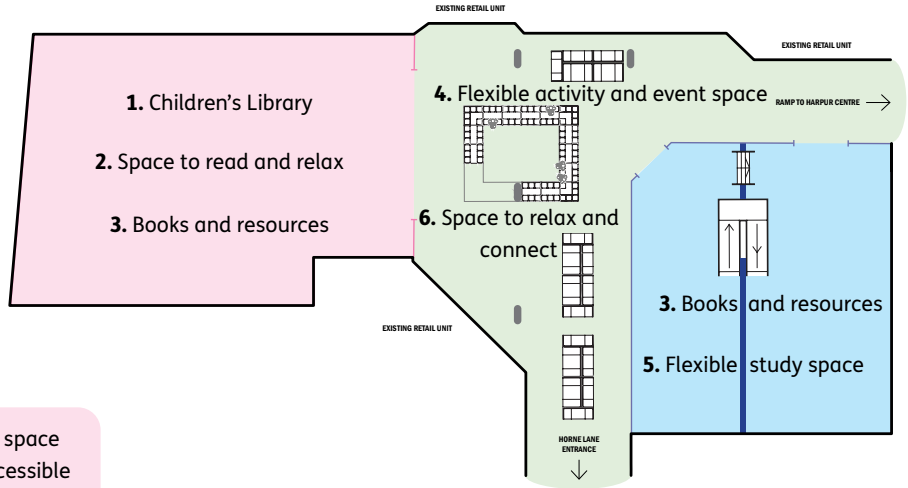
1. A dedicated children's library area, designed to encourage reading and learning from an early age. Open plan and adaptable to allow the space to be used for different activities and events.

Design ideas

4. Flexible and adaptable space with mobile furniture that can be configured for a variety of activities and events.

Design ideas

2. Informal seating areas with comfortable furniture, providing space to study, read, relax and socialise.



Design ideas

3. Main library space in modern, accessible layout, with flexible shelving and furniture.

Design ideas

3. Main library space in modern, accessible layout, with flexible shelving and furniture.

Design ideas

5. Flexible space with desks and furniture for quiet study, collaborative learning and local studies.

Design ideas

6. Seating and space to relax, read and catch up with others

Parking and toilet facilities shared with the shopping centres.

Option 2 - Develop Bedford Central Library in its current location by moving the main public library to the Ground Floor

What is being considered?

This option would involve keeping Bedford Central Library in its current location but moving the main public library from the first and second floors to the ground floor (the area on the ground floor directly underneath the current library areas with a similar footprint to the first floor. The present entrance to Bedford Central Library would form a welcoming accessible entrance through to a ground floor library with windows along the front).

The aim would be to retain the existing building while creating a more visible, accessible and flexible library. It would allow the main library, children's facilities, study space, public computers and community activity areas to be located at street level.

The ground floor provides around 870m² of space and is roughly the same size as the first-floor area of the current library. However, as with Option 1, it would be designed differently to reflect how people use libraries today, with a greater emphasis on accessibility, learning and study space, digital access, community activities, and services for children and families.

Although there would be less space overall for books, the library would continue to provide a broad lending offer while prioritising the books and resources residents use most often and balancing these with demand for other services and spaces.

Under this option, the focus would be on exploring opportunities for alternative uses of the upper floors as part of the wider Mayes Yard regeneration scheme.

Potential benefits

- Improved visibility within the town centre.
- An accessible ground-floor location.
- Opportunity to modernise the library environment.
- Spaces designed around current library use.
- Improved facilities for children and families.
- Enhanced study, learning and digital provision.
- Flexible space for activities, events and community use.
- Opportunity to improve accessibility while retaining the library's established identity and presence.
- Better use of the existing building and spaces.
- Retains and improves the library in Mayes Yard while supporting the regeneration objectives in the area.

Potential considerations

- The ground floor is smaller than the current main library areas.
- Less space would be available for books and other resources.
- Decisions would need to be made about the balance between books, study space, digital facilities and activity space.
- There may still be some limitations relating to the age and design of the building.
- Change of layout may affect how some people currently use the library – some users may value aspects of the current layout that could not be replicated under this option.
- Future arrangements for heritage and local studies provision would need to be determined.
- Work would need to be carefully planned to minimise disruption during the transition.
- Future decisions would be required regarding the use of upper-floor areas.
- The wider building would continue to require ongoing maintenance and investment if it stayed in Council ownership.

Option 2 – Develop Bedford Central Library in its current location by moving the main public library to the Ground Floor

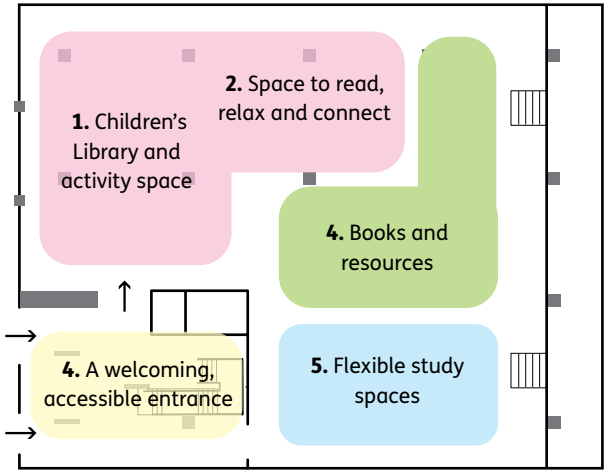
Under Option 2, the library would move to the ground floor of the current building, directly below the current library areas with a similar footprint to the first floor. The present entrance to Bedford Central Library would form a welcoming accessible entrance through to a ground floor library with windows along the front. A new children's library would be at the front of the space, leading through into other books and a new informal seating and study space. There would be new accessible toilets on the ground floor.

Design ideas

1. A dedicated children's library area, designed to encourage reading and learning from an early age. A new event space hosting activities for all ages, including wellbeing and creative activities.

4. Modern, accessible library layout, with flexible shelving and furniture connecting the different areas.

Design ideas



Design ideas

2. Informal seating areas with comfortable furniture, for people to relax and meet a friend. Connects the children's library to the rest of the library spaces.

Design ideas

5. Informal seating and study area with furniture for quiet study, collaborative learning and local studies.

Design ideas

3. A welcoming, accessible entrance leading straight into the library at ground floor level. Light and airy with book displays and a link to the floors above.

5. A small number of library pods for focussed study, meetings, collaborative group work and support sessions.

Design ideas

Option 3 – Retain Bedford Central Library in its current location on the first and second floors and improve the facilities

What is being considered?

This option would involve retaining Bedford Central Library in its current location on the first and second floors, and seeking to make improvements where possible to the layout, facilities and overall customer experience.

The library would continue to provide its current range of services, including book lending, public computers, study space, activities and events, the children's library and local studies provision.

Unlike Options 1 and 2, this option would retain the current arrangement of library spaces within the existing building and would instead focus on improving how the library works in this space. Improvements could include changes to the internal layout, spaces and facilities to make the library more welcoming and easier to use.

Potential benefits

- Retains the library within its existing building and established town centre location.
- Maintains the existing amount of public library floorspace.
- Retains the potential for the same amount of space for books and other library resources as now.
- Retains the current arrangement of specialist spaces, including local studies provision.
- Retains dedicated spaces for different library services and activities.
- Opportunity to improve the layout, furniture and overall customer experience.
- Opportunity to refresh facilities and improve the appearance of library spaces.
- Retains the benefits of a purpose-built library building.
- Maintains a familiar environment for existing library users.
- Retains the library’s established identity and presence within Mayes Yard.

Potential considerations

- This option may provide fewer opportunities to fundamentally change how the library is used and experienced by residents.
- The library would remain less visible within the town centre than a ground-floor location.
- The library would remain on the first and second floors, meaning existing accessibility challenges would continue.
- The current building layout may continue to limit opportunities to create highly flexible community and activity spaces.
- Some existing building constraints would remain despite investment in improvements.
- Work would need to be carefully planned to minimise disruption during the transition – the library would have to close for works to take place.
- The library would continue to require significant ongoing investment in maintenance and repairs.
- This option would provide fewer opportunities to release areas of the building for alternative uses as part of the wider Mayes Yard regeneration programme, and future arrangements for vacant areas of the building would need to be determined.

Option 3 – Retain Bedford Central Library in its current location on the first and second floors and improve the facilities

Under Option 3, the library would remain in its current location on the first and second floors, with improvements made where possible to the layout, facilities and customer experience.

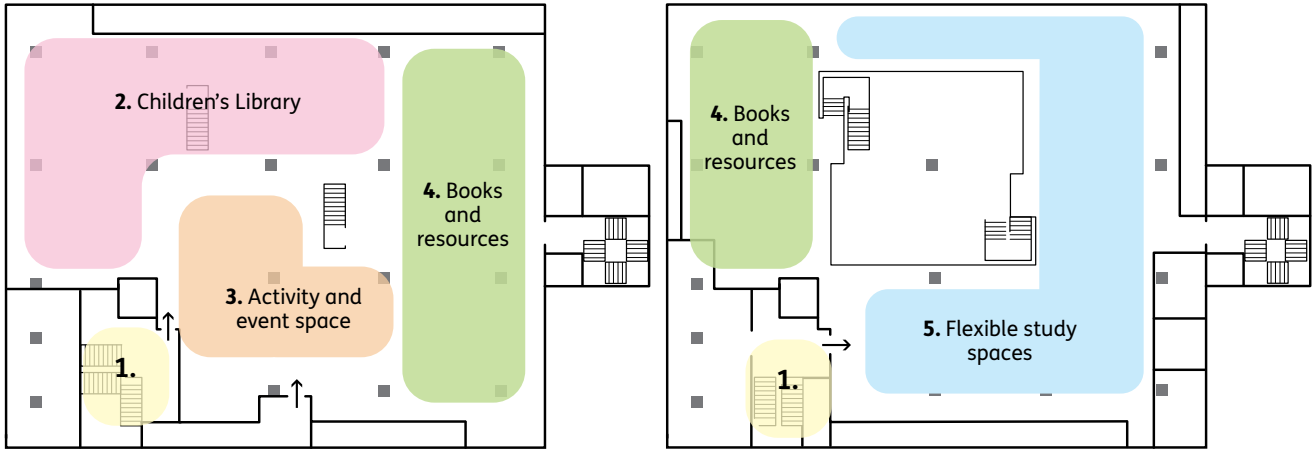
Design ideas

2. A dedicated children's library area, designed to encourage reading and learning from an early age. Open plan and adaptable to allow the space to be used for different activities and events.

4. Informal seating areas with comfortable furniture, providing space to study, read, relax and socialise.

Design ideas

1. The library entrance would remain on the ground floor, with access to the library areas on the upper floors via stairs and lift.



Harpur Square

Design ideas

5 . Informal seating and study area with furniture for quiet study, collaborative learning and local studies.

Design ideas

3. Flexible space with adaptable layout that can be configured for a variety of activities and events.

Design ideas

4. Modern, accessible library layout, with flexible shelving and furniture connecting the different areas.

5. A small number of library pods for focussed study, meetings, collaborative group work and support sessions.

Design ideas

Finding out more

If you would like further copies, a large-print copy or information about us and our services, please contact us at our address below.

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