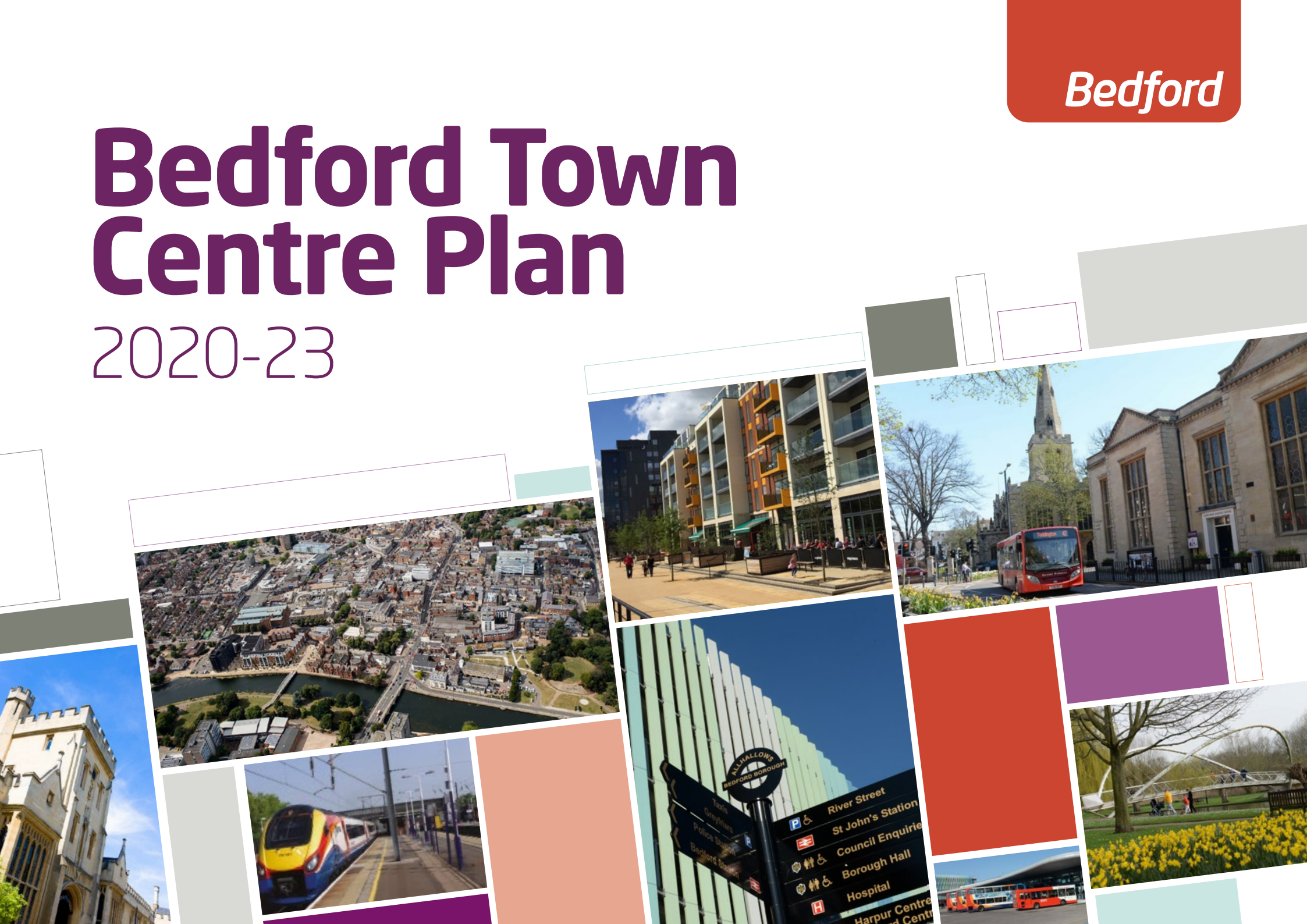


Bedford

Bedford Town Centre Plan

2020-23



Introduction

Introduction by Cllr Henry Vann, Portfolio Holder for Town Centres & Planning

Bedford is our historic county town with a rich and diverse population and history, a significant place in our national heritage, a wide array of cultural assets, technological innovators at our heart, hundreds of markets held throughout the year – including those given to us by Royal Charter, fantastic independent businesses, and accessible shopping areas.

There can be no doubt that high streets nationwide have a fight on their hands. Nationally, a quarter of shops in the high street have closed in just over a decade¹ and nationally footfall has fallen by just over 20% in a decade.² Furthermore, internet shopping and retail in the UK is expected to account for 53% of retail sales in 10 years' time, up from about a fifth in 2019.³

The Covid-19 pandemic is also having a significant effect on our High Streets and on public life as a whole in ways that are foreseeable and unforeseeable. The full effect may be currently unknown but this plan is timely as it seeks to support our vibrant town centre now and into the future as it recovers from the current emergency. So what can we all do together to continue support our beautiful, historic, and diverse town?

In August 2019, we launched a consultation asking you what you most loved about Bedford and what could be done to make you more likely to use the town centre. More than 2,000 people responded directly: Thank you.

The ideas of the people of Bedford Borough and beyond have contributed to this plan and your feedback guides our strategy for our town centre.

What is clear from what you have told us, is that we need to make Bedford Town Centre a destination of choice. Retail is no longer enough. Bedford must celebrate its assets – including its thriving independent sector – with events, markets, retail, residential and office space, a diversification of our town centre to make it accessible and interesting to all, all year round.

There is already so much we are doing, and have done, but we always want to do more. So if you have any more ideas, this plan is not the end but just the beginning, and with the Mayor's Priority Fund for Town Centres open for applications we welcome ideas and suggestions from everyone involved in our thriving town centre.



Henry Vann

Portfolio Holder for Town Centres and Planning

1. How to Save the High Street, Panorama, Saturday 18 January 2020 www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0009v7j

2. ibid

3. Half of UK retail sales will be online within 10 years, The Guardian, Tuesday 9 July 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jul/09/half-of-uk-retail-sales-will-be-online-within-10-years-report-predicts> accessed 30 January 2020

Vision and Statement of Intent

Bedford - a place to live, work, shop, learn and explore.

Bedford town centre has many strengths; our river, independent shops, events and heritage to name a few. Our vibrant and diverse communities and our historical town needs to be celebrated, maximising and displaying Bedford's individuality. These traits are at the heart of our town and we want to harness these and build on them, developing Bedford into even more of a hub for shopping, culture, education, science, leisure and relaxation, in a safe town centre for the entire community.

Key to these enhancements is the environment and surroundings for those spending time in Bedford. We want to make Bedford an even nicer place to spend time by making it even greener and cleaner. We want our town centre to be a place for businesses to prosper and thrive, and for our community to access retail, leisure and services. We want Bedford to be a town that people are proud to call home for their families and businesses, and for Bedford to be a chosen hub for those beyond the Borough.

We will use a variety of ways to deliver our goals, however at the core of it all will be community engagement. Constant and consistent communication between stakeholders and the community are key to developing Bedford into the best place it can be; this is something we identify as imperative to reach our goals.

The world around us is continuously changing and it is essential to look to the future. We need Bedford town centre to be a place that people want to use now and that people still will want to use in the future. High Streets nationally have been faced with immense challenges in the last 10 years from shopping habit changes to Covid-19, but despite these Bedford town centre will still continue to be a prosperous heart of Bedford Borough.

Bedford is already a great place to work, live, shop and spend time, but we want it to be a town that people are proud to call home for their families and businesses, a thriving town of culture, history, industry, leisure, education and culinary delights.

National Context

Town centres and cities around the country are facing extensive challenges. Shopping habits and social attitudes have changed, and as a result, the use of town centres need to evolve. For town centres to remain relevant and as important as they have been historically to society, they need to develop and adapt to these new habits.⁴ Over the past 10 years, the continued preference by consumers of out of town shopping centres and supermarkets along with the rise in internet shopping has resulted in many shoppers selecting these alternative ways to purchase goods over using a more traditional high street.⁵ As a result of the drop in footfall and the change in consumer behaviours, many local branches of nationwide stores have closed down as well as some national chains ceasing to trade entirely.⁶

Global developments in the Covid-19 pandemic have shut down high streets across the country. The lasting impacts of this will be felt for years to come and will accelerate consumer changes, with people having to or preferring to shop online throughout the lock-down and social distancing. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic and its impact means it is hard to predict how deep or what the challenges will be after a return to a “new normal” in our high streets nationally.

High streets and town centres need to offer an exciting alternative to out of town shopping parks with a mix of retail, services and facilities; something that offers experiences rather than being solely retail based, due to the traditional role of town centres not being enough. This need to adapt and alter use of town centres is evidenced by those places where real growth is being experienced.



The government have recently recognised the challenges that town centres are facing nationally, releasing various funding streams to help towns improve.

- **Towns Fund**, focusses on long term economic and productivity growth through investment in connectivity, land use and economic assets.⁷
- **Future High Street Fund**, this relates to plans, that help to reinvigorate high streets from infrastructure, transport and conversion of empty units.
- **Historic High Street Action Zone**, this funding stream is focussed on the historic aspects of high streets, which should be kept in keeping with the history of the town.⁸

4. <https://www.centreforcities.org/reader/city-centres-past-present-and-future-their-evolving-role-in-the-national-economy/>

5. <https://www.centreforcities.org/publication/high-streets-and-town-centres-in-2030/>

6. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/nov/06/high-street-crisis-big-names-job-losses-store-closures>

7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/towns-fund-prospectus>

8. <https://historicengland.org.uk/services-skills/heritage-action-zones/regenerating-historic-high-streets/>

Local Context

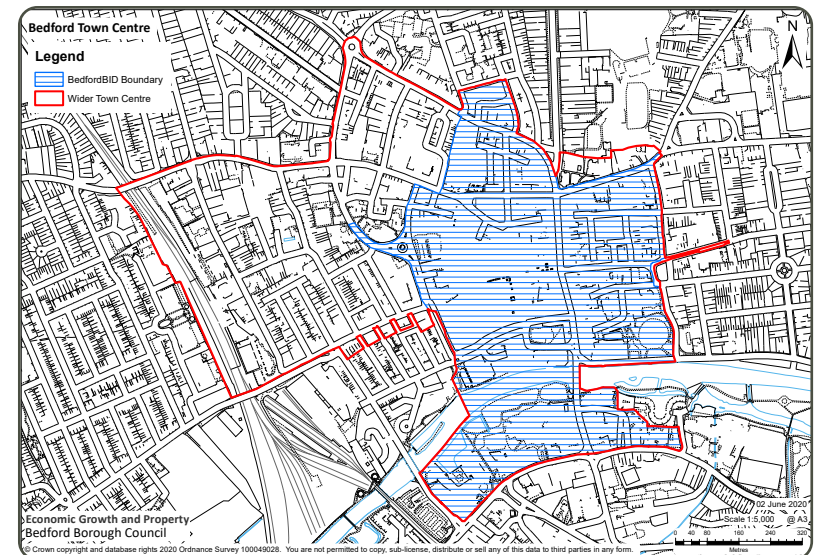
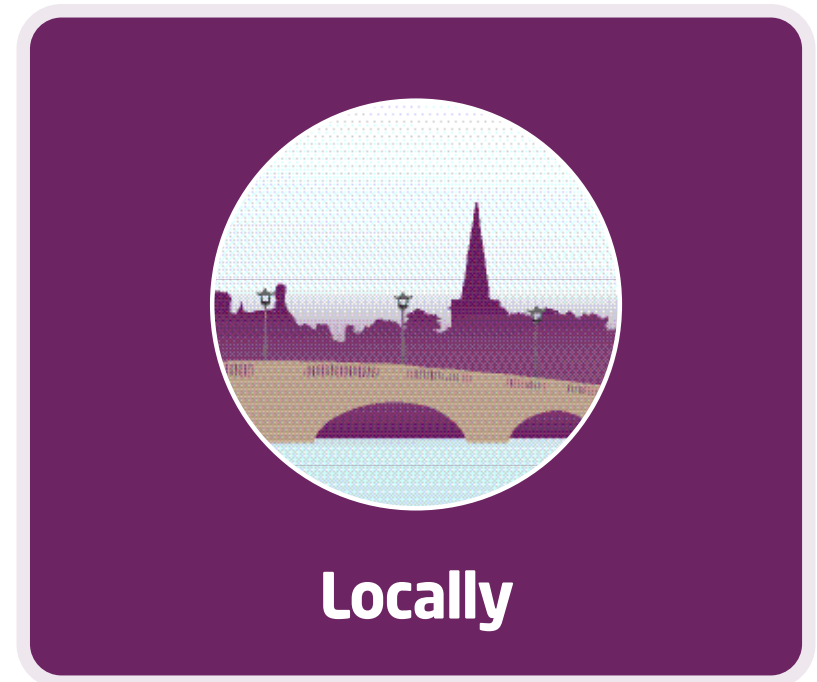
Bedford is a traditional market town situated within a wider Borough which has a population of around 170,000 people and is full of history and culture dating back to Saxon times. The town encompasses a small centre of approximately 1km squared and is currently comprised of a range of local independents and national chain stores, venues and offices.

The town already benefits from a 35 minute train connection with London, and will benefit further from the Oxford to Cambridge Arc development with its location sitting at the heart. As part of this, there will be a new train line from Oxford to Cambridge, with its planned route running through Bedford Midland Station.

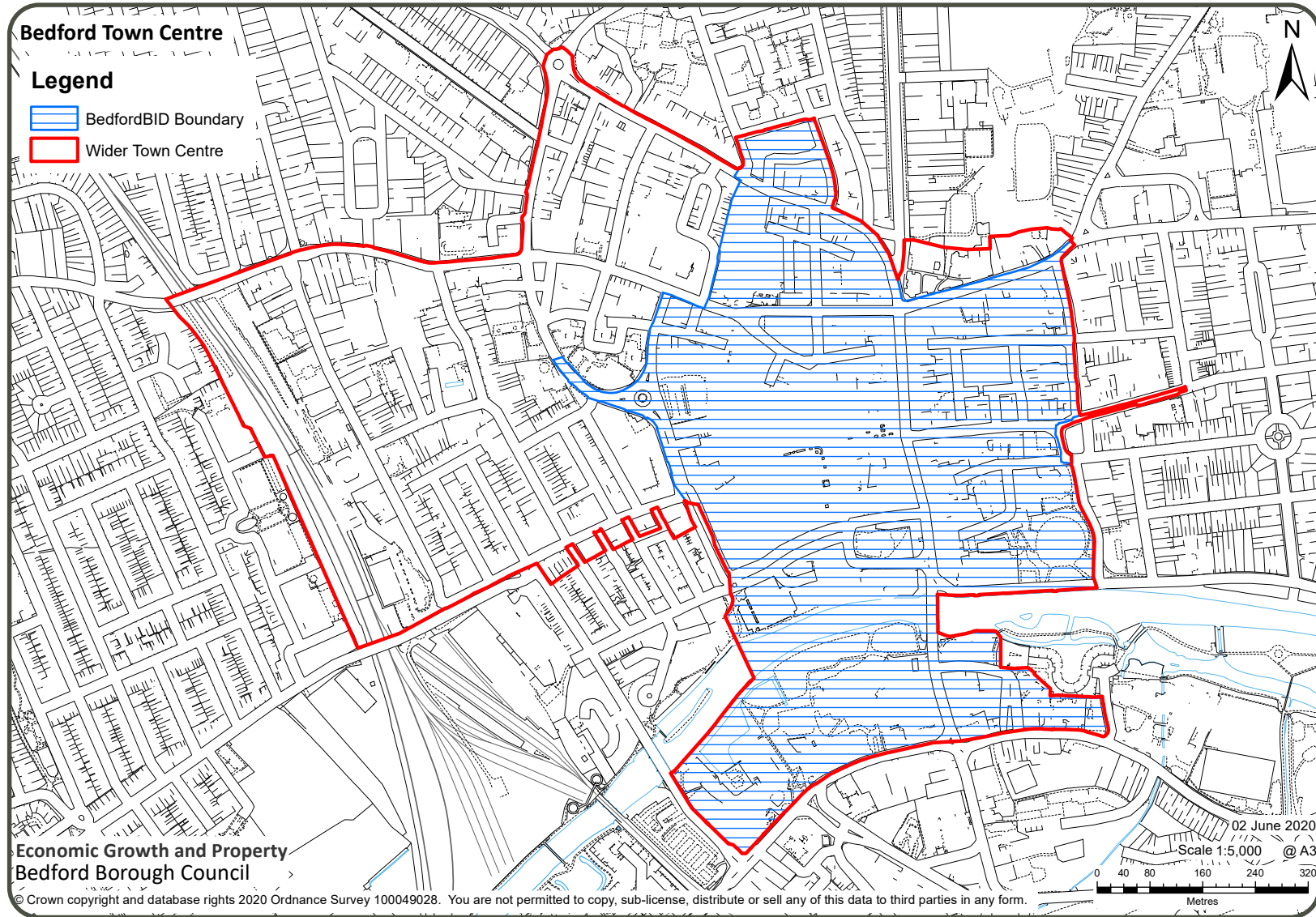
However, Bedford's location means the town has a range of geographical challenges for a traditional high street. Milton Keynes and Cambridge are within close reach with a retail offer that includes big name brands. Rushden Lakes, the A1 retail park in Biggleswade and Bedford Interchange offer a different type of experience for consumers within a reasonable distance; these out of town shopping parks provide an alternative to Bedford's high street.

Locally, there has been an identified priority placed on supporting the town centre and integral strategies and initiatives such as:

- Local Plan 2030: Bedford Borough Council has prepared a local plan that sets out how much growth there should be in the borough in the coming years (housing, jobs and associated infrastructure) and where it should take place.
- One Public Estate (OPE): The One Public Estate (OPE) Programme aims to encourage owners of public sector assets to work together to make better use of their combined assets. Two Masterplans have been adopted for parts of Bedford town centre. The Masterplans are an integral part of the Local Plan 2030.
- Transporting Bedford: Transporting Bedford is an £18 million project to tackle congestion hotspots in Bedford. The project runs over a three-year period between 2018 and 2021 with the aim of tackling those key congestion hotspots, which by their nature are well-used routes through the town, including major improvement work on Bedford High Street.



Local Context Map





Nearly 14m visitors
to town centre in 2018/19



Over 369,000
visits to Central Library,
Corn Exchange & The
Higgins in 2018/19



High profile town
centre venues for
arts and music



One of the **oldest**
Charter Markets
in the country

3,500 car parking
spaces in the
town centre



Bedford Arcade
4 Arcades hosting small
local businesses



62% 
Independent
Businesses



over 75
new business
in 2018/19



£36m mixed-use
Riverside Development



£5m investment
in the Harpur Centre

Consultation Responses

The Town Centre Consultation received over 2,000 responses, through online surveys and town centre workshops, and focused on two key questions:

- **What is your favourite thing about Bedford Town Centre?**
- **What would encourage you, or people you know, to use Bedford town centre more?**

These responses have helped shape this Town Centre Plan.

Consultation Responses: 'What is your favourite thing about Bedford Town Centre?'

Culture and Environment

This category was mentioned the most in 34% of comments.

"Our beautiful Embankment...we should do more things with it"

"I think the Embankment is wonderful and there is a great selection of cafes and restaurants"

"I like the old buildings, the high street has character"

"The evolving cultural centre"

"Little quirks like the faces statues and twinkly steps"

Retail

Over 23% of comments mentioned Retail as their favourite thing within the town centre.

"The number of independent shops is amazing, and much more interesting to browse through them than to go to all the usual chains"

"The range of independent businesses"

"The different markets gives shoppers the opportunity to support local businesses and their produce, e.g. food, crafts, horticulture"

"Picking up a few things I need from either independents or nationwide retailers"

Connectivity

This category was mentioned in nearly 16% of responses.

"The pedestrianised area makes moving from shop to shop easy & relaxed"

"The layout is clever and accessible"

"Bedford Town centre is so accessible and all of the shops are in close proximity to one another"

"It's close to where I live"

Leisure and Entertainment

14% of responses were related to favourite things about Bedford.

"The Riverside restaurant complex has made me come into Bedford a lot more as I like the variety of restaurants and use one of them at least weekly, if not more."

"The pop up soft play and table tennis are a great idea"

"The restaurants, mainly the independent ones"

"Variety of restaurants by the river"

Community

This category was mentioned in just over 1% of responses

"Sense of community"

"Inclusive, clean and friendly"

"Multi-cultural community"

"Familiar people with familiar connections"

"The number of community events and festivals mean there is always something going on at the weekends"

"A vibrant mix of cultures and people"

Miscellaneous

This category was mentioned in nearly 15% of responses.

"Everything"

"Lots going on for a town of its size"

"The work being done by the council to improve the town centre"

"It's still got services like banks, post office etc."

"I think Bedford provides a market town vibe which feels intimate"

Consultation Responses: "What would encourage you, or people you know, to use Bedford town centre more?"

Retail

Over 45% of people mentioned retail as something that would bring them into the town.

"More varied selection of shops, large departmental and independent"

"More high street brands coming back to the town centre"

"Better variety of shops"

"More small retail units showcasing local independents businesses and artisans"

"Better range of shops"

Connectivity

Connectivity was mentioned in over 30% of responses to this question.

"Making the high street pedestrianised, and allowing coffee shops to have seating out onto the pavement"

"Free parking not just for 2 hours on a Saturday but throughout the week"

"If it wasn't so expensive to get into Bedford on the bus I would go into town more"

"Better roads, less congestion"

"Better links between the town centre and the embankment"

Culture and Environment

This was mentioned in just over 10% of responses.

"A cleaner, more modern, more cared for environment. It looks dated and sad, not to mention dirty at the moment"

"If it was renovated with better taste and a more modern look"

"A more pleasing and modern appearance to the pedestrianised part of town, especially around the bus station and midland road"

"The town centre is not welcoming. There seems to be no ownership of the public spaces. There ought to be more street furniture, flowers, and a lot less mess/litter"

Leisure and Entertainment

Responses to this question included just over 9% of mentions for this category.

"The events held there during the summer holidays made it a vibrant place to be. More of those please!"

"Indoor play areas for children with good café, kids activities in general"

"A café where you can sit by the river in the town centre... it's so underused"

"More arts and craft classes"

Community

This was mentioned in just under 1% of responses to the question.

"Networking website for every shop to enable interaction and a community feel"

"More community areas"

"More diversity and multi-cultural interaction"
"Great creativity to provide a warm, family community-based hub"

"Develop the community and have spaces and places to do things"

"The town centre should be seen as a community space. The focus must be on more than just retail"

Crime and Safety

Just under 2% of responses related to crime and safety for this question.

"Want a safer environment in the evening"

"More police presence"

"We must continue to deliver and support initiatives to provide assistance to rough sleepers"

Miscellaneous

Just under 2% of responses fell into this category.

"I feel if there was more 'place making' around the town that would create a more welcome atmosphere"

"Better promotion of the events"

"Urgently needs a USP"

Recent and Ongoing Town Centre Plans

Parking Charges Frozen & Continued Free Parking Offer

Parking charges in Bedford have been frozen for a further year, with a continuation of free 2-hours parking in all town centre car parks on a Saturday and 2 hours free every day in Queen Street car park.

Redevelopment of Bus Station

One of the first significant improvements to Bedford Town Centre has been the redevelopment of Bedford Bus Station. The new multi-million project replaces the former 1960s building with improved facilities and a new car park at Greyfriars.



Bedford - A Town Of Markets

Each week Bedford town centre hosts four market days which bring vibrancy and diversity to the town centre. The markets are a vital part of town centre life and a review is currently underway to ensure that they continue to thrive and boost the town centre offer. [More info](#)

High Street Heritage Action Zone / Transporting Bedford High Street Highway Improvements



Building on the successful Townscape Heritage Project which ended in 2016, the High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ) will work with property owners to improve shop frontages to be sympathetic to the local heritage. This project will also include community engagement activities, raising awareness of the unique heritage. [More info](#)

Funding for this scheme is being awarded through Historic England, with the Council contributing with the High Street improvements, reducing the High Street to a single lane and making it more pedestrian friendly. These highway works are part of the wider Transporting Bedford programme. [More info](#)

Town Deal Board Established

In Autumn 2019, Bedford was one of 100 towns selected to develop a Town Investment Plan to bid for a Town Deal of up to £25m. As part of the initiative, a Town Deal Board has been established, consisting of both public and private representatives, who will lead the development of the Town Investment Plan which will focus on regeneration, skills and business support, and connectivity. [More info](#)

Town Centre Priority Fund Announced

Announced in Summer 2019, the Council have allocated funding to help attract people to the town centre. This funding will support communities to host events in the town centre and the opportunity to bid to a capital funding pot to make physical improvements to the town. [More info](#)

Homelessness Reduction Initiatives

The council have received a further £1million funding to continue current initiatives for a further year (2020-2021). This will continue all previous work but also extend to the recruitment of additional outreach support. This will include the extension of services to EEA nationals, who have no recourse to public funds, and specialist mental health, drug and alcohol caseworkers within the Assessment and Somewhere Safe Hub. With the amount of emergency accommodation available in Bedford, no-one needs to be sleeping on the street.

Riverside Bedford Development

Opened in summer 2017, Riverside Bedford is a mixed-use development, built on the former site of the town hall. The development has brought a range of restaurants, a new multi-screen cinema, hotel and gym as well as residential premises.

Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI)

The Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) was a grant programme to ensure the long term preservation of the historic Bedford High Street area. Bedford High Street received significant investment from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Bedford Borough Council and Bedford BID, restoring 16 properties on High Street. The grant and public funding amounted to a total of £1.95 million and generated private sector contributions from landlords and owners of the businesses, bringing the total investment amount to over £5m.

One Public Estate Programme (OPE)

OPE 7 St Paul's Square feasibility study: The Council has secured OPE funding to carry out a detailed feasibility study into the development of its heritage buildings and land on the south side of St Paul's Square and a new build on the former Bank Site. The study is due to be completed by the end of August 2020. OPE funding for feasibility work in the Station Quarter: The Council has been awarded OPE funding to employ a consultant to carry out master planning of the station quarter in Bedford. This work is on hold pending further information on the changes planned for the area following the recent announcement that the chosen route for East West Rail will come into Bedford Midland Station. [More info](#)

Love Bedford Re-election



The Bedford BID successfully secured a fourth term to continue to deliver projects and initiatives that support the trading environment and help to attract new customers and investment to Bedford. Love Bedford is funded by and represents businesses in Bedford town centre.



Effects of Covid-19 and the Town Centre

Global developments in the Covid-19 pandemic have shut down high streets across the country. The lasting impacts of this will be felt for years to come and will accelerate changes in consumer behaviour, with - for example - people having to or preferring to shop online throughout the lock-down and the adoption of social distancing. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic and its impact means it is hard to predict how deep or what the challenges will be after a “new normal” comes to our high streets nationally. In addition, it is likely that further financial pressures will be placed on local authorities with an unknown level of support forthcoming from central Government; whilst Bedford is better placed than many local authorities to tackle these challenges, it will diminish our ability to carry out some of our intended activities.

At the time of publishing, the Council is developing a Town Centre Recovery Plan to deal with the effects of the pandemic, working with local stakeholders and businesses, looking at short term measures to assist the local economy. Longer term measures have been included in the future plans. The planned approaches have focused around:

Immediate (with social distancing measures still in place):

- **Continuing to support businesses through the timely distribution of central Government grants.**
- **Conducting regular consultation meetings and discussions with local businesses.**
- **Ensuring the town is safe and welcoming (and instils confidence in people) by:**
 - Improving the physical environment to make it more attractive
 - Changing layout of market to ensure social distance measure in place
 - Signage to encourage and remind visitors of social distancing
 - Promotion of the town centre via social media and other communication channels
 - Supporting the safe running of essential stores in our market

Non-immediate (if and when social distancing regulations are relaxed):

- **Considering staging opportunities to support community events**
- **Trails to encourage people to different areas of the town**
- **Calendar of events for the town centre, encouraging small, easy to organise events first**

Future Plans

The Council recognises that there is no silver bullet to solve all the challenges facing town centres, but we will pull every lever to hand to support our town centre. Below are the six themes around which actions will be focused. This is not an exhaustive nor final list but some of these proposals are well developed. The Town Centres Priority Fund will be available to support this work where appropriate, see page 15.

Environment

- Environmental impacts and improvements will be considered in all future projects.
- We will bring the town centre and river together to improve the environment within the town centre. This will include a priority action to create additional signage for pedestrians to highlight routes to and from the river.
- Improving council-owned market stalls and continuing to support our existing markets.
- The delivery of the High Street Heritage Action Zone project [see ongoing plans], along with Transporting Bedford 2020 to bring buildings back in to use and move the High Street to a single lane.
- CV-19: We will be introducing floor marking and signage to remind people of social distancing requirements.
- CV-19: During pandemic we have taken the opportunity to conduct a deep clean of the town centre and ensure street furniture repairs are undertaken.

Regulatory & Property

- Facilitate changes from retail where this would encourage occupation of empty units, allow for diversity of use, and look at other ways in which the town centre can be supported.
- Reform planning policy in the town centre to promote a wider range of use. This will include a retail study.
- Promote the town centre as a great place to live in the new Local Plan, and if possible, earlier.
- Review licensing to assess any opportunities to support town centre businesses.
- Review Article 4 measures to promote heritage and conservation in the town centre and protect our heritage.
- Continue to approach and encourage investment in property in the town centre.
- CV-19: Support for businesses in the town centre and within the council's own property portfolio

Promotion

- We will work with Love Bedford and our partners to develop an interactive map of what is available in Bedford Town Centre.
- Work closely with partner organisations for joined up promotion across local social media channels and other forms of communication including email.
- Increased/better signage on edge of boundary to highlight the town centre offering.
- Increase the promotion of the town centre, inclusive of all groups
- CV-19: Work with businesses and partners on shared messaging throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and responsive measures where appropriate.
- Support other communication channels in promoting Bedford's local offer.
- Increase the promotion of the town centre, inclusive of all groups and individuals.

Strategic

- Create a Town Investment Plan through the Town Deal Board to seek Government and inward investment opportunities.
- Continue to link all existing projects, plans and strategies together to work closely with town centre businesses on the development of plans, including the Town Investment Plan.
- Continue to apply for and monitor future Government funding plans and opportunities.
- Develop regeneration projects and masterplans for the town centre and ensure the Council plays a full role in encouraging regeneration and design codes for the town centre.
- Develop projects from the Bedford Borough Council Town Centre Priority Fund.
- To continue to work with Love Bedford in supporting their promotions and business plans.
- Provide a strategic vision for the development of the town as part of the new local plan.

Connectivity

- Increase the number and availability of loading bays to aid customers to pick up closer to shops.
- Achieve “Coach Friendly” status to boost the attraction of the town for day trippers
- Support the development of Wi-Fi opportunities and full fibre broadband access throughout the town.
- Focus on linking the river and the town further.
- Deliver improvements to the cycle network to attract more people into town.
- Deliver road improvements to cut congestion (see TB2020).
- CV-19: Where possible, cycling improvements will be brought forward to facilitate people’s changing travel habits.
- Support pedestrian, cycling, loading bay and other improvements and connectivity.
- Increasing the number of parking spaces for electric vehicles.

Events & Leisure

- Continue to encourage diversification of the town centre offer, including new leisure facilities in town.
- Review and enhance our markets offer to include more specialised markets.
- Support community events to bring people into town.
- Publish Public Events calendar for all town centre events.
- Create public performance spaces and increase the number of utility points in all the town’s squares to facilitate events.
- Support the creation of a young persons’ hub
- Support the development of the Visitor Information Centre, as well as art and other trails around the town centre.
- Increase the number of high-quality events, inclusive of Bedford’s diversity, held in the town centre.
- The Mayor’s Priority Fund is there to support restarting events that have missed the chance to operate in 2020 and for events to move to the town centre.
- CV-19: Encourage events that needs support post-Covid with infrastructure needed to be held safely.

Bedford Borough Council Town Centre Priority Fund:

The Bedford Borough Council Town Centre Priority Fund was launched by the Mayor in 2019. It is open to the council, third sector, private sector and residents to bid or propose projects to benefit footfall in the town centre and the overall vision of a vibrant, accessible, green, diverse town centre of markets, retail, events, heritage, history and culture. This fund can be spent on capital improvements to the town (such as new planting, cycle storage), new or restarting events and events moving to the town centre. This may include one-off events and a series of events which could receive staggered funding over a three-year period.

Bids to support these priorities and mitigate the impact of the COVID pandemic are strongly encouraged.

www.bedford.gov.uk/benefits-and-support/advice-and-benefits-grants/grants-for-financial-assist/town-centre-priority-fund

Further details on some of these projects

Inclusive Bedford Bedford - An inclusive group has been created as a partnership between the Council and a range of stakeholders, such as Access Bedford, Autism Bedfordshire, Love Bedford, Bedford and District Access Group, Bedford and District Cerebral Palsy Society and the Harpur Centre. The group are looking to introduce a Charter for local businesses. By signing, businesses will be making a lasting commitment to create a better experience for disabled customers as well as their carers and families.

Wi-Fi and Full Fibre Broadband The Council are keen to encourage the roll out of Full Fibre and Gigabit capable broadband to retail, leisure and offices in the town centre, and are considering other communications improvements that could support economic growth

Performance Spaces By providing dedicated performance spaces across the town, it will add to the vibrancy and atmosphere. It is hoped that this will build up to support a performance festival in the town, showcasing the talent that Bedford has to offer.

Public Events Calendar The production of an events calendar highlighting everything that is happening in the town to help with the promotion of the town. It will include both Borough Council and community events, where the Council has been notified.

Town Investment Plan As part of the government's Town Deal, Bedford will develop a Town Investment Plan focusing urban regeneration; skills and enterprise support; and connectivity. The Investment Plan will be developed by the Town Deal Board and be produced in Autumn 2020. If successful, delivery will start from March 2021

Action Plan: An internal action plan will be regularly reviewed by officers and the Town Centres and Planning Portfolio Holder to ensure that this plan is understood across the council and where appropriate, feasible and achievable individual plans are delivered.

Measures of Success Table



<i>What is being measured</i>	<i>What is a “good” outcome</i>
<i>Town Centre Premises Vacancy Rates</i>	<i>Low vacancy rate</i>
<i>Footfall levels</i>	<i>High footfall levels</i>
<i>Environmental improvements</i>	<i>High levels of cleanliness</i>
<i>Opportunities for businesses in the town centre</i>	<i>High number of businesses opening, low number of businesses closing</i>
<i>Diversity of businesses</i>	<i>Wide variety of businesses premises and use within town centre</i>
<i>Number of events or activities</i>	<i>High number of events held</i>
<i>Town centre stakeholders engagement</i>	<i>High levels of activities and communication with and between stakeholders</i>
<i>Regeneration projects within the town centre</i>	<i>New regeneration projects, both private and public sector led</i>
<i>Crime levels</i>	<i>Low crime levels are good</i>
<i>Use of electric vehicles</i>	<i>Higher number of electric vehicle spaces is good</i>
<i>Use of green transport methods</i>	<i>High numbers of people cycling to the town centre</i>

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