**Town Centre Consultation: Conservative Group Response – September 2019**

Bedford town centre has an incredible offering including the magnificent Embankment and brilliant independent retailers. Nevertheless, the reduction in footfall in 2018, which has continued into 2019, means the town centre needs to adapt to the challenges posed by out of town and online retail.

The town centre should be the place to be and be seen as a community space. The focus must be on more than retail by creating opportunities to live, work and spend leisure time.

The town centre must provide an array of leisure activities day and night. There is a huge opportunity to create a destination for the community beyond what is currently on offer.

It is our view that the below points should inform the formulation of the Council’s Town Centre Plan.

**Overall Feel**

1. Strong sense of identity: we should not compete with Milton Keynes for big shops. Instead, we should focus on our unique selling points, such as our high proportion of independent retailers. Hitchin and St Neots are both market towns that have done this successfully.

**Planning and Heritage**

2. Conservation area review: there should be different conservation areas for the town centre and an appraisal should take place to see which buildings positively contribute and which should ideally be replaced. This is important for establishing the built character of the town centre and visually signalling what kind of town centre it should be.

3. The Council should consider submitting planning applications on units to establish a variety of planning uses, not just retail or restaurants, to make sure they are mixed use spaces. Establishing use would give those considering investing in buildings clear knowledge of what they can do with them before buying or renting, which would create greater certainty. A pre-application would be an adequate, albeit less certain, alternative.

4. A Neighbourhood Area within the town centre and the creation of a Neighbourhood Plan would provide greater control over future development by determining, for instance, building design requirements.

5. Reducing the size of the town centre and re-evaluating its boundaries would allow recognition of different areas and their characteristics and encourage innovative schemes, such as the St Cuthbert’s Arcade.

6. More living accommodation should be provided in town, encouraged through planning policies

**Family Focus**

7. The town centre should be welcoming and have something for everyone, ensuring a variety of attractions for all age groups.

8. Install proper children’s play areas: Vigo in northern Spain provides a useful example of how to accommodate families. Currently there are inadequate facilities for families, but a play area would go a long way towards providing a family friendly environment. A good location would be Harpur Square.

**Connectivity and Accessibility**

9. Improved connectivity between the Embankment and Town Centre would be beneficial, including consideration of how pedestrians and cyclists can traverse the two. The current crossing at the bottom of the High Street means that pedestrians and cyclists have to go out of their way to access the Riverside North development and the cross arrangements are very unsatisfactory given the narrowness of the pavement and the street furniture causing a blockage outside McDonalds.

10. There needs to be dialogue with residents, community groups and stakeholders to asses opportunities to improve the living environment in and around Midland Road and explore potential development.

11. Pedestrian first approach: cars must be secondary along the High Street, St Paul’s Square, Horne Lane and the Embankment to ensure that those on foot accessing facilities are prioritised.

12. An accessibility survey must be carried out urgently; the whole experience from car park to town centre and into shops must be reviewed from the point of view of those who have any mobility issues including, but not limited to the elderly, wheelchair users and those with pushchairs / prams.

13. Traffic into car parks needs to be managed and the environment from getting from the car park to the town centre needs to be improved. Often the walk is uneven, around the back of buildings and does not create a welcoming entrance to the town at all.

14. Are bus users content with the bus station area? A user survey should ask for suggested improvements.

15. Subject to budgetary implications, free car parking for two hours every day would provide a huge boost for businesses. Where possible, parking bays should be widened and there needs to be an assessment as to whether more parking is required.

16. An assessment of the road network should be undertaken, as part of Transporting Bedford 2020, with a view towards closing part of Mill Street and St Paul’s Square to traffic and creating a pedestrian area to improve access into town and discourage motorists’ use of the High Street.

17. There should be greater connectivity through to the museums and better pedestrian access between the two; this should be covered as part of the accessibility review.

18. A new, bigger lift for Bedford Central Library and more accessible toilets would be beneficial to users. There is a huge queue for popular events such as Rhyme Time but the lift can only hold one pram at a time and is very slow, which causes a jam. There should be more buggy parking downstairs too.

**Sense of Place**

19. Harpur Square should be the focus of all events taking place in the town centre and the location for pop-up crafts and food stalls (see Maltby Street Market in London, for example).

20. Tourist information needs a proper home in the town centre. Heritage and public art trails, treasure hunts and activities for families and older people throughout the year organised by Tourist Information would encourage people into the town centre for leisure and shopping. Retail and coffee shops could be encouraged to get into the trails / themes of the particular event to increase their trade and participation in the town.

21. Creating more active frontages around the Harpur Suite / Central Library/ Harpur Centre would improve interaction between inside and outside spaces.

22. Market stalls should be repositioned so that they do not hide shops and facilities.

23. There should be an established use for the Riverside North Square and the connectivity improved between that square and Harpur Square; currently the two do not join well together so events in one would not guarantee increased users of the other. A good use could be an outdoor auditorium (like outside the GLA building on the South Bank in London).

24. Heritage boards would be beneficial in explaining the rich history of the town centre and individual buildings.

25. Pocket parks would encourage gardening and improve the visual amenity.

26. A variety of free events, such as the Victorian Fair, would draw people into town. Events have to be unique such as dance events, choirs etc. If it has not happened already, it may be beneficial to study successful events elsewhere.

27. An internet pick-up / returns unit would encourage internet shoppers into town; sending items back through the post is a pain and people are not always in for deliveries so a centralised unit would be beneficial.

28. More public art would allow local artists the opportunity to showcase their works, perhaps through a revolving exhibition like the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square

29. A proper, co-ordinated Christmas window display like Fenwicks in Newcastle would draw people from beyond Bedford into the town. The display could be across shops on a set theme each year. Bedford BID would be well placed to co-ordinate such a project.

**Leading by Example**

30. The Council can buy units as they become available which would provide greater scope to implement the finalised Town Centre Plan. Reduced rents should be available to new businesses to incentivise them into town and Council-owned properties could also be used for pop-up crafts, for example.

31. A business incubator / start-up hub would provide space for small businesses from which to operate.

32. Can more be done to provide small urban area housing units suitable for those wanting to get on the property ladder?

33. A review should be undertaken of the environmental enforcement regime undertaken by Kingdom.

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

35. There is a need to address professional begging around cash machines and car parks.

36. More cycle racks should be provided outside the Public Space Protection Order area to encourage cyclists into town.