Bedford Borough
Empty Shops Strategy
2014 - 2016
Mayoral Foreword

The UK’s town centres are changing. The number of empty retail units in town centre locations around the country has grown in recent years. Bedford, despite proving to be more resilient than many areas, needs to respond to the challenging wider climate for town centres as the overall economy improves. The crisis faced by High Streets is a phenomenon caused not only by economic conditions but also by social changes affecting how, when and where we shop. The development of this strategy is timely as not only is there a national move to redefine the town centre in the UK through initiatives such as the Portas Pilots, but we are also seeing Bedford play host to a number of exciting, innovative grassroots initiatives.

The Council’s Growth Plan seeks to secure faster delivery of jobs growth, with the town centre playing a critical role in the success of the local economy. We intend to help deliver investment and a real vibrancy in the town centre. If we are to do so we have to recognise that while we do not know exactly how town centres will continue to change, we do know that they will change. Town centres must reflect the fact that the growth of online and out-of-town shopping, for example, mean that people will need to be attracted into town centres by not just retail alone, but also cultural, leisure and other functions and services. In many cases the role of commercial property will need to be adapted, providing our communities and businesses with both challenges and opportunities.

It is clear that the occupancy of commercial units is influenced both directly and indirectly by a range of factors, which are impacted upon by a variety of different stakeholders. Our vision needs, therefore, to be wide-ranging, open minded and, crucially, to link to other key businesses, groups, organizations and individuals who can have a positive effect on the issue of empty shops locally.

This strategy and supporting action plan is intended to identify and promote different collaborative approaches. Genuinely collaborative, partnership working on this issue of real importance for our Borough will be key to our success in making the positive difference we all want to see.

Dave Hodgson
Mayor of Bedford Borough
1. Introduction

Town centres are subject to differing definitions, narratives and perspectives. While the overriding story of Bedford town centre has, for many years, been one of commercialised space, we acknowledge that this is neither the only reality nor the only option. Town centres as places for community, leisure, art, culture, and manufacturing are all definitions that are worth considering and are not mutually exclusive to that of a commercially vibrant town.

Numerous factors - social, legal and economic, have provided impetus for the development of this document. Nationally, the number of empty shops has increased since 2008 but it now appears to be levelling off and starting to show some signs of recovery which is very much the case in Bedford. Bedford has played host to a number of empty shops projects providing us with useful data on which to reflect, and our success as a Portas Pilot town team means that investment should impact further. Existing Council initiatives such as investment in the Bus Station area, Riverside North development and the High Street Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) Regeneration scheme are also underway and will have a part to play in how we respond to empty properties. Recent legislative changes are impacting on the way buildings are used, with new temporary use classes and permitted development rights in addition to changes in business rate legislation. There is a growing concern, nationally, for the future of our town centres and empty shops provide a physical manifestation of a fundamental change in our urban landscapes.

Firstly we look forward as we outline our vision (section 2) for empty units within the town and identify the key objectives we wish to move toward followed by our initial actions which are outlined in the action plan (section 3). The national picture (section 4) identifies the trends that are emerging from data analysis and provides case studies outlining other approaches to the issue of empty retail units. Here we question whether town centres face an inevitable decline or are undergoing unprecedented change of a more positive kind. We consider the local picture (section 5), outlining data relevant to Bedford and looking at what has been done to date, and identifying the perceived opportunities and barriers. We explain why this strategy is being developed (section 6) identifying the perceived barriers, gaps in provision and what we have learnt and the conclusion (section 7) serves as a summary to the document.

The strategy is developed by Bedford Borough Council, supported by Kayte Judge and Erica Roffe of We Are Bedford, and Dan Thompson, founder of the Empty Shop Network and author of Pop Up People and Pop Up Business for Dummies. The strategy sits alongside the Growth Plan 2013, Economic Development Strategy 2011-2014, the Town Centre Action Plan (2008) and the Strategy for Bedford High Street (2010). It also supports the objectives of the High Street Townscape Heritage Initiative Scheme and the Portas Pilot Initiative. It is hoped that it provides a complimentary addition to the existing documents, but also challenges existing positions/proposals where necessary. The policy approach will need to be flexible to adapt over time and the actions responsive to the changing needs and demands of a multitude of town centre consumers.
2. Vision

"We will endeavour to use empty properties as an opportunity to revive our town centre as a thriving hub for retail and social use and as an interactive venue for events and art, both temporary and permanent, through the proactive use of local data and knowledge, nurturing and supporting local entrepreneurs to unlock creative solutions and by taking a collaborative approach with landlords and agents."

2.1. Objectives

In order to achieve the vision, the following objectives have been identified below:

1. To provide a more coordinated and joined up approach between the Council and its key stakeholders in responding to the number of vacant units;

2. To foster, support and encourage local entrepreneurs to use empty units, either on a temporary or permanent basis;

3. To provide data to relevant stakeholders to help them to promote Bedford as a destination for visitors, existing businesses and inward investors;

4. To improve the appearance of the town centre.

There are a range of resources and opportunities for delivering against the objectives:

More joined up approach
The Council has a key part to play in clarifying and ‘joining up’ issues that can sometimes act as a barrier to the use, permanent and temporary, of empty town centre space. Internal departments such as economic development, licensing, planning, estates and events can work more collaboratively and information from the bi-annual agent forum and annual data on empty shops and footfall can be shared and used proactively.

Links with landlords and agents
Regular meetings are held with local agents but strong and clear links with landlords are yet to be made and maintained and this provides an opportunity for a collaborative approach to empty shops. The Council can promote and provide information in manageable forms to aid the best use of empty properties. Full shops benefit everyone.

Potential for partnership approach
Cultural organisations are working together to a greater extent in Bedford and work on empty properties could be undertaken in partnership with them. The Council has key links it can use with Bedford Creative Arts, The Higgins Bedford Museum & Art Gallery, Bedford Library, Schools and relationships with external partners such as the Portas Town Team, Bedford BID and Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce.
Fostering and support for the ‘empty shop entrepreneur’

Reframing an empty shop as an opportunity rather than a blight on the town would encourage creative thinking and solutions - entrepreneurs, arts groups and cultural services could all make good use of the empty space. The Council and its partners can offer advice and support to ‘empty shop entrepreneurs’.

Proactive use of data

Data held by the Council provides useful information for those with an interest in empty shops. By publishing this annually we would be able to make stakeholders aware of potential empty shop ‘hot spots’ and engage with empty shop landlords and cultural organisations to try to make the best use of these opportunities. The data should be used as an action research cycle to pilot different approaches and consider what works and what does not as well as reviewing best practice elsewhere.

Joint approach to the appearance and upkeep of empty properties

In line with the High Street Strategy, we recognize the importance of maintenance, upkeep and appearance. Guidance on how to dress an empty shop can be provided to agents and landlords to create a more attractive offering.

Marketing of Bedford to long term tenants

Empty shops are part of a wider issue and the marketing of Bedford to national retailers remains important. This is covered in the Economic Development Strategy, but it is recognized that the dissemination of positive information about Bedford and the innovative use of empty properties will help promote the town. This should be delivered in partnership with the Council, Bedford BID, local businesses and the community.

3. Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>By When</th>
<th>By Whom</th>
<th>How Much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To provide a more coordinated and joined up approach between the Council and its key stakeholders in responding to the rise in vacant units</td>
<td>April 2014 / Ongoing</td>
<td>EDM(PRO) / BBC</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Develop better links and information exchange between Council departments that are involved with and/or have contact with local properties and businesses</td>
<td>April 2014 / Ongoing</td>
<td>EDM(PRO)</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Provide data regularly to key stakeholders (i.e. landlords, agents, BID) to identify local patterns e.g. footfall and vacancy and to inform actions to address these</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>IIM</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Continue to hold the bi-annual Commercial Agents Forum to encourage a collaborative approach to tackling empty shops</td>
<td>July 2014</td>
<td>EDM(PRO) / BID</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Develop relationships with landlords and establish a network to share information, ideas and bring forward the best uses and income stream for their properties</td>
<td>May 2014 / Ongoing</td>
<td>EDM(PRO) / BCA / CB</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Work collaboratively with the local creative community through organisations and networks such as Bedford Creative Arts and Creative Bedfordshire to consider how empty shops can be used, temporarily or longer term</td>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td>PTT</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. To provide start up grants to new businesses (pop ups and permanent) not already represented in the immediate area</td>
<td>April 2014</td>
<td>PTT</td>
<td>Portas - £15k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. To provide 50% discretionary rate relief for up to 18 months to businesses taking up occupation of retail premises previously empty for at least 12 months (subject to Government funding)</td>
<td>April 2014</td>
<td>LOCAL TAXATION</td>
<td>Funded by Government Grant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 4. The National Picture

The importance of High Streets has been reflected in planning policy for many years, particularly since the mid-1990s with the presumption of 'town centres first' in land use decisions. However, these policies have not been sufficient enough to create thriving town centres.

Town centres are places of great complexity and variety in terms of scale, geography and catchment, function and form. No two are the same. As a result, the way in which they are affected by and respond to change is diverse and varied.

The rise in empty shops marks a change in our retail habits and retail is crucial to the UK economy. As the UK population has increased by 5.8% over the past 10 years, this has given a boost to retail expenditure. However, town centres have not reaped the benefits of this. UK retail sales are around £300bn, the 3rd largest in the world, after the USA and Japan.

**Negative Change for Town Centres**

Town centres are influenced by wider circumstances and the recent economic situation has created a climate of nervousness. They have become homogenised, with little strategic control over the tenant mix and after years of growth, specialist retailers, many independently owned, have had their margins squeezed with increased rents, cost of raw materials and the minimum wage.

We have seen a fundamental shift in the types of buildings needed in our town centres.

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**Table: Bedford Borough Empty Shops Strategy 2014 - 2016**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>By When</th>
<th>By Whom</th>
<th>How Much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3. To provide data to relevant stakeholders to help them to promote Bedford as a destination for visitors, existing businesses and inward investors</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>EDM(PRO) / BID</td>
<td>BBC - £300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Continue to undertake consultations with the general public, visitors and businesses, to ascertain strengths to build on, weaknesses to address, opportunities to develop and threats to deal with</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>EDM(PRO) / BID</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Use consultation findings to promote the gaps in service and retail provision in the town centre as a call to entrepreneurs and multiples to fill these e.g. creche, gym, community space, shoe shop</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Be more proactive and promote (cross-promote) positive town centre related news stories via press releases and through social media</td>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td>BBC/BID</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Use data to contribute to a marketing campaign based on the town centre's unique offer (river, independents, restaurants), with Bedford BID, to attract new businesses to trade in the town centre, increase footfall and local spend</td>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To improve the appearance of the town centre</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Encourage landlords and agents to improve the appearance of neglected empty units to make them more marketable. If unresponsive, where budgets allow and approval is given, improve the appearance ourselves e.g. remove internal window posters/signs, paint hoardings etc</td>
<td>May 2014 / Ongoing</td>
<td>EDM(PRO) / BID</td>
<td>Portas - £2k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Encourage local businesses to work together in a ‘call for action’ against neglectful landlords</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>EDM(PRO) / BID</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Use planning and enforcement legislation where appropriate, to improve the appearance of properties that have fallen into disrepair</td>
<td>March 2015</td>
<td>EDM(PRO)</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Use data and consultation findings to focus public realm improvements in ‘hotspot’ areas and encourage ‘community clean ups’</td>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td>EDM(PRO)</td>
<td>Resourced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Develop a grant scheme and offer shopfront improvement grants to landlords and tenants of commercial town centre units, up to a maximum of £500 as 50% match funding</td>
<td>April 2014</td>
<td>EDM(PRO) / PTT</td>
<td>Portas - £10k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Where data suggests there a problem areas, to pilot different ways of using empty units e.g. vinyl wraps, art installations, box shops</td>
<td>July 2014</td>
<td>EDM(PRO) / PTT</td>
<td>BBC / Portas - £2k</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**KEY:** EDM (PRO) - Economic Development Manager (Projects & Research); IIM – Inward Investment Manager; BBC - Bedford Borough Council; BID - Bedford BID; BCA - Bedford Creative Arts; CB - Creative Bedfordshire; THIPM - BBC High Street Townscape Heritage Initiative Project Manager; ESTATES - BBC Estates Team; LOCAL TAXATION – BBC Taxation Team; PTT - Portas Town Team.
Multiple retailers need larger units, and so, town centres must compete with large out of town retail parks and shopping centres, providing customers with everything they need in one place. In broad terms, each year over the past decade has seen a 1% drop in the proportion of town centre retail floorspace and a corresponding rise in out of town retail space of 3%. Not only has the last few years seen mass closure of established retailers such as Woolworths, Jessops and Virgin Records but multiple retailers are also consolidating their branches, closing down unprofitable stores and focusing on fewer larger stores in the biggest retail destinations. These ‘big box units’ have left vacant mid-sized town centre units which are unsuitable for smaller local retailers without sharing space.

The current greatest threat for traditional retail is customers using the internet to search for the best deals and buying online, with many large retailers now using transactional internet sites as mail order businesses. Internet sales doubled from 5.1% in 2000 to 10.2% in 2011 and are forecasted to rise to 12.2% by 2014. Over the same period, the consequence is that town centre vacancy rates have crept upwards and footfall has reduced. Total retail sales are forecast to grow by 12% but town centre sales are expected to continue their current decline. People are becoming more confident in using on-line services which may also affect other types of business, for example banking.

There has been some government support for action to tackle town centre decline e.g. proposed legislation changes, the Meanwhile Project and approximately £24m for the High Street Innovation Fund, the Mary Portas review with Portas Pilot Towns and Town Team Partners and the recent Autumn Statement announcing a ‘Reoccupation Relief’ for new occupants of vacant properties. However, this has been increasingly offset by a large reduction in local government funding, making it even more difficult for local authorities to support services e.g. public toilets, libraries, museums, cultural events and bus services. Yet these often give a town centre a unique selling point that out-of-town centres cannot match.

Town centres must adapt and embrace change to survive. While national retailers are reducing their portfolio and pulling out, small retailers are moving back and the numbers of independents are increasing. Often, this is a result of subdividing larger units or creating flexible spaces within larger units, with easy in-out terms, for traders. So perhaps town centres are starting to shape for the future?

Positive Impacts of Change?
There is some good news. The reduction in voids and boosting of footfall is being achieved in a number of ways. Landlords are amalgamating units to provide more suitable accommodation for larger retailers and restrictions on additional out of town supermarkets have encouraged multiple grocery chains to develop in-town convenience stores with a move towards ‘local’ branding in order to look like independents, such as Tesco coffee shops.

Value retailers such as Poundland and 99p Stores have expanded which are drivers of retail demand and can increase footfall, however, this can lead to declining diversity. Temporary stores opening up to gain a short term sales spike to take advantage of seasonal spend can help in the short term, however, they are also taking spend away from established businesses during what would be their busiest period.

In 2011, 2,500 more independent shops opened than were closed down and in 2012, there was a gain of more than 850 new shops. Falling rents and rising vacancies are enabling existing retailers to relocate to better sites and gain a foothold in a centre that was previously unaffordable.

Retail Spending by Location, 2000 vs. 2011 vs. 2014 (forecast)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Town Centre Sales</th>
<th>Out of Town Sales</th>
<th>Neighbourhood Sales</th>
<th>Non-Store Sales</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 2000</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
<td>28.1%</td>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2011</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2014</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Verdict Research, Out of Town Retailing, 2010 and UK Town Retailing, 2011
The length of leases are now more accommodating with reduced contractual years, rent free periods, break clauses and monthly rent payments etc all helping to reduce a retailer’s financial commitment and help maintain store viability during difficult economic times. And while e-commerce might worry town centre operators, m-commerce (using mobile phones) offers opportunities for innovation and engagement with this technology may afford an important means to boost the vitality of our town centres. (BIS - Understanding High Street Performance - December 2011).

New style retailers are proving successful, often by trying new models of 'hybrid' retail, which combine more than one thing in a space, for example a produce store and restaurant. Examples include: Bill’s Produce which has gone from a single presence in Lewes to open in 9 further places including central London and Toy Barnhaus which was started by ex-Woolworth’s staff, kitted out with ex-Woolworth’s shopfittings and now with stores in Crawley, Croydon, Epsom, Redhill and Worthing.

Town centre management has the potential to affect change. Town centres are clearly difficult to manage due to a multiplicity of owners and occupiers, public spaces and competing day time and night time economies but management is essential to their revival. Business improvement districts can add value to the commercial and social vitality of the area they operate as well as provide added value to the traditional work of local authorities. These arrangements are, however, through a direct additional cost to the business, so the benefits should outweigh the business costs.

Future Models for Empty Shops
Another source of innovation is the use of 'pop-ups' or 'meanwhile use' which make temporary use of space and are good for diversifying the mix of town centres. They attract interest and footfall, and further the discussion about the future use of town centres. They offer flexible solutions for businesses and provide a space for businesses which do not need year-round premises e.g. seasonal shops or online retailers or smaller space than that provided within traditional retail units.

Pop ups:
• Offer a chance to test or prototype a new business model;
• Allow market research of a new product, range or service;
• Give a product or service an attention-grabbing launch or increase its profile;
• Reinforce an existing brand and customer’s loyalty to it;
• Allow failure with limited risk.
Social Selling & Micro Shops

‘Social selling’ means that retailers or entrepreneurs start shops or other initiatives together. They join forces to attract customers and save expenses. According to www.popupcity.net: “The future shop is not related to one retailer any more but becomes a shared place for different merchandisers. Sharing risks and expenses lets retailers profit from each other and create new, fresh and well communicable concepts that work perfectly on social media. That’s what makes this selling trend entirely social.”

We Are Bedford’s Pop Up Emporium (November-December 2011) and subsequent BedPop Boutiques (July & December 2013) are good examples of this concept, bringing together local crafters, makers and artists to allow them to share one space as well as the experience.

Another example of a shared space concept was the so-called ‘box shop’ or micro shop cited by Nest Project (www.nestproject.nl). Their Christmas 2012 initiative took place in the lobby of an Amsterdam hotel and each retailer was able to showcase their products in one of the boxes alongside other temporary co-renters. The micro-shop concept supported the artist/maker who was not suited to an entire retail unit. From a marketing point of view, the more people that took advantage of the space, the more networks that were reached, therefore greater awareness, sales opportunities and footfall. Each seller promoted through their social media channels, so was constantly attracting new customers to the space.

Pop Up Shops Training & Grants - Rochdale

Rochdale Council developed an empty shops initiative to encourage the creative use of the empty units by creating training packages for prospective ‘pop up’ shopkeepers and offer a small grant to businesses wanting to take on an empty shop. Rochdale Council has produced a ‘pop up’ pack containing contact details of the landlords of all the vacant premises in the town centre. However, while they have experienced success, their work has mainly taken place within Council-owned properties and one local shopping centre. Multiple landlords have remained elusive and difficult to deal with. The Council is considering arranging face-to-face meetings with the institutional landlords in London to attempt to resolve the problem.
**5. The Local Picture**

Historically, Bedford has outperformed the UK average in terms of percentage of vacant retail units, however, in 2012, this rose to 14.6% compared to the UK average of 13.6%. Good news in 2013 is that Bedford’s vacancy rate significantly fell to 12.3% against the UK average of 12.6% (Experian), however, the task is to lower this.

Bedford’s retail split is about average with the past 12 years seeing the comparison goods sector reduce by 13.7% and the service sector increase by 8.3% (Experian). Please see the map on Page 22 depicting the retail split in the town centre. Categories are defined as:

- Comparison = General retailers such as clothing, electrical, newsagents
- Convenience = Food retailers
- Retail Services = ‘No goods’ retailers such as hairdressers, opticians, travel agents
- Leisure Services = Cafes, restaurants, betting shops, pubs, hotels
- Finance and Business Services = Estate agents, employment agencies, banks.

According to The Local Data Company, in comparison to the UK average of 68%, Bedford has a large independent retail base, with 441 (71%) businesses compared to 178 (29%) multiples. Locally, Milton Keynes only has 33% independents, Cambridge 46% and Northampton 60%. Bedford town centre is classified as an ‘Average Retail Centre’ with 3.5% premium retail, 77% mass market and 20% value retail. Bedford achieves a strong market share from within its core and total catchments, but in reality, Bedford falls some way short of achieving its full market potential.

A number of future trends will have an effect on the town centre and its offer, such as an additional 10,500 houses planned up to 2021 in Bedford Borough; older age groups will grow significantly, particularly for the over 85s, requiring good access and health services; planned town centre regeneration schemes will increase the leisure, culture and retail offer.

A number of initiatives exist that focus on supporting and invigorating the town centre such as:

- The £9.6m redevelopment of Bedford bus station area which includes a refurbished multi-storey car park and public conveniences, new surface car park, refurbished retail units and replacement of the Bus Station building itself;
- A development of Riverside North, due to start on site in 2014, to include a hotel, cinema, residential units, retail units and restaurants, as well as a new public square and footbridge;
- A £3m Bedford High Street Townscape Heritage Initiative project providing grants to landlords to undertake property repairs, reinstate traditional shopfronts and bring upper floors back into use;
- Reopening of The Higgins Bedford, Museum and Art Gallery, following a £5.8 million redevelopment into state-of-the-art modern facilities;
The Mayor's Free Parking Deal offering 2 free hours parking on a Saturday plus all other parking charges frozen for the past four consecutive years;

Bedford BID provide services such as Bluecaps, marketing and advertising, Retail Radiolink, events and family activities, a town centre guide, loyalty card and gift vouchers;

The Portas Town Team with £51,000 funding to be used for training existing and start up retailers and entrepreneurs, start up grants for pop-ups and new businesses, shopfront improvement grants and events;

Rural, evening and Sunday bus services for Bedford & Kempston are subsidised by the Council;

A Community Toilet Scheme has been introduced to enable local businesses such as pubs, restaurants and shops to work with the Council to make more toilets available in convenient locations in the town centre;

Four weekly markets alongside two monthly ones and other occasionals are held which increase footfall in the town centre;

Direct work with businesses, free training for existing retailers including a Window Dressing Workshop and meetings of the Friends of High Street Business Group;

Public realm improvements including seating, lighting and planting;

A programme of town centre events including the River Festival, Kite Festival and High Street Showcase;

A bi-annual local agents forum to update on demand, availability and other issues;

The building and launch of the Community Boat offering river trips.

Numerous public consultations have been undertaken in the last few years and the key findings are:

In terms of the town centre, the embankment/river, markets and pedestrianised areas are the aspects most liked about the Town Centre. Variety and quality of shops, cheaper/free parking and fewer empty shops are the aspects people most commonly stated as things to improve. Milton Keynes is the most commonly visited place for shopping and leisure outside of Bedford Town Centre, followed by Kempston Interchange Retail Park and Riverfield Drive, Bedford. The main reasons given for visiting other places was the range of shops (80%), followed by easy parking (52%), cheaper parking (35%) and quality of the environment (34%).

Public priorities are to reduce the number of pubs and clubs, foster independent retailers and better quality shops, make empty shops more attractive and remove traffic.
Case Study - We Are Bedford

We Are Bedford (WAB) was a community group set up by Kayte Judge and Erica Roffe in Nov 2010, in response to the number of empty shops with the aim to facilitate arts events in them and invite collaboration. WAB was a not-for-profit organisation run by volunteers and was an umbrella for individual events, with the initial project funded by a catalyst grant from the Royal Society of Arts and other local sponsorship.

Castle Quay Weekender March 2011
Relationships were established with landlords including a developer and the Council, where one point of contact was established. Dan Thompson (Empty Shops Network) and the Empty Shop Toolkit was essential and the Bedfordshire Creative Network was integral to connecting with people. Local market operators, tour guides, local art groups, the archaeological society and local businesses all became part of the project, with support from the local media. Traditional and social media spread the word and face-to-face contact to generate interest was paramount. The result was that, seven Council owned empty shops in Castle Quay and the surrounding area were transformed into a focal point for culture and arts including crafters, musicians, photographers, poets, artists and makers. The weekend attracted 4000 people and brought this area to life and to the attention of the community; summing up the concept of turning spaces into places.

Subsequent projects include:
The Bedford Busking Festival and further empty shop projects, specifically a pop up art gallery exhibiting David Litchfield’s ‘A drawing a day’ exhibition, a ‘Big Draw’ event, a six week Pop Up Emporium, the We Are Bedford bursary scheme and resultant Mill Street Pop Up shop plus two BedPops.

Challenges & Barriers:
Identifying and contacting landlords proved difficult so WAB developed a partnership with letting agents, Stimpsons Eves, however despite this, not many landlords came forward although one private landlord was found. This highlights how important and serious absent landlords are to the success of any empty shop strategy. Insurance, rates and utilities became the personal responsibility of WAB because it was not a social interest group or charity. Having one point of contact at the Council who can help liaise with other departments would be useful.

We Are Bedford’s legacy:
WAB ceased active delivery in November 2012, however, it continues to thrive on Facebook, Twitter and beyond and the group is used for active discussions, advice and promotion of local businesses. A number of micro-businesses were established as a result of the work of We Are Bedford and those involved developed leadership skills that led them to go on to create new projects.
6. Strategy Background

This strategy marks the first attempt to strategically consider the empty buildings within the town centre. In recognition of the importance of different perspectives to this ‘re-imagining’ of empty retail space and the town centre, we began the strategy development with an Empty Shops Workshop (Sept 2012) facilitated by Kayte Judge, Erica Roffe and Dan Thompson, founder of the Empty Shops Network. This was held with 16 key stakeholders and partners including landlords, local businesses, the Council, the Mayor of Bedford Borough, High Street Regeneration team members, Bedford BID and Bedford Creative Arts. Attendees listened to national best practice case studies, local opportunities and barriers to empty shops work.

Through this we defined the problem that the strategy will aim to solve, namely:

“**In what ways might we encourage a range of uses to reduce the number and impact of empty properties in the town centre through broad and creative consultation and collaboration with key stakeholders?**”

This is our driving question.

We defined empty shop space as unused or underused whole building spaces, recognizing that while empty ground floor retail is particularly visible it is not the only issue. We identified the following stakeholders: the Council, including specific departments (planning, leisure, licensing, events, estates, economic development), and elected members; landlords; agents; the Portas ‘Town Team’; community groups; existing and start up businesses including pop up tenants; business groups such as the Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses and Bedford BID; charities; artists and arts organizations including Arts Council England and Bedford Creative Arts; and, most importantly town centre users.

Town centre users can also be identified in different ways, for example, as locals, visitors, residents, people with disabilities, cyclists, drivers, pedestrians, young, old, daytime and nighttime.

Having identified the ‘problem’ the strategy will solve, solutions were creatively explored. The key messages included the need for a template lease agreement for pop-ups and a ‘broker’ or ‘matchmaker’ to act as a go between for potential tenants and the landlords, agents, various Council departments, BID etc to signpost them to the right person. Creative solutions and action is needed in terms of events, community engagement, promoting the town (being positive), exploring other non-retail uses, business rates and car parking.

Through facilitated conversation we uncovered key areas that were seen as barriers to the use of empty space, which gave us clues as to how we could encourage and enable the productive use of empty retail property within the town.

**Barriers included:**
- Bureaucracy
- Legal requirements
- Business rates and rents
- Areas of town being unattractive
- Landlords - absentee, difficulty contacting them, little benefit to consider alternative uses
- Lack of central communication channel to ‘shout about’ all that is good and interesting in the town
- Shops needing too much remedial work
- Confusion over who to speak to
What we have learnt

Empty shops can be used by a number of stakeholders for a number of uses, ranging from the multinational looking to set up a shop in the town permanently, to the art group looking to create an installation over the very short term. The barriers to each will be different with much depending on the resource available to the interested party. Bureaucracy, cost, legal and insurance requirements present less of a problem to a large retailer with a legal department and adequate resource. To the community art group or micro entrepreneur, however, these can prove insurmountable. Conversely the lack of an attractive and thriving ‘buzz’ to a town could be unattractive to a retailer, but could provide the fertile opportunity for a cultural event or installation by a grassroots group who may be able to tap into community resource.

It is worth considering the empty shops from a few different perspectives to order our thinking and the approaches we might take to attract the different groups to the town centre including national brands, independent retailers, cultural, community, leisure or arts groups, non-retail businesses, domestic residents, ‘pop up’, temporary, social selling or activity and manufacture.

Consideration should also be made regarding the difference between filling empty shops with ‘live’ projects, shops, or other uses, and approaching empty shops as a ‘closed’ unit with the focus on the shop front as an opportunity for presentation of art or information, or simply as a well maintained unit that is ‘retail ready’ and an attractive proposition for tenants.

The key lessons are:

• Empty Shop problems are universal, but many solutions are hyper-local;
• Towns with high numbers of multiple landlords struggle to implement a working empty shops strategy;
• The role of a broker/matchmaker is important to remove barriers and point people in the right direction;
• Successful approaches to empty shops involve highly engaged communities;
• Changing town centres is inevitable but no one knows what will happen;
• Many feel that Communities/Arts/Culture may offer a future for town centres;
• Successful Councils have partnered with creative, cultural and community organisations (e.g. 3space, Empty Shops Network.)
• External improvements are important and there are good national examples of billboard art/vinyl wraps/murals/business led art work.
7. Conclusion

Bedford town centre is currently seeing huge investment. The local markets are thriving, local businesses are beginning to work together, vacant properties are starting to be filled with new independent businesses and temporary and creative uses of these properties are also becoming more frequent events. Together these are bringing added interest and creating a buzz and renewed optimism to the town centre.

However, Bedford Borough Council cannot deliver the vision and objectives alone. We need to work with and build good relationships with partners and external stakeholders such as local landlords, agents, local entrepreneurs, existing businesses, creative networks, cultural and arts organisations, Bedford BID and the Portas Town Team.

We recognise that town centres are changing and our town centre must respond. With vacant properties, changing town centre uses and footfall along with a squeezed economy, we have to accept the idea of the town centre as a different kind of experience that complements rather than competes directly with out-of-town centres and internet shopping. There is likely to be a move away from retail as the prime driver, to a multifunctional destination, with retail playing a part alongside community, public service, leisure, cultural and civic uses. The distinction is that under this vision, the town, and in particular the High Street and other secondary shopping areas, will serve more of a social function with retail supporting social uses and the empty shops themselves offering an opportunity to improve the look and feel of the area through imaginative use. Bedford has a wealth of independent retailers and as yet a relatively untapped local creative community upon which we can build.

This strategy aims to pull everyone together who can influence, shape and contribute towards delivering investment and creating a vibrant and successful town centre.