



Leighton Buzzard:

Challenges, Opportunities and Moving Forward

Report to Policy & Finance Committee Meeting

Monday, 22nd November 2021

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Contents	Page Number
1. Executive Summary	3
1.1 Summary of Key Workshop Outputs	
1.2 Comparing Leighton Buzzard to National Town Centre Challenges and Trends	
1.3 Recommendations for Next Steps	
2. Introduction	6
2.1 Methodology	
2.2 Context	
3. External Factors and National Town Centre Trends	8
3.1 Town Centre Challenges and Issues	
3.2 Impacts of the Coronavirus Pandemic	
4. Workshop Learnings and Outputs	10
4.1 Place Leaders – Characteristics, Role and Remit	
4.2 Developing a Shared Vision for Vibrancy, Relevance and Sustainability	
4.3 Partnership Working	
4.4 Leighton Buzzard – Unique Selling Points	
4.5 Leighton Buzzard – Strengths, Challenges, Opportunities	
5. Recommendations for Next Steps	13
 Separate Document	
Appendix 1 – Workshop Agenda and Attendees	
Appendix 2 – Town Tour – Observations	
Appendix 3 - Town Centre Challenges and Changing Role	
Appendix 4 – Workshop Findings – Key Stakeholder Discussion Summaries	
Appendix 5 – Reference Documents	

1. Executive Summary

Leighton Buzzard is performing above the national trends in terms of better than average footfall and vacancy rates. Despite this the town centre is not considered to be achieving its potential and for the most, a large part of its surrounding communities are not utilising the town centre. In view of this, the challenge for Leighton Buzzard is how it can stay relevant and continue to be 'fit for purpose' going forward (particularly as Leighton Buzzard, has a growing catchment}. Standing still appears not to be an option.

Though the town possesses many strengths, not least it's wonderful heritage, but its low value retail is not a strong offer or providing what people want in some cases.

We know that people are not only attracted to town centres for retail and that there is more of a desire for none retail things. To ensure the town remains relevant to its catchment area, such as people who work or live in your centre, Leighton Buzzard would benefit from a wider and higher end mix of uses, such as retail, restaurants, bars, leisure and cultural offer that would also appeal to younger age groups and families.

It's integral that stakeholders understand the role that they can play to reinvent Leighton Buzzard and tackle these challenges. From the workshop, there is clearly a passion from council members and stakeholders to see Leighton Buzzard thrive. In order to establish a multifunctional core brimming with vitality, we would recommend that the Town Council, together with Central Bedfordshire Council, work together, to take a leadership role in bringing the key stakeholders from the town together to devise an action plan and help make change happen. It is vital that as many people and organisations are invested and take wider ownership of the town and this process, as it cannot be the single role of the Council to do this.

Improving communication will also help combat any negative perception that local people have of the town. By encouraging them to take more ownership of Leighton Buzzard, it will help the town become a destination of choice for residents/visitors and encourage local people and young people to see the value in investing in the long-term future of their town.

This report presents the key findings, stakeholder discussions and recommendations on next steps for the Policy & Finance Committee on 22nd November 2021.

1.1 Summary of Key Workshop Outputs

The workshop was well attended by Town Council members and with representatives from Central Bedfordshire Council and some key stakeholder groups. The workshop:

- Highlighted the next steps required to ensure that this workshop acts as a clear starting point towards a new town centre regeneration process that will draw on Leighton Buzzard's unique features and maximise its potential. This will ensure that the town is a vital and vibrant place for the future and remains relevant to all of its catchment area.
- Encouraged Leighton-Linslade Town Council with Central Bedfordshire Council to lead the way in helping all key stakeholders to be the principal place leads and begin to coalesce thinking and agreement around what the ideal future for Leighton Buzzard would be.
- Provided an understanding of the role and how place leads can unlock additional resources and effect positive change through collaboration and empowerment.
- Provided an overview of current national trends and how these relate to Leighton Buzzard.



Summaries of the discussions are attached as Appendix 4.

1.2 Comparing Leighton Buzzard to National Town Centre Challenges and Trends

- Leighton Buzzard with a 6% vacancy rate has bucked the national vacancy rate trend of 9% for small towns and has an ability to attract new independent businesses quickly.
- There is a growing number of cafes and restaurants which helps create vibrancy but a lack of a day to evening family friendly offer.
- There is a good Events and Activities programme to help deliver the changing trend for towns to provide a whole destination experience, along with developing a digital platform and infrastructure and enhanced public realm. These can link local people and communities to the town to learn from and celebrate its rich history, discover new skills and promote social wellbeing.
- The historic Market (operating 2 days a week and with some themed Markets) is a main attractor but appears to currently only attract a small segment of the total catchment area with a largely over 55s user profile.
- There is a large value-led retail offer, although a small, growing number of independent quality comparison retail and health and beauty businesses.
- Whilst footfall in Leighton Buzzard is picking up following a sustained period of lockdowns, this does not match 2020 figures and its proximity to a growing younger catchment population.
- A noticeable lack of community and leisure facilities is a missed opportunity to retain the growing family population and Leighton Buzzard's proximity to local schools.

Additional information regarding the challenges facing town centres nationally and the positives and negatives for Leighton Buzzard is contained in section 3 of this report.

1.3 Recommendations for Next Steps

The key stakeholders at this workshop demonstrated a real desire to move forward to help Leighton Buzzard remain vibrant and relevant for all of its catchment area. In conjunction with Central Bedfordshire Council, suggested next step are to:

- Engage more widely with other key stakeholders within the catchment area.

- Hold an additional workshop for the Town Council, Central Bedfordshire Council and wider stakeholders to begin the process of forming a town wide Partnership to develop a shared vision for Leighton Buzzard town centre that can harness an additional pool of resources, skills and expertise to agree and lead on key actions.
- Continue collaboration with Central Bedfordshire Council on the proposals to aid the review of Central Bedfordshire Local Plan and inform the updated Development Brief for land immediately south of High Street and Supplementary Planning Guidance for the town.
- Hold consultations on a draft Action Plan.

2. Introduction

2.1 Purpose of Report

IntoPlaces Ltd, an independent town centres consultancy, was commissioned to provide an overview of the future role of town centres given the competing challenges they face, the emerging trends nationally and how this relates to Leighton Buzzard in particular.

Through a focused workshop for the Town Council and some key stakeholders, IntoPlaces explored how Leighton Buzzard can remain a vibrant and thriving place to visit and spend time in and the opportunities for sustainable growth and development. This will help the Town Council, together with Central Bedfordshire Council, to review the strategic aims for the town centre, town centre uses and its future development.

2.2 Methodology

Desk research provided useful background information on Leighton Buzzard in addition to information provided by the Town Council. This was complemented by a Town Tour which provided additional independent visitor observations (see Appendix 2 for detailed findings). A workshop including Town Council members and key stakeholders helped to provide attendees with the national trends and challenges and group discussions helped to inspire leadership, start the visioning process and identify future aims to ensure Leighton Buzzard remains a thriving town now and in the future.

2.3 Context

Leighton Buzzard, along with Dunstable, is one of the largest towns within Central Bedfordshire Council and situated in the southwest of Central Bedfordshire. It is part of the Leighton Linlade Parish Council with a catchment population of approximately 48, 484.

Leighton Linlade Town Council wishes to ensure that its main town centre of Leighton Buzzard adapts to changing town centre trends and that it maximises its potential in order to remain vibrant and relevant to its growing catchment, delivering positive outcomes for the local economy and community.

- **Leighton Buzzard – The Future**

In view of changing consumer trends and the many challenges affecting town centres everywhere, it will be necessary for Leighton Linlade, in partnership with Central Bedfordshire Council and key stakeholders, to review and update plans for Leighton Buzzard town centre.

The diagram on the next page illustrates the strategic links that will enable Leighton Buzzard to maximise its strengths and opportunities, creating sustainability and vibrancy for the future.

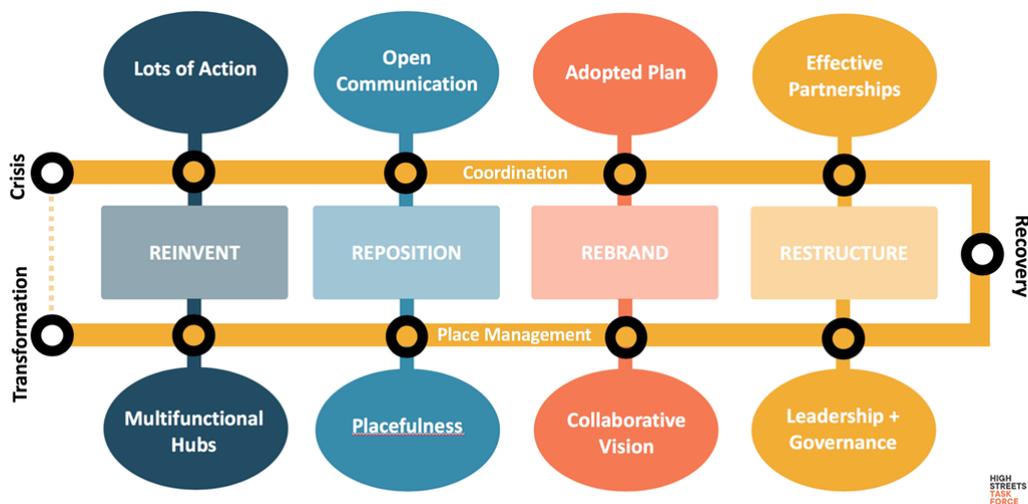


3. External Factors and National Town Centre Trends

3.1 Summary of National Trends

- The well documented decline of town centres across the country caused by changing shopping habits, online retailing, out of town competition and high overheads has shaped the way town centres are viewed and need to adapt to remain relevant and sustainable in the long term.
- This has been further hastened and informed by the Coronavirus pandemic and its huge impacts on businesses, communities and town centres.
- Based on extensive research from the Institute of Place Management/High Streets Task Force into the development of vibrant, sustainable town centres, the following High Streets Task Force diagram summarises the different phases of development from Restructuring to Reinventing as multifunctional hubs.

Further details are in Appendix 3.



3.2 Comparison with Leighton Buzzard

Positives

- Leighton Buzzard is doing comparatively well compared to the national picture with a lower-than-average vacancy rate and vacant units tending to be refitted for new businesses quickly. However, the shopping centre, in line with national trends, is not faring as well and this is combined with an uninviting shopping environment.
- The well maintained heritage and historic character of the buildings is a positive that provides uniqueness and pleasant backdrop with the Conservation Area status helping to protect this.
- Smaller independent cafes and restaurants are helping to create a reason to linger longer and reflect the national trend although do not seem to attract the family market/younger age groups.
- This is combined with a programme of activities and promotional campaigns to attract more people in and develop a whole town experience. The recent reopening of the Library Theatre will also help.
- The development of a digital platform for businesses and free town centre WIFI/infrastructure is important to incorporate the growing desire to combine online and physical sales through outlets.

Negatives

- Enhancements to the public realm and good pedestrian links also help to increase the footfall although this does not appear to be capturing as much of the wider catchment area as it could with its higher than average car ownership and accessibility to other out of area towns and competing destinations.
- The historic Market (operating 2 days a week and with some themed Markets) is a main attractor but compared with other towns nationally does not appear to maximise its full potential. The 2019 Market survey had nearly half (47%) of customer responses from the over 55s with very few (10.8%) in the 25-34 age bracket and no responses from the under 25s. It is suggested that more in-depth research into usage and what the catchment (including young people) would like from the Market could help to increase footfall and maximise this asset. Good initiatives in place such as the Charity and Community Group/Non-profit making pitches as well as the Start-Up Pitches all help to develop vibrancy.
- The large value led retail offer does not reflect the total catchment's higher than average household income and much higher than average employment rate and within key growth sectors (Professional, Scientific and Technical as well as Construction and Post/Telecoms). There are, however, a growing number of independent quality comparison retail and health and beauty businesses.
- Footfall in Leighton Buzzard appears to have slowed according to October figures and is perhaps an indication that the offer does not meet the expectations of growing 'newer' catchment profile.
- Although safety and crime has featured in the top 10% most deprived in the 2019 IMD ratings, this is being addressed via various police and community safety projects.
- The lack of community, creative arts and leisure facilities again may cause those from the catchment area to travel further to access these. Leighton Buzzard's proximity to local schools and the University of Bedfordshire's latest campus as well as Central Bedfordshire College's new Engineering and Construction Skills Centre provide another opportunity for the town to capture additional footfall, dwell time and spend.

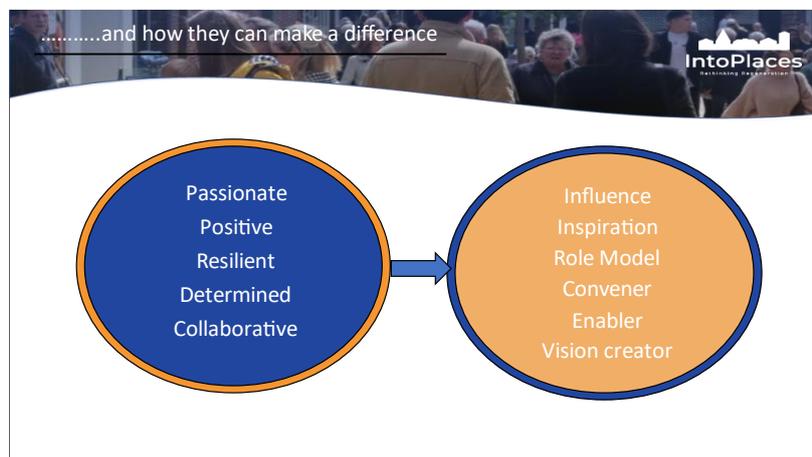
4. Workshop Learnings and Outputs

Attendance was strong from passionate and committed people. There were 21 people present, mainly Town Council Members but also including representatives from Central Bedfordshire Council, local resident representatives from Leighton Buzzard Society, the Chair of Leighton Buzzard First/Local FSB Special Interest Group, the Bedfordshire Rural Communities Charity and local Police Inspector. Encouragingly, the meeting engendered a spirit of continued place leadership to take things forward and a commitment to engage with other key stakeholders in important sectors for the town.

The Workshop Agenda and attendance list are attached in Appendix 1.

4.1 Place Leaders – Characteristics, Role and Remit

People with an interest in achieving the best for their town and working in partnership with their communities can inspire and put make positive change happen. A summary of key characteristics and how they can make a difference are outlined below. It also requires trust and empowerment.



4.2 Developing a Shared Vision for Vibrancy, Relevance and Sustainability

Engagement with all key stakeholders in a variety of sectors is required in order to develop a shared vision for the town. This workshop acted as a starting point to re-evaluate the town's uniqueness, strengths, opportunities and challenges in the light of changing consumer trends and the role of town centres.

The discussions helped to highlight what is important for Leighton Buzzard town centre to thrive, remain sustainable for the future and maximise its potential. The workshop also highlighted the need to engage with additional stakeholders from key town centre sectors as well as the need for further collaboration and empowerment with Central Bedfordshire Council.

Some suggestions put forward to include in a Shared Vision included:

- Destination: Leighton Buzzard – A Creative and Social Hub and Cultural Centre
- A place for community activities, e.g., arts, health and social
- A place for the community to help the vulnerable
- A place for encouraging skills and activities for young people

- A place giving opportunities for all incomes
- A high street giving an attractive and varied experience for residents, the community plus visitors
- A Sustainable Zero-Waste Town
- An Accessible Town for All
- A Collaboration Hub

4.3 Partnership Working

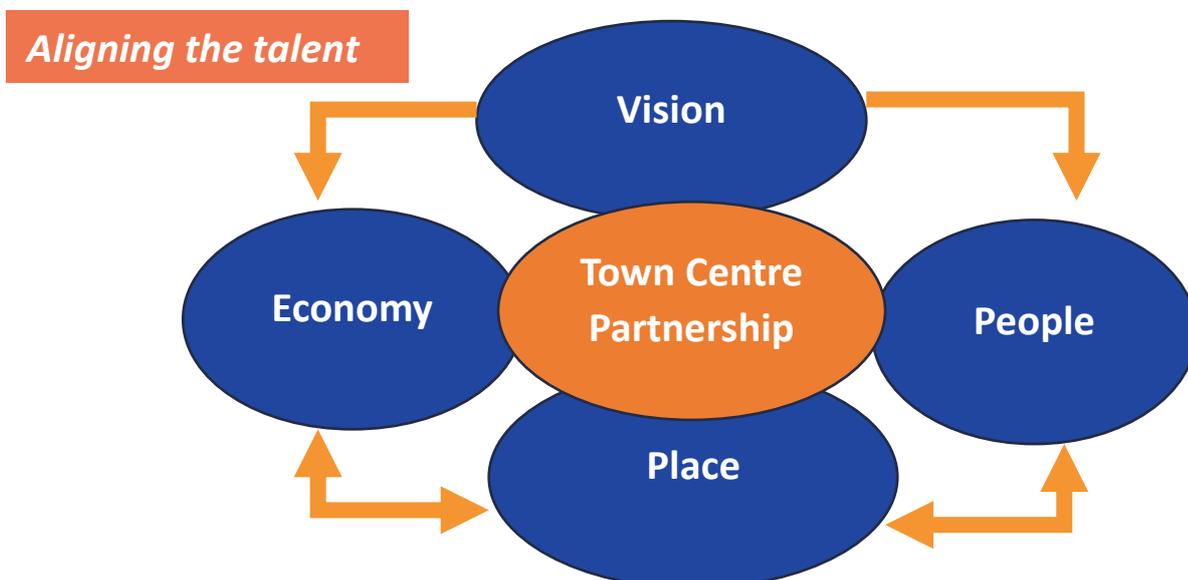
Town Centres are complex, experiencing fundamental change, which requires new understanding and approaches to be taken based on a unified vision, partnership working and strong place-leadership. COVID-19 has exacerbated the rate and scale of this change, and, as such, this understanding is now more important than ever.

A strong working relationship based on trust needs to be developed between stakeholders from all sectors and new structures and systems need to be introduced. Having capacity and an appropriate partnership structure in place is a proven and effective way of improving the town’s vitality and viability.

As such, the development of an overarching partnership for Leighton Buzzard is fundamental to driving sustainable change in the town centre and will help build the capacity, leadership and resources needed to deliver the transformation required.

At the meeting, the model of partnership working below was presented by IntoPlaces. The model takes into account that there are existing teams, groups and organisations already working on specific aspects of the town but, for Leighton Buzzard to really succeed, it needs to have a collaborative overarching partnership that draws all of these strands together behind a compelling vision, which this cross-sector partnership seeks to achieve.

This model shows how a number of component parts that make up a town are broadly grouped into People, Place and Economy subgroups. It was explained at the workshop that these component parts can have specific work streams, as determined by the partnership, once the strategy and action plan have been developed.



This does not require a complete 'reinvention of the wheel', as you already have a number of existing groups that may simply need to be better aligned to prioritise the key challenges that the town is facing.

This journey cannot be achieved overnight, but progress can be made by bringing key stakeholders together to develop thinking around Leighton Buzzard and the role of these stakeholders can play to maximise the town's potential and ensure it remains vibrant and sustainable.

NB Based on our experience of successfully helping to regenerate and develop vibrant sustainable towns for the future, IntoPlaces would be happy to facilitate the important follow on workshop to maintain momentum and achieve outputs relating to strengthening partnership working to develop resilience and sustainability, agreeing a shared vision, action planning and securing additional resources and community wealth building.

4.4 Leighton Buzzard – Unique Selling Points

Key features for why people come to Leighton Buzzard identified themes around community spirit, an attractive location to live, the unique heritage and historic buildings, the Charter Market, a compact centre with an attractive physical layout, a broad affordable shopping offer.

4.5 Leighton Buzzard – Strengths and Challenges

Strengths:

It is seen as predominately a convenience retail location but with a growing café culture, helped by the temporary pedestrianisation of High Street and good pedestrian links to the other areas of the town. The large variety of independent comparison retail businesses and availability of small units for start-ups was seen as a major strength. There is a good community events programme and good landscaping/public realm. The proximity to good park facilities and waterway network is a bonus. Excellent accessibility via road, rail and airport (also a challenge).

Challenges:

The key issues for Leighton Buzzard elicited a number of responses which could also turn into opportunities. These included:

Out of town retail/amenities, land south of High Street and the need for sympathetic development, lack of a good Sunday/family friendly offering, cost of car parking and linked to congestion, pedestrian and vehicular access of the main high street not working well, perception of crime/safety concerns and linked to a lack of a good cultural/evening economy and leisure facilities, lack of facilities/activities for young people, connecting the town centre offer to the new and growing catchment population, lack of community spaces, developing connections with Central Bedfordshire Council and empowerment to enable change.

5. Recommendations for Next Steps

- Engagement with additional stakeholders such as representatives from the education/youth, transport and health sectors as well as other community groups and organisations is essential to develop impetus and ambassadors for developing a shared vision and Plan that can make a difference.
- It will be important for the Town Council, Central Bedfordshire Council and key stakeholders to meet as a Steering Group to develop a draft shared vision for Leighton Buzzard, some key short-term actions and map out some long-term goals. It may be necessary to investigate partnership and funding models, determine what other stakeholders are needed, begin early branding and communicating more widely around the ambitions of the new partnership model.
- The draft shared vision and key actions can form the basis of a Town Action Plan with input from wider stakeholders that can harness an additional pool of resources, skills and expertise and who can help to take it forward and maintain momentum.
- The Plan should include a section on Encouraging Investment and recommendations on the types of development investment local people favour, incorporating national trends and Leighton Buzzard's uniqueness and strengths.
- Continued collaboration with Central Bedfordshire Council on the proposals is essential to contribute to the review of Central Bedfordshire Local Plan in 2022 and updating of the Leighton-Linslade Strategic Delivery Framework.
- Consultation on the draft Vision and Action Plan can then take place.

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