**BedfordBID Chair’s Annual Verbal Report (1st April 2020 – 31st March 2021)**

At the start of the 2020 financial year, following the declaration of a global pandemic, we put down our five year plan full of exciting events and instead ensured all non-essential expenditure was stripped back. The front-line BedfordBID team was initially furloughed and we placed our marketing and communications position on hold.

As online working became more apparent, IT became paramount. Systems were streamlined and operations consolidated to adapt to online WFH. This coincided with vacating the office premises in Lurke Street and taking up temporary storage and a short period of safely working ‘on the hoof’ with front-line team using mobile devices. A new tenancy at Marks Mews Castle Lane was later secured at a reduced cost in October 2020.

The contracted-out night team staff were partly redeployed to support the daytime BedfordBID Champion role to assist the day team. They supported with businesses reopening after the first easing of lockdown. The Retail Radio scheme and Bedford Businesses Against Crime (BeBAC) initiative assisted the essential stores communication and safety throughout lockdown.

We didn’t get chance to return to a programme of Board, Breakfast and Retail Radio Link meetings but carried on regardless adapting to virtual communications and lots of social distancing. The first virtual AGM was held in January 2021. The IT support was critical to also enable BID to keep in touch to offer best support so businesses could operate whilst enabling the team to keep in touch.

We contracted-out digital expertise as we had to talk daily to our two audiences, the local community and our businesses.

[Direct Mail](https://www.lovebedford.co.uk/top/downloads.php) campaigns to help signpost businesses to where and how they could access the ongoing “package of financial support measures” announced by the government over the COVID pandemic and during lockdown periods was critical to support the great work and comms the Council provided.

For the community, a COVID hub was created for the Love Bedford website showing the essential stores and which businesses had adapted to ether online or takeaways. This resulted in over 74,000 page views on the Love Bedford website.

As the first lockdown eased BID launched the #openforbusiness campaign. Reassuring everyone it was safe to return and enjoy the stores they missed resulted in +59% week on week footfall growth. It also included working with the Inclusive Town team and Hidden Disabilities to train and sign up over 35 businesses to the Sunflower Lanyard scheme.

The Eat Out to Help Out scheme webpage through August had a reach of over 35,500 people. Pushing COVID compliance confidence and positivity, the results of first week of EOTHO were +34.9% increase in foot flow Monday 3rd August.

November and December didn’t stop us continuing our annual Window Dressing Competition, being filmed to help present at the College’s first ever virtual awards and supporting the Council’s Christmas Trail. The Click and Collect town centre parking bays helped those still WFH also get their favourite food delivered and we enhanced the Christmas lights to offer a festive and cheery welcome.

Despite the pandemic curves, our essential systems like BeBAC and the Retail Radios saw further success and growth. Day members increased from 311 – 534 and Night 57 – 129. The Retail Radios kept essential stores safe and in communication and the graffiti Wipeout scheme ensured businesses returned to clean shopfronts after each lockdown. Utilitrack still helped businesses make substantial cost savings and the BID still supported major investment schemes including the High Street Heritage Action Zone and Town Deal Board.

Just reading this to you, brings it all back but it still feels surreal. We’re proud that even a global pandemic didn’t stop us and our town welcoming 39 new businesses. We reminded everyone that the BID teams are the ‘eyes and ears’ of the business community. We are a support to businesses large and small and we are well respected by our partners. Most importantly, the pandemic proved we were essential.

We are open and accountable to all of our levy payers. We didn’t spend our money on colourful events in 20/21 but instead, used every penny carefully on reactive communication, contractual commitments, essential systems and our bespoke campaigns.

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