**BedfordBID Chair’s Annual Verbal Report (1st April 2022 – 31st March 2023)**

As more uncertain COVID rules became apparent, we all continued to navigate the new regime from April 2022. You will recall that there was still a duty of care required for customers and staff. We also dealt with more sickness absence, hybrid working arrangements, temporary business closures and inconsistent opening hours.

To some degree, the fallout has continued with more staffing challenges and then soaring energy bills and hospitality sector predictions of businesses shutting permanently with the loss of hundreds of jobs brought on by the cost-of-living crisis and a 2022 recession. You will read in the annual accounts' commentary the erratic levy payment implications and impact on cash flow which as you know is managed on the basic principle that we can only spend what we have got!

However, the management of our reserves have enabled us to provide important ongoing activity. Looking back to 2022/2023, the BedfordBID Annual Review 2022/2023 provides worthy insights to demonstrate how we have enabled to continue with delivering high performance and welcome new businesses to the town. I hope you will have had chance to read the hard copy version of the Annual Review sent to you earlier in the year.

Although we have seen business closures in town centre, often because of corporate difficulties, Wilkos was our latest casualty with the loss of loyal staff (some working for the business for over 25 years), Edinburgh Woollen Mill finally opened its doors in the former Bhs unit along with over 40 small businesses openings in 2022/23. This year, the Harpur Centre alone will have four of its five vacant units occupied by some new exciting brands.

The levy yield has reduced but with changes to our daily operations team and restructuring our online activity, despite sending fewer emails post-COVID, both B2B and B2C categories witnessed an improvement in their open rates. This might suggest that while email volume decreased, the relevance or appeal of the content increased, grabbing more attention. Engagement with businesses is therefore stronger with business news enjoying a significant boost in the click rate post-COVID, nearly doubling its pre-COVID percentage.

The consumer facing Facebook platform now has over 11,000 followers, 61% Bedford based, 16,000 Instagram accounts reached and 13.3k non-followers and over 9,000 followers on Twitter.

The BedfordBID team also write about businesses and town centre events for local publications whose circulation falls within the new residential areas. Global Radio and dedicated Facebook campaigns are used to widen the penetration into 20+ minute drive time which this Christmas will include Milton Keynes!!!! The Love Bedford website, which is undergoing a complete overhaul, attracts regularly new signups to the 5,000+ mailing list.

The new, improved foot fall system is reporting increases in the foot flow like for like comparisons to last year. National comparison insights draw an overall conclusion that Bedford continues to buck the trend and impose the train-of-thought that those who use Bedford do so as it is their local town and for convenience, rather than for recreational retail or leisure.

There is an entire section about BedfordBID frontline day and night teams in the Annual Review including their successful reporting of graffiti, StreetLink, and street cleaning to highway engineers. They continue their first aid responses, defibrillator checks and crucial involvement with Police and Council initiatives such as Operation FireFly, Safer Streets Campaign, Ask Angela and Hollie Guard app. Still reassuring everyone, as part of the Inclusive Town team, we train and sign-up businesses to the Sunflower Lanyard scheme. There is also a special mention for the night team who were recognised and thanked by the businesses at the BedSafe meetings and praised for their help and assistance they provide the NTE.

We still have not had chance to return to a programme of Board, Breakfast and Retail Radio Link meetings but carry on regardless adapting to virtual communications and lots of personal business engagement.

Events returned in abundance in 2022/23 with the Jubilee weekend, Armed Forces Day, Bedford College Hair & Beauty Show, Bedford Concerts, Independent shops weekend, Italian Festival and Fiver Fest. We also saw the return of the Town Centre big spruce up (special thanks to those businesses who came out and joined us for a couple of hours around the town!), River Festival and The One Hundred Motoring Display especially created for High Street AND **three weekends** of festive fun from BedfordBID and strategic partners.

The Small Business Saturday, giant photo-fabulous floral wreath, Christmas Tree Festival, the Love Bedford Christmas Window Display Competition and Elf on the Shelf all helped to attract visitors to the town and into the shops.

The highlight was the inaugural Love Bedford Land Train which will be returning this Christmas by popular demand and planning for this Christmas has already begun ...

* **Saturday 25th November** - Lights Switch-On Event - Harpur Square
* **Saturday 2nd & Sunday 3rd December** - **A Very Merry Bedford Christmas Market Weekender with** special Christmas markets and return of The Love Bedford Land Train
* **Saturday 2nd December** - Small Business Saturday
* **Wednesday 6th -10th December** - St Paul's Christmas Tree Festival
* **Saturday 16th & 17th December** - Love Bedford Family Christmas Weekend - Free activities.

BedfordBID continue to fund Christmas lights. Father Christmas will, of course, be at the Harpur Centre again! And don’t forget to tell your customers about the 4 hours FREE parking!!!

Whilst BedfordBID continues to deal with the day to day ‘eyes and ears’ issues for the business community, in the wider context of town centre place making and longer-term sustainability,

* BedfordBID is a member of the High Street Heritage Action Zone Partnership Board which has successfully delivered the rejuvenation and repurposing of high street premises including Blue Monk, Silver Street ‘square’, Salvation Army (Lurke Street/High Street) and All Ears
* We funded the HSHAZ Community Grants Cultural programme through delivery agent Bedford Players Trust <https://bedfordplayerstrust.org.uk/haz-cultural-programme/>
* We supported the recent Bedford POP pop-up store on Midland Road
* We played a significant part in the refusal of the proposed Adult Gaming Centre on High Street
* We sponsored the annual Bedford College Hair & Beauty and Achievement Awards

We are a support to businesses large and small and we are well respected by our partners. We are open and accountable to all our levy payers.

Most importantly, we use every penny carefully on reactive communication, contractual commitments, essential systems and our bespoke campaigns.

I would like to thank the team for all their efforts again this year, our frontline Champions, marketing and office team, Christina and our Directors for all bringing their expertise and time to support BedfordBID and our town.

Thank you.