

Central Bedfordshire Council

06 January 2026

Executive

Response to Full Council Motion on Regeneration-first approach to support our town centres

Report of:

Cllr Steven Watkins, Executive Member for Assets, Business and Housing,
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Responsible Director:

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This report relates to a decision that is: Key

This report relates to a decision that is urgent/exempt from call-in: No

Purpose of this report

This report is a response to the motion proposed by Councillor Holland-Lindsay to Full Council on the 20 November 2025 which was deferred to Executive due to possible resource implications.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

The Executive or Committee is asked to:

1. Consider the response to the key asks put forward in the motion as set out in paragraph 12 of this report.

Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

1. Overview and Scrutiny have not commented on this report due to the short timescales between deferral from Full Council and the next Executive meeting.

Executive Summary

2. Councillor Holland-Lyndsay tabled the Motion in Appendix A at Full Council on the 20 November. This asked that this Council recognises the increasing pressures on our high streets and town centres and that the Council declares a High Streets Emergency.
3. To support this, three actions for consideration were tabled. These being that this Council will:

- a. Promote a regeneration-first culture across the whole Council, to ensure the benefits of growth and inward investment support vibrant town centres. This strategic approach will guide all policy development and the approach to new initiatives, so that the potential for regeneration benefits are front and centre.
- b. Develop a High Streets and Town Centres Action Plan setting out the actions and levers the Council will take to help support businesses, community groups and cultural activities to thrive.
- c. Request the Leader of the Council write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer expressing concern about the growing challenges faced by town centre and high street businesses in Central Bedfordshire and requesting support from government to help them thrive.

National and local context

4. High streets across the UK are under severe pressure due to structural changes in retail, accelerated by the pandemic and the growth of online shopping. Since 2020, thousands of retail outlets have closed, and vacancy rates nationally hover around 13 to 14%, with persistent vacancies in some areas exceeding 7%.
5. Nationally footfall remains below pre-pandemic levels, and rising costs, such as energy, wages, and business rates are squeezing margins. Consumer behaviour has shifted toward convenience, leisure, and experiential spending, leaving traditional retail models vulnerable to the convenience that online retail offers.
6. Towns in Central Bedfordshire face the same challenges. Vacancy rates, as collected on a quarterly basis for the Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) for the Local Plan and performance reporting, show that many of our towns are performing better than the national vacancy rates, averaging at 9%.

Town	% Vacant Units (from Aug 25 Monitoring)	% Vacant Units (from Nov 25 Monitoring)
Amphill	8.0	7.8
Arlesey	6.3	6.3
Biggleswade	8.3	7.7
Dunstable	14.3	13.4
Flitwick	6.5	2.2
Houghton Regis	6.3	9.4
Leighton Buzzard	7.2	9.7
Potton	8.0	8.0
Sandy	4.3	2.9
Shefford	9.3	7.0
Stotfold	0.0	0.0

7. The preliminary findings from the Town Centre Benchmarking surveys (see paragraph 13 c) indicate that on the whole footfall across all towns in Central Bedfordshire is higher than for similar comparator towns elsewhere in the UK.

8. The Council does have a role to play in support of our High Streets and has invested considerable funding and resource to do so over the years. Examples of recent activity are detailed in the next section. However, given the current financial pressures on local government and changes to how funding for regeneration is allocated by government, scope for future interventions presents challenges as internal resource and funding, alongside external funding, face considerable pressures.

Action in Central Bedfordshire

9. The Central Bedfordshire Strategic Plan 2024–2027 provides a clear framework for addressing these challenges through its priorities of Thriving Communities, Economic Growth, Infrastructure and Connectivity, and Sustainability. There are a number of areas where the Council is and has taken positive action to address these challenges within the scope of the financial and resource constraints that are being faced. This includes:

- a. **Local Plan:** Central Bedfordshire Council is progressing with a new Local Plan, which will set the strategic framework for growth up to 2050. The new plan will guide where homes, jobs, infrastructure, and community facilities are located, ensuring development is sustainable and supports thriving places. Importantly, the Local Plan will include policies to protect and enhance town centres, promote mixed-use development, and encourage investment in retail, leisure, and cultural facilities.

By aligning housing growth with regeneration objectives, the plan can help deliver the footfall and infrastructure that high streets need to remain vibrant. Early engagement has already highlighted the importance of town centre vitality, and future consultations as the Local Plan is developed will provide an opportunity to shape policies that embed regeneration-first principles.

- b. **UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund:** Town Centre regeneration initiatives which include capital and revenue grants to Biggleswade, Flitwick, Houghton Regis, Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (round 1) along with Ampthill, Potton, Shefford and Sandy (round 2). This has and is delivering a range of measures including funding roof renovations at the Flitwick Community Hub, public toilet refurbishment, and other improvements such as street furniture, wi-fi, signage and planters. Revenue funding has supported a programme of cultural events in these towns to help increase footfall. More information can be found on the Council's website¹.
- c. There will be no further UKSPF funding after 25/26 and Central Bedfordshire is not one of the areas allocated funding under the replacement Local Growth Fund which is for Mayoral regions or the Pride in Place Programme, which is targeting 75 towns in the UK, none of which are in Central Bedfordshire.
- d. **Town Centre Benchmarking:** As part of the outcome monitoring for UKSPF, the Council has commissioned Town Centre Benchmarking surveys for Ampthill, Biggleswade, Dunstable, Flitwick, Houghton Regis, Leighton Buzzard, Potton, Sandy and Shefford. These measure footfall on busy and non-busy days, count

¹ UKSPF projects for 25/26 can be found: [UK Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund | Central Bedfordshire Council](#) and details on previous rounds at: [Central Bedfordshire Council news and press releases | Central Bedfordshire Council](#)

vacant units, parking utilisation and canvass views of businesses and visitors to the town centre areas to understand strengths and weaknesses as well as gather data on average spend and duration of visit. They follow a nationally recognised methodology which allows comparisons to be made with national averages. Final reports are due to be issued to the Council in December 2025.

- e. **Supporting Businesses:** The Council provides a comprehensive range of business support services² aimed at helping high street and town centre businesses adapt and thrive. Through its Business, Investment, Employment and Skills team, the council offers free specialist advice on start-up and growth, innovation, exporting, and decarbonisation. This includes one-to-one consultancy, workshops, and access to networks via partnerships with organisations such as Wenta, Cranfield University, and the University of Bedfordshire.

Recent initiatives funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) have delivered targeted programmes for entrepreneurship, business growth planning, and sustainability, alongside grants for shopfront improvements and bringing vacant units back into use.

These interventions not only strengthen the resilience of local businesses but also contribute to the vibrancy and economic health of town centres by encouraging innovation, improving the retail offer, and supporting cultural and community uses.

- f. **High Street Rental Auction (HSRA):** The Council recently ran a consultation (1 September to 23 November 2025³) to define the specific high street areas where HSRA powers could apply. These powers, introduced under the Levelling Up & Regeneration Act 2023, allow councils to auction leases for commercial properties that have been vacant for more than 12 months, enabling local businesses, charities, and community groups to bid for tenancies.

The consultation focused on identifying the town centre areas with high vacancy rates, economic importance, and regeneration potential, where these powers could be applied in the future, thus ensuring the approach reflects local priorities. By designating these areas, the council can use HSRAs to bring empty units back into productive use, diversify the offer, and create spaces for cultural and community activity, key drivers of footfall and vitality.

Feedback from the consultation will inform a local policy framework to implement HSRAs thoughtfully and effectively. The next step will see these final HSRA areas being taken to Executive in February for adoption. The mechanism for delivering HSRA is subject to budget and resource being made available.

Based on the experience of the pilot authorities elsewhere in England, the simple act of just designating these areas has had a positive impact on vacancy rates.

Responding to the motion

- 10. The Council recognises the importance of supporting vibrant high streets and town centres and shares the concerns raised in the motion. The examples provided in this

² [Business advice and financial support | Central Bedfordshire Council](#)

³ [Consultation: Defining the High Street Areas for High Street Rental Auctions \(HSRAs\) | Central Bedfordshire Council](#)

paper demonstrate some of the recent action that has been taken to target this important area and builds upon many years of targeted support and investment.

11. In response to the suggested actions:

a. **Promote a regeneration-first culture across the whole Council**

This principle is already embedded within the Council's adopted Strategic Plan, which prioritises sustainable growth and regeneration as key drivers for economic vitality. Whilst aspects, such as Vacancy rates are already reported, members may wish to consider how reporting on these elements can be strengthened to ensure transparency and demonstrate the impact of Council actions and services on town centres.

b. **Develop a High Streets and Town Centres Action Plan**

The development of a comprehensive Action Plan would require dedicated resources and funding to develop and then coordinate delivery. This work is not currently within the approved or proposed budget and would need to be considered as part of the forthcoming budget-setting process by Members. The scope and ambition of such a plan will depend on the level of investment Members are prepared to allocate. There is usually a lot of work required in advance of an action plan. This is also costly given the number of towns in Central Bedfordshire.

c. **Write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer**

This action can be undertaken and provides an opportunity to highlight the significant challenges faced by town centre and high street businesses in Central Bedfordshire. In particular, the Council can draw attention to the cessation of UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF), which were introduced to replace EU funding.

With these programmes now concluded, and subsequent funding streams being directed to Mayoral Combined Authorities or designated towns, none of which include towns in Central Bedfordshire, the Council faces an even greater reduction in external funding/investment. This places additional pressure on local resources and underlines the need for government support to help our high streets thrive. This is a political decision.

Council priorities

12. The Central Bedfordshire Strategic Plan 2024–2027 sets out the council's vision and priorities for creating thriving communities and a strong local economy, which directly supports the ambition for vibrant and prosperous high streets and town centres.

13. The plan identifies four key priorities: Thriving Communities, Economic Growth, Sustainability and Climate Action, and Infrastructure and Connectivity. These priorities underpin regeneration efforts and ensure that town centres remain central to community life.

14. Under Thriving Communities, the plan commits to making town centres inclusive spaces for social interaction, cultural activities, and local identity.

15. The Economic Growth priority focuses on supporting local businesses, attracting investment, and creating jobs, which strengthens the commercial vitality of high streets. Investment in Infrastructure and Connectivity ensures that town centres are accessible and attractive, with improvements to transport links and public realm.

16. Finally, the emphasis on Sustainability embeds climate resilience and green infrastructure into regeneration projects, aligning with the council's environmental commitments. Together, these objectives provide a clear framework for delivering high streets and town centres that are economically robust, socially vibrant, and environmentally sustainable.

Legal Implications

17. The Council's responsibilities for high streets and town centres fall into two broad categories: statutory duties (required by law) and discretionary responsibilities (policy-driven or strategic). These include statutory duties that relate to planning and development control, highway and public realm maintenance and public protection and licensing. The Council also has statutory powers to take action, such as High Street Rental Auctions.

Financial and Risk Implications

18. Outside of the funding provided to deliver statutory duties and services there is no dedicated resource or budget to develop an Action Plan without provision being made in the next budget.
19. As detailed in the report, this is exacerbated by the ending of UKSPF funding for regeneration projects after March 2026 and Central Bedfordshire not sitting under a mayoral combined authority or any towns in the Central Bedfordshire area being allocated Pride in Place funding.

Equalities and Fairness Implications

20. Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty under the Equality Act 2010 with respect to the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). Section 149 of the Act details the requirement when taking decisions to have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
21. The duty requires public authorities to demonstrate that they are making financial decisions in a fair, transparent and accountable way, considering the needs and the rights of different members of their community.
22. The proposed motion seeks to strengthen support for high streets and town centres, which can have positive equality and fairness implications. Vibrant town centres provide accessible services, employment opportunities, and social spaces for all residents, including those from disadvantaged or rural communities.
23. However, any future action plan or regeneration initiatives must ensure inclusivity by considering the needs of diverse groups, including people with disabilities, older residents, and those without access to private transport. Engagement with local communities and businesses will be essential to avoid unintended impacts and to promote fairness in the distribution of benefits.
24. All decision making will include consideration of the findings within completed equality impact assessments where appropriate.

Biodiversity and Sustainability Implications

25. Regeneration and investment in town centres present opportunities to enhance sustainability and biodiversity. Measures such as incorporating green infrastructure, improving active travel routes, and supporting low-carbon development can contribute to environmental goals.
26. Conversely, without careful planning, increased development could lead to loss of green space or higher carbon emissions. Any High Streets and Town Centres Action Plan should therefore align with the Council's sustainability objectives, ensuring that interventions promote climate resilience, energy efficiency, and biodiversity net gain wherever possible.

Conclusion and next steps

27. The report acknowledges Cllr Holland-Lindsay's motion and details where action can be taken and where further input from Councillors is needed. It also recognises that a lot of good work has been done by the council to support our High Streets but that future funding and resource implications represent a significant challenge.

Appendices

Appendix A: Motion proposed by Councillor Holland-Lindsay to Full Council – 20th November 2025

Background Papers

- None

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