

RECORD OF EXECUTIVE DECISION TAKEN BY AN EXECUTIVE MEMBER

This form **MUST** be used to record any decision taken by the Elected Mayor or an individual Executive Member (Portfolio Holder).

The form must be completed and passed to the Head of Members' Services no later than NOON on the second working day after the day on which the decision is taken. No action may be taken to implement the decision(s) recorded on this form until 7 days have passed and the Head of Members' Services has confirmed the decision has not been called in.

1. Description of decision

To approve 4-hour free Town Centre Car Parking at Allhallows multi-storey car park, and the extension of overnight free parking to 08.30am (from 06.00am) at both Allhallows and Lurke Street multi-storey car parks, from 1 February 2024 to 31 March 2024.

2. Date of decision

22 January 2024

3. Reasons for decision

The aim of offering four hours free parking is to encourage more customers into the town centre to use the local shops and businesses.

The current four hours free parking trial is due to close at the end of January 2024 with a report on the full findings to follow in March 2024. Outputs to date (presented in the report at Appendix A) suggest an increase of over 30,000 cars parking in town centre car parks, an increase in town centre footfall and no quantifiable negative impact on elements, such as air quality or public transport use when comparing the same time periods in 2022 and 2023 and without and with the four hours free car parking respectively.

There is a current proposal in the budget for 2024/2025 to extend free car parking for the full financial year. Should four hours free car parking cease as planned at the end of January 2024 and the budget for financial year 2024/2025 is agreed in a similar timescale then there would be a two-month period where parking charges would be reintroduced before again being removed as of 1 April 2024. This could cause confusion and frustration with current users of the free parking provision and businesses within the town centre. This could then undermine the increases in car park usage and footfall to date and cause reputational damage to both the service and the administration in its commitment to revive Bedford's town centre by encouraging more customers to the town to use the local shops and businesses.

Extending free car parking for these two months (at an estimated cost of £30,000 based on income foregone for the car parks in question for comparable months) allows the relevant governance to take place around both the four hours free parking trial period and the 2024/2025 budget whilst maintaining the increases in car parking numbers and footfall prior to its formal introduction in 2024/2025 should appropriate agreements be reached.

4. Alternatives considered and rejected.

Reintroduction of standard car parking charges at Allhallows and removal of the extension of overnight free parking to 08.30 (from 06.00) at both Allhallows and Lurke Street has been considered.

The 2024/2025 budget includes a proposal to extend 4-hour free car parking in the town centre for the full financial year. Should four hours free car parking cease as planned at the end of January 2024, and the budget for financial year 2024/2025 is agreed in a similar timescale, then there would be a two-month period where parking charges would be reintroduced before again being removed as of 1 April 2024. It is considered that this could cause confusion and frustration with current users of the free parking provision and adversely affect the commitment to revive Bedford's town centre by encouraging more customers to the town to use the local shops and businesses.

5. How decision is to be funded

Funding of £30,000 to be drawn from Environment Reserves.

6. Conflicts of interest

Name of all Executive members who were consulted AND declared a conflict of interest.	Nature of interest	Did Standards Committee give a dispensation for that conflict of interest? (If yes, give details and date of dispensation)	Did the Chief Executive give a dispensation for that conflict of interest? (If yes, give details and the date of the dispensation).

The Mayor has been consulted on this decision

Not Applicable

Signed 

Date: 22 January 2024

Name of Decision Taker: Tom Wootton

This is a public document. A copy of it must be given to the Head of Members' Services as soon as it is completed.

Date decision published:23January2024.....

Date decision can be implemented if not called in:1February2024.....

(Decision to be made exempt from call in.....NO.....)

Bedford Borough Council – REPORT TO MAYOR AND PORTFOLIO HOLDERS (TOWN CENTRE AND HIGHWAYS)

Date: 22 January 2024

Report by: Chief Officer Transport, Highways and Engineering

Subject: Introduction of 4-Hour Free Town Centre Car Parking – 1 February 2024 to 31 March 2024

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The Executive wishes to revive Bedford's town centre by encouraging more customers to the town. One way of doing so could be by opening some Multi Storey Car Parks to 4 hours free parking every day and extending overnight free parking.
- 1.2. Due to the unquantified impact on a number of areas from car park income to network operation, the concept is currently being tested in the form of a trial for four hours free parking at a single multi storey car park (Allhallows) and the extension of overnight free parking to 0830 (from 0600) at both Allhallows and Lurke Street for the period of six months from August 2023 to January 2024 inclusive.
- 1.3. The current trial is due to cease at the end of January 2024 and reporting on the trial will follow in March 2024. There is a proposal in the draft budget for 2024/2025 for free car parking at Allhallows for the full financial year from April 2024 until March 2025, and potentially extending the offer in year to other car parks within available resources. This is subject to approval by Full Council in February 2024. Should this be ratified then there would be a two-month period (February and March 2024 inclusive) where parking charges would return before free parking was potentially reintroduced in April 2024 undermining the effectiveness of the trial in encouraging more visitors to the town centre as part of a suite of measures to revive the town centre.
- 1.4. There is currently no agreement or budget provision to extend free car parking from the end of January until the end of March 2024. Based on the trial to date this is anticipated to cost approximately £30,000 to cover the income foregone from offering four hours free car parking. Funding from an environment reserve has been identified to cover this income foregone. The provision of four hours free car parking for February 2024 and March 2024 would need an Executive Decision.

- 1.5. The key findings to date (five months covering August to December inclusive) are presented in section 5 of this document and highlight over 30,000 additional cars parking in our town centre car parks during the five-month period August to December 2023 in comparison to the same period in 2022. Elements such as public transport usage and air quality have not been affected negatively during this same period.
- 1.6. This report on the preliminary findings will not replace the report on the trial (August to January inclusive) which will follow in March 2024 but provides an overview of the outputs from the trial to date to allow discussion and decision over service provision between the end of the current trial and the potential introduction of free car parking from the new financial year should the budget for 2024/25 be agreed.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. To extend the provision of four hours free car parking at a single multi storey car park (Allhallows) and the extension of overnight free parking to 0830 (from 0600) at both Allhallows and Lurke Street for February 2024 and March 2024 inclusive.

3. Reasons for Recommendation

- 3.1. The preliminary outputs from the trial highlight an increase in car park usage by over 30,000 vehicles with no marked negative impact on elements such as public transport usage and air quality.
- 3.2. Should the trial end on the 30th of January but the budget allocation for free car parking be approved for financial year 2024/25 on or before this date then there will be a two-month period (February and March inclusive) where full car parking charges will be reinstated.

This is likely to cause confusion and frustration with those current users of the free parking provision and local businesses in the town centre. Furthermore, this has the potential to undermine the increases in usage to date and cause reputational damage to both the service and the administration in its commitment to revive Bedford's town centre by encouraging more customers to the town centre.

Implications

Legal

- 3.3. There are no legal limits on the amount that a local authority may charge for the provision of off-street parking but there are restrictions on the level of penalty charges that may be imposed.
- 3.4. The local authority may keep the money raised from parking charges including the penalty charges for infringing parking restrictions. If the amount raised exceeds the cost of administration of the current or previous years, the local authority may either roll the surplus forward to cover the costs of future parking controls or it may use the surplus for approved purposes.

Policy

- 3.5. Bedford's Parking Strategy (2011 - 2021) provides a comprehensive framework for determining parking provision in Bedford to '*effectively use parking controls and resources to stimulate regeneration and local economic activity*'. The findings from the trial will feed into the updated parking strategy coming forward as part of the next iteration of the Local Transport Plan.

Resources

- 3.6. The cumulative cost of the trial for the period August – December inclusive is £79,635.95 so in line with the original estimate of income foregone from providing four hours free parking at a single multi storey car park (All Hallows) and the extension of overnight free parking to 0830 (from 0600) at both Allhallows and Lurke Street for the period of six months from August to January inclusive. Based on the current monthly and cumulative loss of income we would expect the extension of four hours free car parking for February and March to cost in the region of £30,000.
- 3.7. The Revenue Budget includes a contingency of £0.500 million for one-off items. The expected loss of car parking income until the end of the current trial will be funded from the contingency. To continue the provision of four hours free car parking for both February and March, additional funding to cover the income foregone would come from an environment specific reserve which has been identified.
- 3.8. The extension of the provision of four hours free car parking would need to be ratified via executive decision with the potential for the decision to be called in.

Risk Implications (text in italic are findings from the first five months of the trial)

- Reduction in parking income of approximate £95,000 – *Loss of parking income is broadly in line with this estimate.*
- Increase in cars and associated factors such as congestion and detrimental impacts on air quality – *No material impact on air quality from the findings of the first 5 months of the trial (presented in more detail in section 5) impacts on congestion to be presented in the report on the full trial but anecdotally are largely unaffected by the trial.*
- Reduction in use of alternative modes of travel into Bedford (public transport, walking and cycling); *No material impact on public transport from the findings of the first 5 months of the trial (presented in more detail in section 5) and whilst difficult to quantify impacts on walking and cycling will be explored in the report to be completed at the end of the trial; and*
- Increased security costs associated with more vehicles parked in Borough car parks overnight leading to an increase in vandalism and or theft. *No reports of theft or damage from any of the car parks during this period*

Environmental Implications and contribution to achieving a net zero carbon Council by 2030

- 3.9. Air quality in Bedford Borough is mostly very good, however, there are locations where pollutants build up and are slow to disperse due to traffic volumes and road traffic routes with unfavourable layouts/local geography.
- 3.10. Allhallows car park is located within the Air Quality Management Area (AQMA) designated across much of Bedford's town centre. An AQMA is declared for an area where the local air quality is unlikely to meet the Government's national air quality objectives.
- 3.11. As presented in section 5, air quality has not been materially affected when comparing the same time periods in both 2022 and 2023 and a comparison between normal operation and the four hours free parking trial.

Equalities Impact

- 4.6 The Council has considered whether this report has any equalities impact and determined that the activity has no relevance to Bedford Borough Council's statutory equalities duty to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relation and, therefore, an equality analysis is not needed.

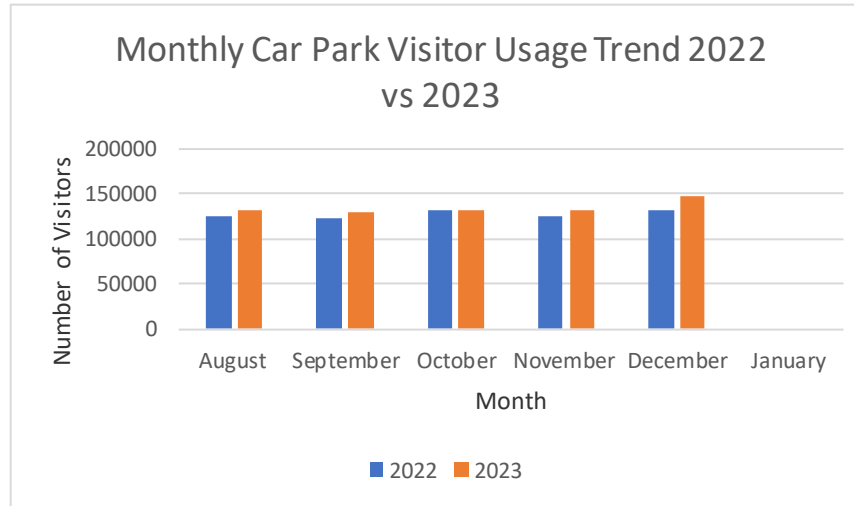
4. Detail

- 4.1. Data collected on the trial impact covers:

- Impact on MSCP with 4 hours free parking and extended overnight parking – principally in terms of positive or negative increases or decreases in usage compared to the same period in 2022;
- Impact on parking income and the usage of our town centre car-parking stock to understand a cumulative positive or negative impact on parking numbers as a whole.

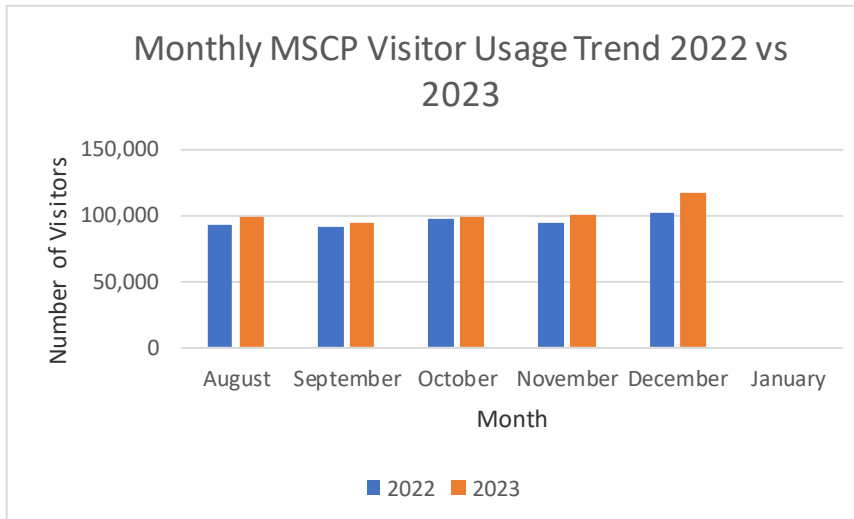
Total Monthly Car Park Usage

Month	2022	2023	Annual Change
August	125,310	130,977	5,667
September	123,873	129,392	5,519
October	130,845	130,765	-80
November	125,935	132,689	6,754
December	131,010	147,227	16,217



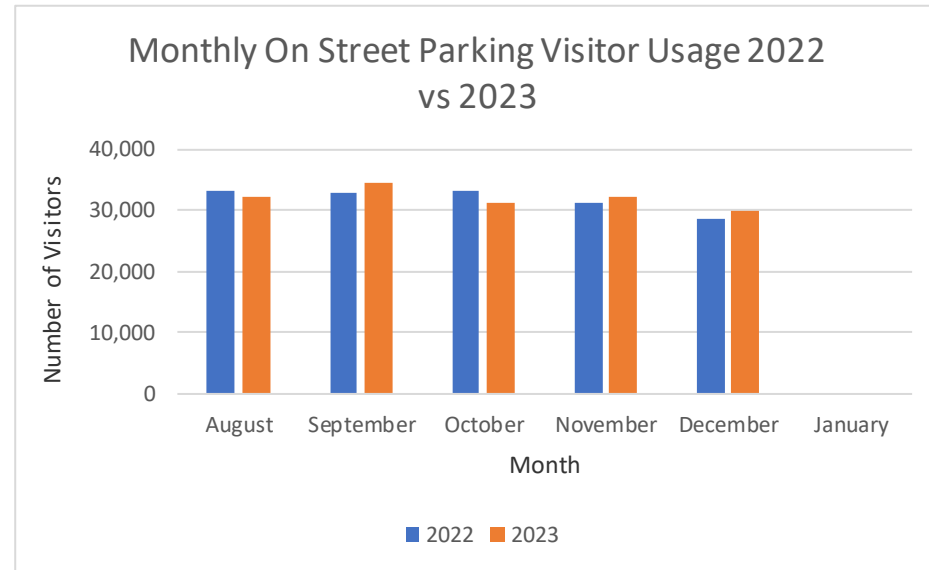
Monthly MSCP Usage

Month	2022	2023	Annual Change
August	92,151	98,699	6,548
September	90,901	94,849	3,948
October	97,508	99,553	2,045
November	94,617	100,364	5,747
December	102,395	117,391	14,996



Monthly On Street Parking Usage

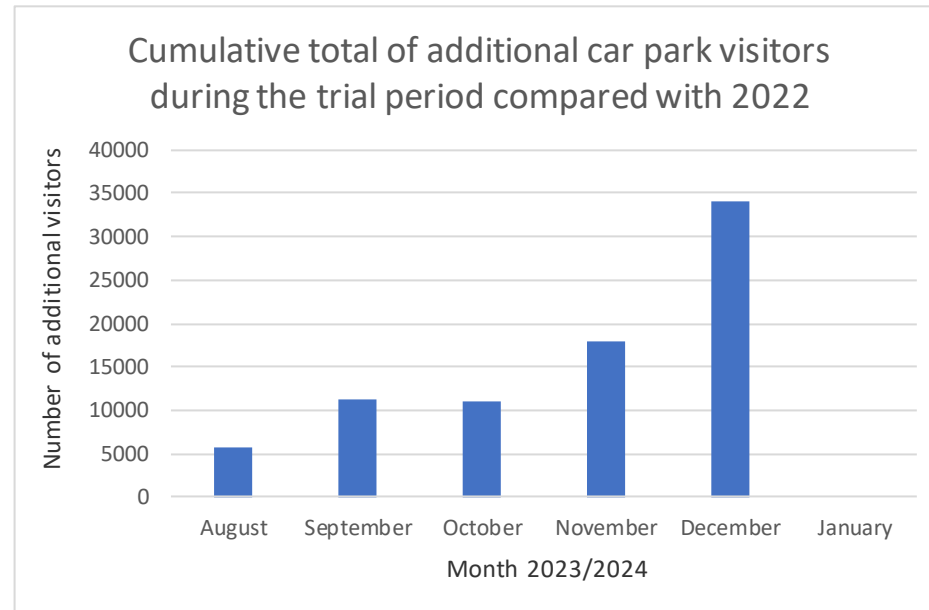
Month	2022	2023	Annual Change
August	33,159	32,278	-881
September	32,972	34,543	1,571
October	33,337	31,212	-2,125
November	31,318	32,325	1,007
December	28,615	29,836	1,221



Cumulative change in visitor numbers using town centre car parks

Month (2023/4)	Cumulative Total Visitors
August	5,667
September	11,186
October	11,106
November	17,860
December	34,077

Cumulative additional car park visitors August – December 2023: **34,077**

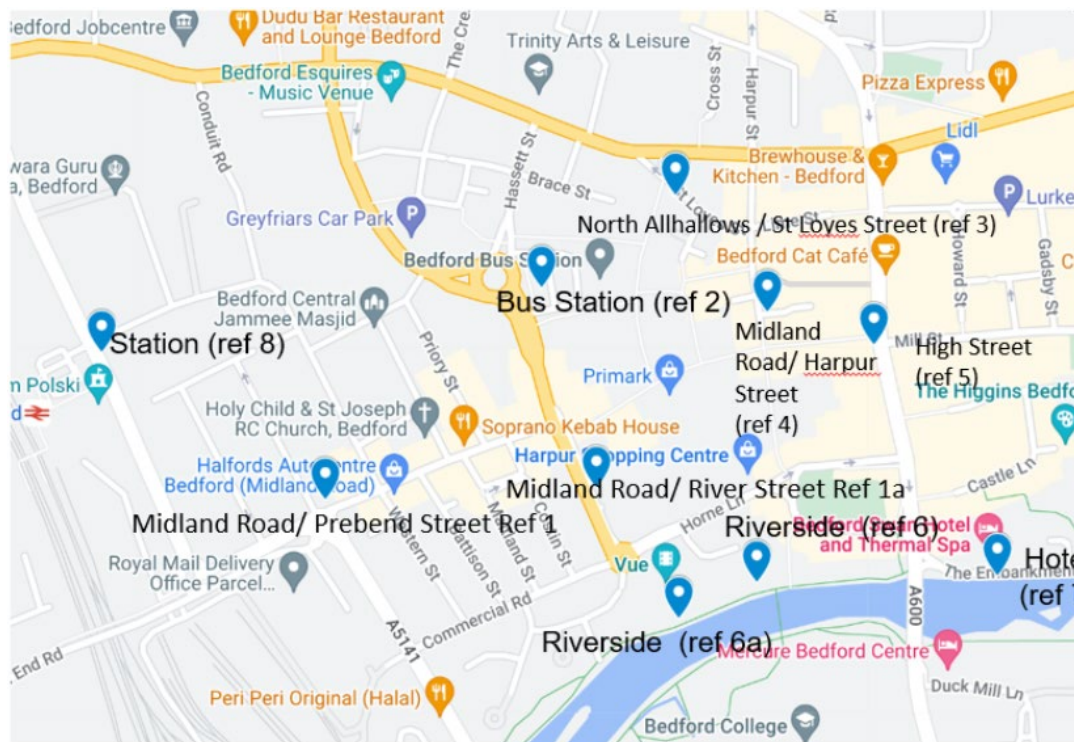


- **Town centre footfall to understand a positive or negative impact on numbers of visitors in the town centre.**

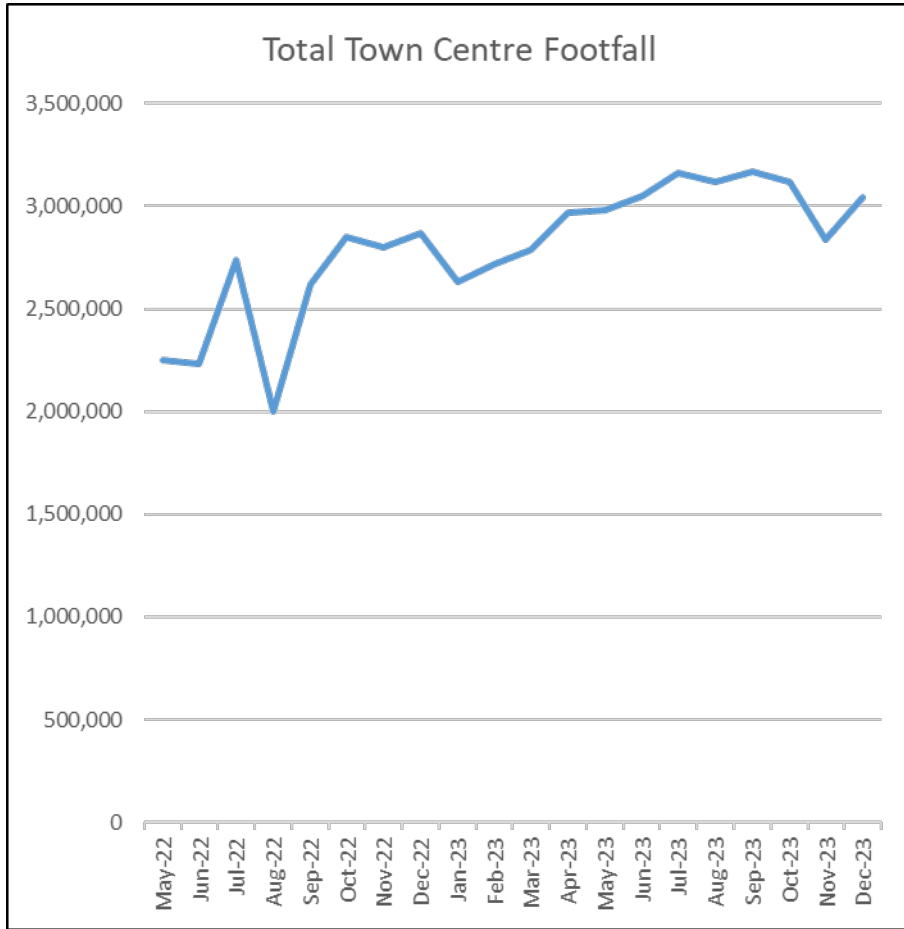
The impact of the free parking trial on the number of people visiting and spending time in Bedford town centre has been measured through the use of footfall counters placed in a variety of key locations (see table below).

Location of Bedford town centre footfall counters

Reference	Location
1	Midland Road/Prebend Street
1a	Midland Road/River Street
2	Bedford Bus Station
3	North Allhallows/St Loyes Street
4	Midland Road/Harpur Street
5	Silver Street/High Street
6	Riverside Bedford (East)
6a	Riverside Bedford (West)
7	Swan Hotel
8	Bedford Train Station



Town Centre Footfall Trends

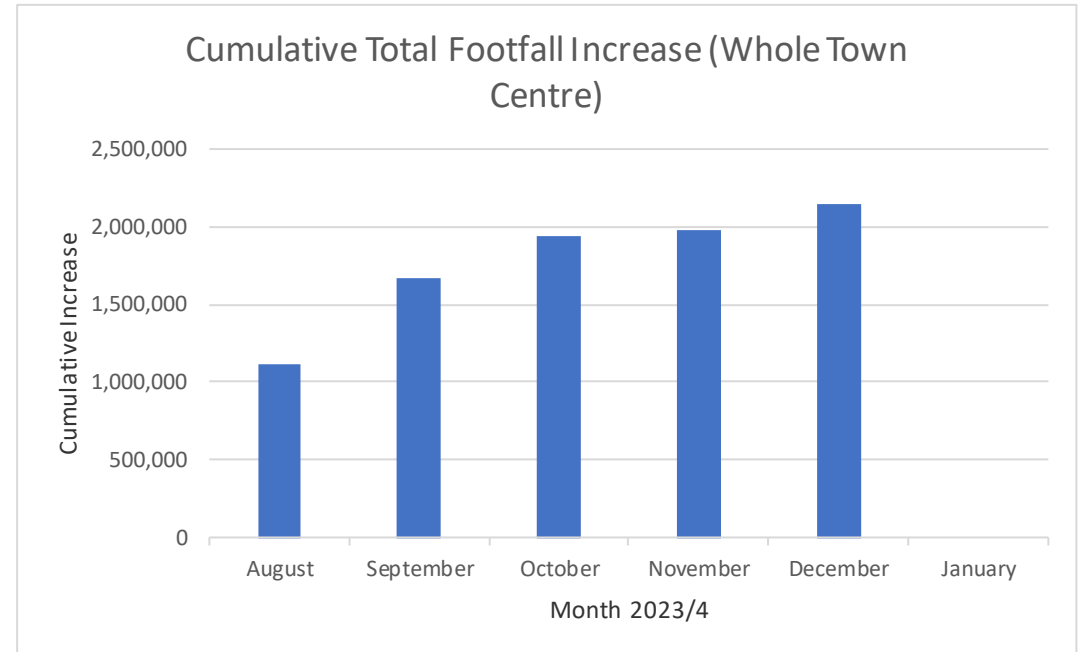


Month	2022	2023	Percentage Change
August	2,000,000	3,120,000	56%
September	2,620,000	3,170,000	21%
October	2,850,000	3,120,000	9.5%
November	2,800,000	2,835,620	1.3%
December	2,870,000	3,040,000	5.9%

Cumulative Footfall Change

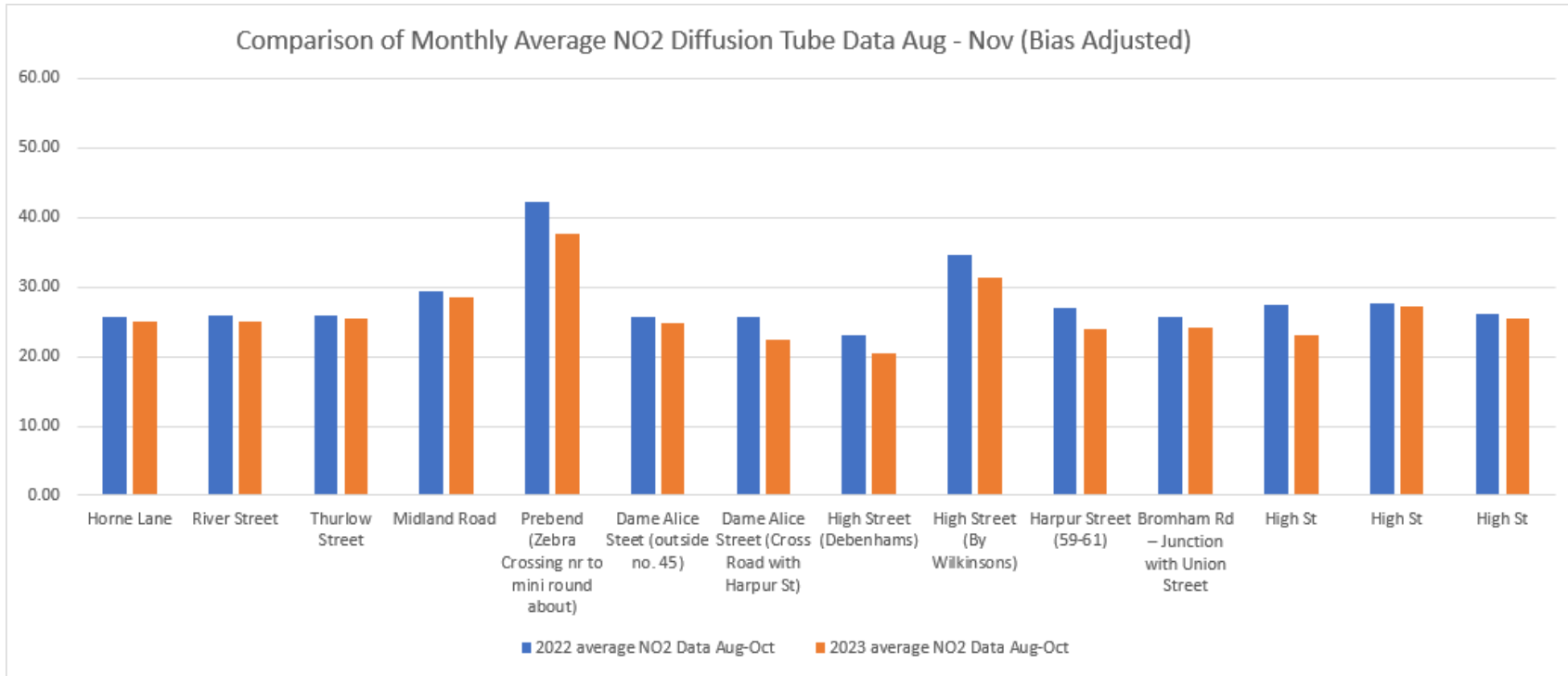
Month	Cumulative Total Footfall Increase
August	1,120,000
September	1,670,000
October	1,940,000
November	1,975,620
December	2,145,620

- Cumulative increase in footfall December to August 2023: **2,145,620**



- positive or negative impact on air quality

The graph below shows monthly average monitoring data for NO2 at a number of roadside locations around Allhallows car park, between August and November 2022 and the same period in 2023.

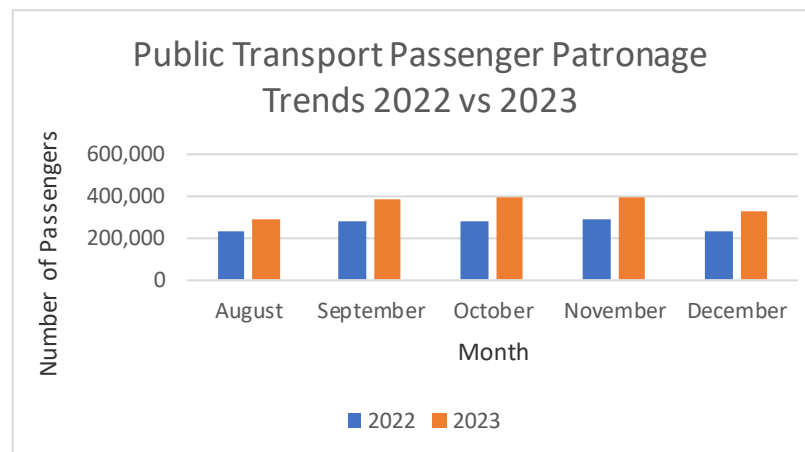


- **Positive or negative impact on the use of public transport during the trial period**

To understand the impact of the free parking trial on the use of public transport, the number of passengers using public buses in the borough was recorded and compared with the figures for the respective months in 2022, and 2023. The data collected includes passengers travelling on all routes across Bedford Borough.

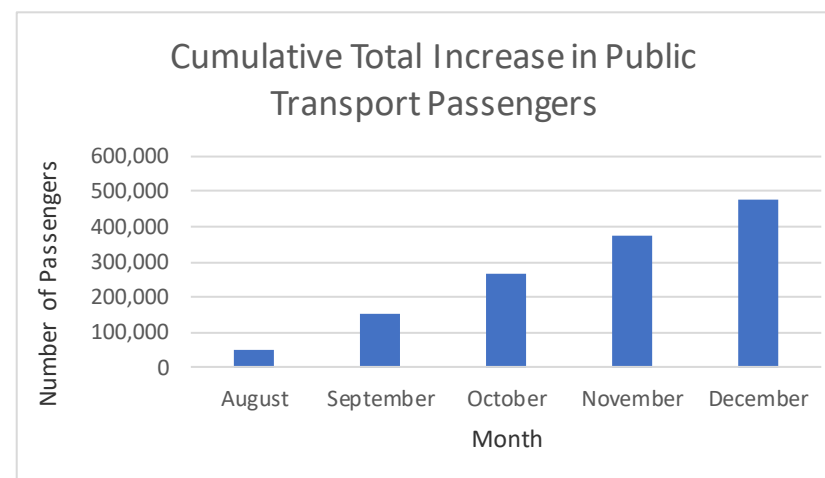
Monthly Passenger Patronage

Month	2022	2023	Number Change	Percentage Change
August	233,721	285,174	51,453	22%
September	275,450	378,730	103,280	37.5%
October	277,287	388,502	111,215	40.1%
November	287,905	397,005	109,100	37.9%
December	228,797	330,462	101,665	44.4%



Cumulative change in passenger numbers

Month	Cumulative Total Increase in Passengers
August	51,453
September	154,733
October	265,948
November	375,048
December	476,713



- Cumulative increase in public transport passengers: **476,713**

5. **Summary of Consultations and Outcome**

5.1. Report circulated to Chief Officers for:

- Environment;
- Planning and Economic Development;
- Regulatory Services;
- Commercial Services & Business Transformation;
- Finance; and
- Legal, Performance and Democratic Services

6. **Ward Councillor Views**

6.1. Ward members have not been approached for comment at this point. However, a full report on the outcome of the trial will be published at the end of the trial period and they will be consulted on at the end of trial.