

Agenda item 6

Committee	Assets & Services
Month	October 2021
Report Title	Road Closure Consultation
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Attachments	Appendix A – PowerPoint presentation

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1. Purpose of Report

To provide Committee with an analysis of the results following the public consultation on the road closures in Saffron Walden.

2. Background information

2.1 SWTC has long maintained a desire to pedestrianize the town centre of Saffron Walden. This was first formally agreed at a Full Council meeting on 9th October 2017 and is recorded below, extract from Minutes 09.10.17, as recorded under Minute Reference FC319-17:

Proposed Pedestrianisation of Market Square

As per Minute Reference P & RT 389-17, the P & RT Committee recommends the following motion to Council

“Consideration of popularising the Towns attraction by introduction of seasonal pedestrianisation during the summer period at set times and the possibility of utilising the horse and carriage theme on a thoughtful and financially viable design mode for the Town and local attractions and that the trial period be for Fridays and Sundays only in July and August 2018 from 11am to 5.30pm but to also include the August Monday Bank Holiday”

Council considered the motion as proposed, noting that the motion was to “consider” and that therefore Officers would be tasked with ascertaining further information, carrying out consultation and reviewing potential costs. Council was not therefore being asked at this time to implement pedestrianisation, this decision would come forward again to Council with a full report, identifying necessary steps and costs associated with the proposed pedestrianisation. It was

Resolved:

Unanimously to accept the motion as proposed, noting that Officers will bring this matter forward to a future meeting with further details for determination on whether to implement the pedestrianisation or otherwise on a trial basis.

2.2 Subsequent to this agreement, the Town Council later resolved to initially progress formal amendments required for the market closure orders; this separates the two requirements, maintaining a distinction between the two and avoiding any later confusion.

2.3 Changes to the market TRO have progressed separately which simply formalise current practice and activity. With the conclusion of that work, SWTC was better placed to carry out public consultation to meet the objective as per the Full Council meeting of October 2017.

2.4 In May 2020 using UK Covid-19 regulations¹ and to allow greater social distancing, a Temporary Traffic Regulation Order (TTRO) was introduced in the town centre, restricting traffic movement and allowing increased space for pedestrians and shoppers. The TTRO is

¹ UK Gov (2020b) under the Statutory guidance: Reallocating road space in response to COVID-19: statutory guidance for local authorities

valid until mid-January 2022 and all tiers of local authorities are supportive of its retention until expiry. This retention further accords with advice and guidance from central Government.²

The desire to pedestrianise the area was already embedded in Council policy, an extract from the policy (last reviewed September 2021), reads “*Implement better pedestrian use of the Market Square, including considering part or full pedestrianisation*”. This aspiration is further supported in policy SW20 of the SWNP “Promoting Walking and Cycling” and aligns with the promotion of sustainable transport in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

2.5 In spring 2021, a Town Council Working Group consisting of Councillors and Officers was established to oversee the Town Council’s consultation process.

3. Rationale

3.1 The Importance of Rationale

Rationale is reasoning or justification for an action or a choice made, focussing on “WHY”. Establishment of the rationale further reduces the risk of later misunderstandings or omissions.

The covid road closures are a game-changer in providing a taster of pedestrianisation, something which has not been experienced previously. It is important to grasp the opportunity of pedestrianisation as visitors/shoppers experience a traffic-free town centre. Informal public engagement evidenced a ground-swell of support for pedestrianisation.

To date, the Council’s corporate priority has not progressed due to pressures of other work and the impact of covid on Council business.³

3.2 Consultation Primary Aims and Objectives

To carry out a 2-phased public consultation on the road closures in Saffron Walden

- **Phase 1:** to establish a benchmark of current behaviour and desires (the basis of this report and the consultation analysis).
- **Phase 2:** using evidence from phase 1, to formulate specific proposals for phase 2 of the consultation process.

² As per the forward from Grant Shapps MP, Secretary of State for Transport given on 30.07.21 to the Statutory guidance; Traffic Management Act 2004: network management to support recovery from COVID-19. Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reallocating-road-space-in-response-to-covid-19-statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities/traffic-management-act-2004-network-management-in-response-to-covid-19>

³ During the height of covid, SWTC business and focus moved towards offering direct help and assistance to residents with many staff diverted to practical community support; corporate priorities were purposefully paused, allowing the Council to focus on the immediacy of the covid situation.

SMART principles supported the rationale, adding clarity and definition with the project aims and objectives summarised below:

SMART PRINCIPLES		
	Definition	Response
Specific	Is the objective clear?	Yes - a public consultation on road closures in the town centre.
Measurable	How will progress be measured?	Targets will be set for defined activities. There is a defined start and finish.
Achievable	Is the Council equipped to complete the project?	Yes - although other resources will be needed. A step-by-step work/time plan identified resources, including funding.
Relevant	Is this worth doing? Is the timing right?	Yes - supported by local and national policies and priorities. Timing is optimum given current closures.
Time-bound	How long will it take?	Approximately 6 months.

3.3 Options

Having established the rationale, options and resourcing were further considered.

Option 1:

Carry out public consultation, providing an evidence-base for any future action which may reconcile historic tension and conflict between cars and pedestrians.

SWTC's position is clear; it wishes to pedestrianize the town centre but will be led/directed by public consultation. Previous consultations have failed as Council has not tackled disadvantages (actual or perceived) or demonstrated tangible benefits.

Option 2:

Do nothing. Revert to pre-covid road closures in January 2022 with no scheduled consultation; this option fails to progress one of the Council's strategic priorities or deal with the contentiousness of parking vs pedestrianisation in the town centre. Further, it does not accord with the Government's edict of retaining covid road closures "*Schemes must not be removed prematurely or without proper evidence*" Shapps⁴ (2021).

3.4 What the consultation did not achieve

The concluded consultation and subsequent analysis only concerns itself with Phase 1 of the consultation process and not the consultation outcome.

⁴ Shapps, Grant: Secretary of State for Transport, UK

4. Consultation Process

4.1 In June 2021, the Town Council entered into an agreement with CommonPlace, an online engagement platform, with an online consultation being the primary means of consulting with residents and businesses about road closures.

4.2 The online consultation was created and formed by SWTC Officers with help and support from CommonPlace. All questions were reviewed by the established Working Group, with members being able to access a draft version of the consultation; this enabled the site to be tested and reviewed prior to official launch.

4.3 The consultation did not present specific options to the public/businesses and the intention of this first phase was to simply identify a benchmark of behaviour and preferences. The information from phase 1 will form the basis of any specific options for phase 2.

4.4 The questionnaire was designed so that it could be completed by any individual or businesses although part of the consultation was specifically aimed at businesses.

4.5 Paper copies were also provided in a range of community outlets including the Tourist Information Centre, library and community centres. Paper copies were also hand delivered to a number of local care homes.

4.6 The consultation ran from 16.07.21 to 31.08.21

5. Marketing and Promotion of the Consultation

5.1 A promotional / marketing campaign was launched to promote the online consultation; a range of social media channels were used, along with conventional advertising in local newspapers (including outside of Saffron Walden). The consultation was promoted regularly and online respondents were able to sign up to an electronic newsletter which provided further updates and encouragement to share details of the online consultation.

5.2 Retailers were engaged via the Business Improvement District who were sent full details of the consultation process and requested to encourage business participation. Details of the consultation, including a QR link, were distributed to various cafes and restaurants in town for customers and workers in the premises.

During the consultation process, a number of local businesses were visited by SWTC Officers, reminding them of the consultation and encouraging participation.

5.3 Two face to face consultation days were held on Saffron Walden market on 27.07.21 and 10.08.21

5.4 Local schools were contacted and requested to share the online details through their ParentMail services.

6. Analysis of Phase 1 Consultation

6.1 The supporting Power Point presentation provides details of responses to a number of questions with the final slides offering an evaluation and summary of findings. This is followed with a recommendation for the next stage (phase 2) of the consultation process; this recommendation is repeated below for ease of reference.

7. Recommendation

To carry out phase 2 of the consultation process, offering the following options:

1. Complete pedestrianisation of Market Square (as per current covid road closures)
2. Part pedestrianisation of the Market Square. This would involve retention of the pedestrian area of Market Square but re-opening of King Street / part of Market Street to traffic
3. Reopening of all streets (i.e. no road closures at anytime, other than the existing market closures)

Both options 1 and 2 above have a number of variables that could be considered, for example:

Road closures could be limited to certain days/times of the week and/or limited to certain periods of the year (say from April to Sept/Oct).