

EASTLEIGH LOCAL AREA EASTLEIGH LOCAL AREA COMMITTEE

15 September 2020

EASTLEIGH TOWN CENTRE COVID RECOVERY PLAN UPDATE

Report of the Corporate Director for Service Delivery

Recommendations)

It is recommended that the committee consider the content of this report and support:

- (1) The proposal to keep Market Street and High Street including a section of Wells Place closed until 21 April 2021;
 - (2) A recommendation to Cabinet to approve the introduction of a 'buy one hour get one hour free' offer for all pay and display car parks in the town centre when a ticket is purchased using RingGo, the contactless payment system. This will initially be for the period until 1 January 2021;
 - (3) A recommendation to Cabinet to approve the proposal to remove the 3-hour tariff at Wells Place car park;
 - (4) The proposal to introduce an exemption to the Temporary Traffic Regulation Order for funeral processions in Market Street and High Street to the Temporary Traffic Regulation Order; and
 - (5) The proposal to introduce a bus stand at the junction of Wells Road and Hanns Way.
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Summary

In response to government advice and to coincide with the reopening of non-essential shops on 15 June 2020, Eastleigh Borough Council (EBC) temporarily closed roads within Eastleigh Town Centre to create a safe trading environment and enable safe queuing and social distancing through the provision of additional road space to allow pedestrians to pass safely.

The scheme promotes active travel to the town centre and the safety of all who use our town and local centres, encouraging shoppers to return and use the boroughs businesses through the provision of a safe and welcoming environment.

Since its introduction the scheme has been monitored to evaluate the impact of the road closures on town centre businesses and visitor numbers, with the potential to develop a new shopping experience in the town centre and reduce air pollution levels.

Statutory Powers

- Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984

- Traffic Management Act 2004
- Road Traffic (Temporary Restrictions) Procedure Regulations 1992
- Business and Planning Act 2020

Strategic Implications

1. The introduction of social distancing measures in our towns and local centres to create a safe trading environment is a high priority for the Council. This cross-cutting issue is led by the Cabinet Member for Economy as part of the COVID-19 economic recovery package. However, this report proposes actions which also deliver against the Council's Environment ('Tackling congestion' and 'Excellent environment for all'), and Health and Wellbeing ('Enabling healthier lifestyles') Corporate objectives.

Introduction

2. Coronavirus (COVID-19) has impacted people's lives and health in many different ways. The social distancing measures imposed by the government to limit the spread of infection, have had a significant impact on the local economy and as these restrictions have begun to be lifted, have resulted in public concern over the safety of town centres.
3. The road closures in the town centre of Eastleigh have provided businesses with a safe environment to resume trading, encouraging the public to use the town as a safe shopping destination of choice. The Council's aspiration is to support the return of town centre footfall to its pre-COVID-19 levels.
4. There is also an opportunity to capitalise on the change in travel behaviours and culture seen during the lockdown to encourage active travel, particularly for short journeys, which is affordable, improves health and wellbeing, reduces congestion, improves the town's air quality and has no carbon emissions at the point of use.
5. The Council has sought and received significant feedback on the road closure scheme, from both the public and businesses in the town centre. This has been mixed with the majority of public responses being in favour, whilst most businesses either oppose it or have no firm view. More details on this can be found in the Business Feedback section below.

Duration of road closures

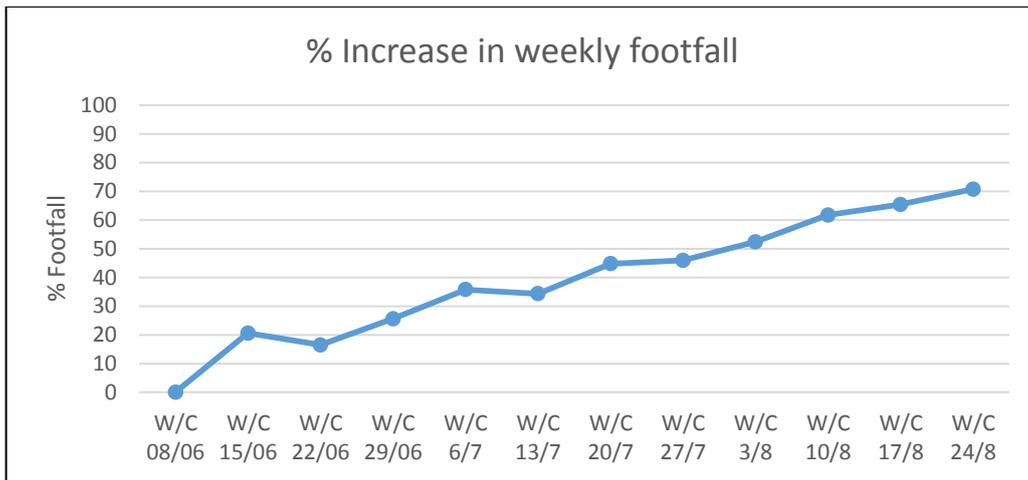
6. With social distancing measures still in place and the Government reintroducing restrictions on the 14 of September to limit gatherings of more than six people, there is still a high likelihood that the UK is moving towards the governments predicted second wave in COVID-19 infections before the end of the year. Whilst the safety of all those who use the town centre is of fundamental importance, there are a number of benefits in maintaining the current arrangements as the Rate of Infection (R rate) is now above 1;
 - Covid-19 cases are increasing across the Country and data published by the NHS for the week commencing 4 September shows an increase in the

infection rate across Hampshire Districts. The county's current weekly rate stands at 6.2 cases per 100,000 population, compared to the England weekly rate of 12.1.

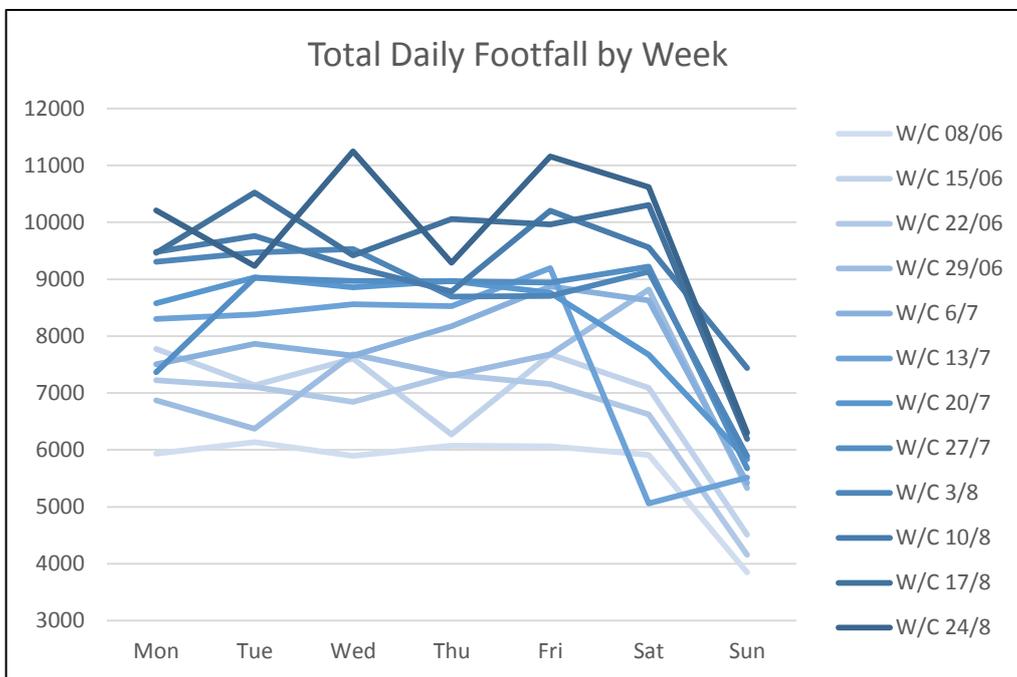
- Hampshire County Council (HCC) have included a scheme for the town centre in a bid to the Department for Transport which, if successful, would be used to improve the public realm in the town centre through a range of measures. These include changes to the entrances of the town, the provision of more planting and cycle parking facilities and the use of temporary surface treatments that will help to encourage social distancing and add an element of visual appeal.
 - To provide opportunity for new travel and shopping habits to establish, with more people shopping locally.
 - To provide businesses applying for pavement licences a degree of certainty over the use of these areas in the coming months.
 - To minimise the risk of Eastleigh becoming a local hotspot such has been seen in other parts of the country where local lockdowns have further impacted on the local economy.
 - To provide a degree of certainty for all who use the town centre, avoiding the need to reintroduce road closures should further increase in infections or future government restrictions be imposed. As footfall in the town centre increases there are a greater number of people in the town centre on a daily basis and there is still need for space to socially distance.
7. During this time the Council will continue to monitor and evaluate feedback from both businesses and the public and review the scheme to ensure that the measures operate safely, and any issues raised are addressed.

Footfall Data

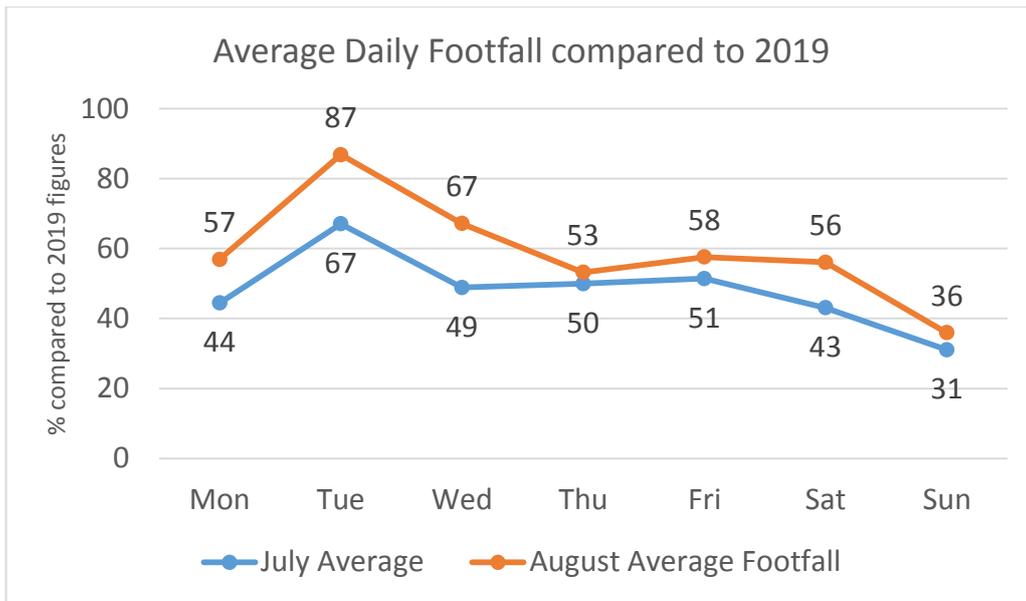
8. The road closures have been closely monitored since they came into effect. Footfall in the town centre has been measured through the network of 6 Geo-Sense footfall sensors located on Market Street, High Street, Wells Road and Leigh Road.
9. Since the reopening of non-essential retail on the 15 June, footfall in the town centre has increased. When compared to the week commencing 8 June, total weekly footfall increased by 20% in the first week of the closure and has continued to rise, with footfall in the week commencing 24 August 71% higher. The % change in weekly footfall can be seen in the graph below:



10. The weekly footfall patterns can be seen in more detail in the chart below:

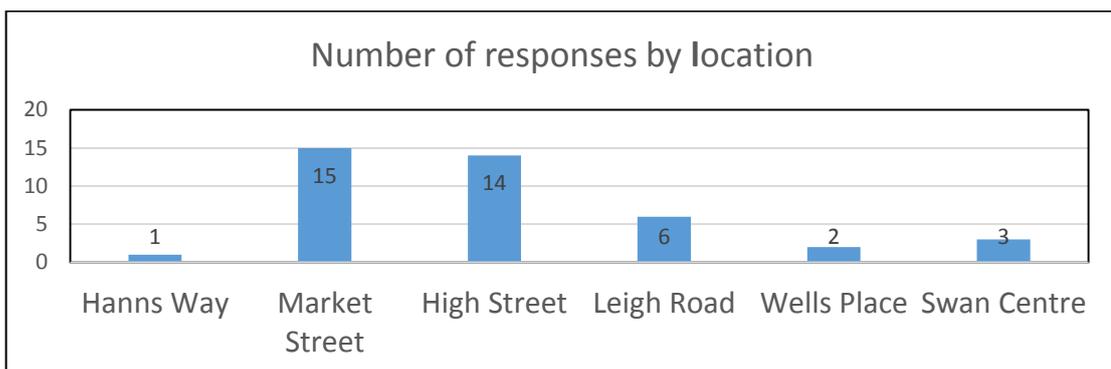


11. However, when compared to 2019 footfall figures there is still some way to go before levels return to normal. Footfall in July was on average 48% below 2019 levels but August rose to 59%, the monthly daily average is shown in the table below. Tuesday's have been performing particularly well, with footfall over the past 8 weeks regularly above 80%. This may be as a result of the 'eat out to help out' scheme run by Government attracting more visitors to the town centre. Sundays are still performing poorly with on average only 33% when compared to 2019 figures, which is likely to be due to limited Sunday opening times.

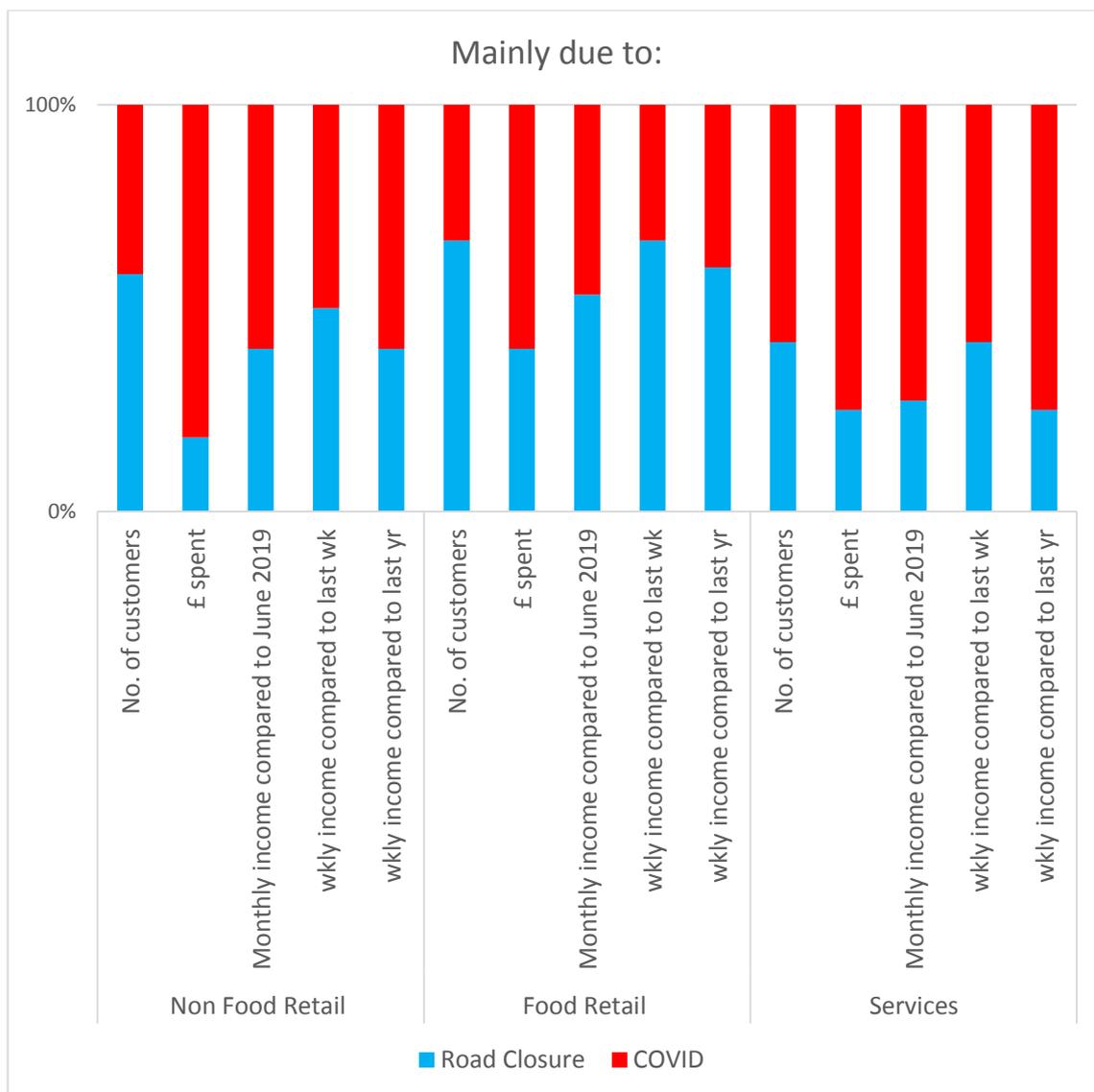


Businesses Feedback

- EBC have worked alongside Eastleigh Business Improvement District (BID) in gathering feedback from businesses on the economic impact of COVID-19 and the success of social distancing measures in the town centre. A business survey was sent out by email to the BID membership, which ran from 1 – 8 July. 52 responses were received from 41 unique businesses. Additionally, 1 business based at Barton Park Industrial Estate in Chicken Hall Lane responded, as this is outside of the area directly affected by the closure it has not been included in this analysis.



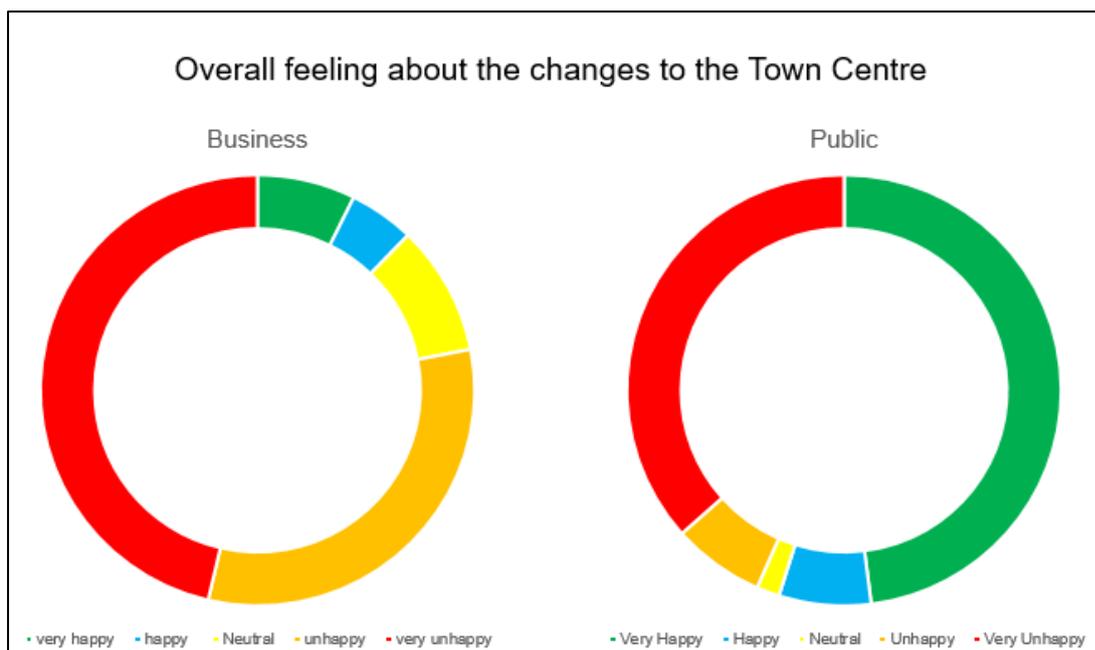
- Businesses were asked if they felt that changes to the number of customers, amount spent in store, monthly income, weekly income compared to last week and last year were mainly due to either the impact of COVID-19 or the impact of the road closures. The responses are set out in the table below by businesses type. The food retail businesses were more likely to associate change with the impact of the road closure than COVID-19 restrictions.



14. When asked about ways in which the Council could improve the town and support business:

- 51% would like to see more outdoor retail and café space
- 98% would like more shops to reopen
- 73% would like more events in the town centre
- 46% would like more trees and planting
- 68% would like more drop off and pick up space

15. The overall feelings about the changes to the town centre can be seen in the chart below, which shows a comparison between public and business feedback.



16. In addition to the business survey, between the 24 July and 6 August, face to face interviews with businesses within the town centre were carried out. 25 units were closed, and 51 businesses were unable to speak so a letter was delivered setting out the changes that were happening in the area and contact details should they wish to discuss any issues.
17. Interviews were carried out with 93 businesses, of which 24% were in support of the road closures, 28% were neutral and commented that the closures had had no impact on their business and 48% felt that the roads should be reopened to traffic. Comments from these interviews include:
- ‘There is less footfall, naturally, but how much of that is Covid and how much is a change in the market, it’s impossible to say. We enjoy being able to work with the door open now that there is less noise from the traffic.’
 - ‘There’s been no impact on trade, sales have been up and steady. The shop has queues as its so limited inside, and the extra space allows this to be safe, especially on Saturdays and early in the morning.’
 - ‘Please open the roads again, we have lots of customers that use the short-term parking outside and pop in’
 - ‘Town is not busy, so the closure is not needed as the pavements are 4 m wide. It has killed trade - some days we’ve had no customers. We have been open throughout lockdown with online orders being taken but people don’t want to pay for parking and the 3-6pm hours free parking has gone.’
 - ‘Close it forever. It would be nice to have more trees, and I think tables and chairs would be a great addition.’
 - ‘First week of the closure was great, it had no impact on trade, we are currently up on last year. Mornings are busy but not so much in the afternoon. Some people have commented about disabled access, but it would be nice to keep it longer term.’

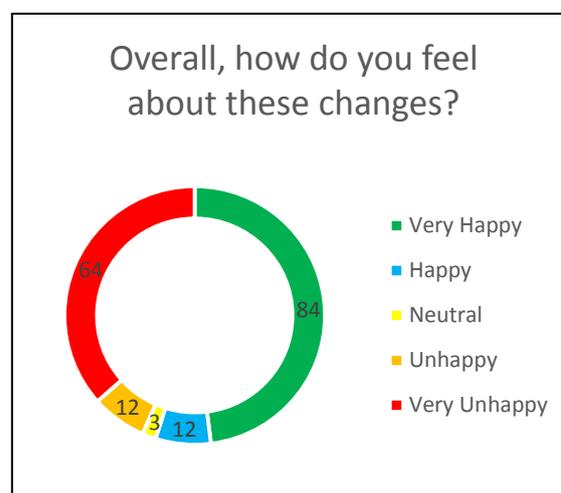
18. Since the beginning of June 2020 16 Businesses have been in direct contact with the Council regarding the road closures, and raised a number of issues regarding parking, deliveries and disabled access.
19. Concerns have been raised by One Community, the organisation which manages local community transport services, about parking in the vicinity of the Hanns Way and Wells Road junction. This prevents the community transport service from disembarking passengers safely from the rear of the vehicle, and particularly effects passengers who are wheelchair users. To address this issue the proposal is to install a bus stand which would provide a dedicated space for the community transport services on Wells Place close to the Shopmobility (Recommendation 5). The area is currently protected by double yellow lines and therefore a bus stand, in operation at certain times of day would limit the use of the space by blue badge holders.
20. Local funeral directors have requested special dispensation to allow funeral processions down Market Street and High Street. Recommendation 5 of this report proposes the introduction of an exemption to the Traffic Regulation Order for this purpose.

Public Feedback

21. To gather feedback from the public the scheme was added to the Sustrans 'Space to Move' survey and as of 11 August 175 responses had been submitted. A summary of the key points is set out below:

22. Of the 175 responses 55% were either Happy or Very Happy, 2% were Neutral, and 43% were either unhappy or very unhappy about the scheme.

23. 55% of people felt that the changes helped them to maintain physical distancing and 54% of people felt safer as a result of the scheme and 54% of respondent think these changes could have a positive impact on the area in the longer term



24. In June the Council was contacted by the 'Eastleigh Town Centre Action Group' (ETCAG), who want to see the reopening of High Street and Market Street and the reinstatement of previous parking arrangements. The group claim to represent 90% of shop owners, the public, disabled people and Carers.
25. At a meeting with Council staff on 22 July, representatives of the group presented 12 questions; a copy of these, together with the responses can be

found in Appendix 1. On 25 August ETCAG submitted a petition signed by 2008 people to the council in support of their request.

26. A Simple survey was carried out via the E edition of the Borough News, which is circulated to more than 15000 email addresses. More than 3000 responses were received to the survey, which asked a simple 'yes' / 'no' question, with 67% of people in favour of the closures.
27. 17 local residents have been in contact with the Council directly to make comment on the road closure, of whom 5 were in support of the road closures. Of those that objected to the road closures 1 related to waste collections, 7 wished to raise a concern over disabled access and 4 were regarding parking or residents permits.
28. 1 MP letter regarding disabled parking arrangements has been received on behalf of a local resident.

Car Parking

29. Car parking levels and duration of stay have been monitored closely since the road closures came into effect. Certain car parks have been monitored to provide a consistent weekly measurement against usage in 2019 and 2018 for the same periods. Pay on Foot car parks, being barrier-controlled, are able to provide accurate data for occupancy. The main car park in Eastleigh for shoppers and leisure visitors, the Swan Centre, provide a clear indicator of usage and any impact of consumer confidence especially in respect of parking dwell time. This shows that between the week commencing 15 June and 31 August the average spend in the town centre is slightly lower when compared with 2019 levels but is showing a gradual increase over the period.
30. Average spend for Swan Centre car park during August 2020 was £2.15 (August 2019 is £2.37). During July 2020 is £2.06 (July 2019 is £2.34). During June 2020 is £1.94 (June 2019 is £2.32)
31. Peak car park occupancy at Swan Centre has increased from 18% over the period to 58% on average.
32. From the data available it can be seen that long stay and permit parking associated with office workers is still significantly down, by as much as 82% per day (occupancy data from the multi-storey Pay on Foot car park located in Mitchell Road). Usage at the car park has only peaked at 13% over the period (compared to 89% during 2019).
33. Through the feedback on the road closures a number of comments have been received about the cost of parking in Eastleigh, this has been discussed at the ELAC Parking Working Group. The Working Group requested staff to further investigate a number of options which are detailed below:

1 Changes to existing tariffs

1a. Introduce an off-street tariff for 30-minutes stay

34. Short stay parking, such as a 30-minute tariff, limits the time spent within the town centre, discourages visits to multiple retailers and limits average spend per trip. Introducing a 30-minute stay increases risk of overstay and therefore of enforcement action against visitors; this is a particular issue as COVID-19 restrictions remain in place and queuing may be required as retailers limit the number of customers.

1b. Removal of 3-hour parking tariff in Wells Place car park

35. Rationalising tariff levels available in Wells Place car park, will help to displace longer- term parking into other town centre car parks. This will help to distribute car parking across the town centre and encourage users to the Pay on Foot car park(s), thereby freeing up capacity for short stay visitors.

1c. Free parking

36. Whilst free parking offers could be provided in town centre car parks, these incentives only benefit visitors driving into town rather than those that use sustainable and active travel. To support the night- time economy free parking is still provided after 6pm within the town centre at the Wells Place and Swan Centre car parks. In addition, charges at the Romsey Road, Leigh Road & Hanns Way car parks only apply up until 6pm and Southampton Road car park until 4.30pm.

2 Long Stay parking offer

37. As permit and long stay parking in Mitchell Road Car Park remains low, additional capacity is currently available. A long stay parking offer could be used for a limited period to encourage visitors to spend longer within the town centre. Any offer would be available to all users and would result in a discounted rate for commuters.

3 Incentivise cashless payment

38. This could be achieved through the use of different tariffs for cashless parking (RingGo), with a cheaper tariff for those users against those paying by cash. This would be available to visitors already travelling by car and is intended to support the local economy by providing visitors with extra time to spend within the town centre encouraging a higher spend within the town centre.
39. RingGo can be accessed via a number of platforms including iPhone or Android App, website, phone and SMS texts. This has the added benefit of reducing the number of touchpoints within the car park which protects against COVID -19. The Local Operations Manager has reviewed these options resulting in Recommendation 3 & 4 in this report.

Town Centre Changes

40. Since the introduction of the road closures the Council has been working to make changes to address issues as they have been raised. This has resulted in changes to the closure and associated parking arrangements.

41. A number of local residents who live within the road closures have been granted permits for the Mitchell Road car park free -of- charge whilst the roads are closed to minimise access to the town centre.
42. During the first 6 weeks of the closure a number of comments were received by the Council and Eastleigh BID regarding the number and distribution of disabled parking bays in the town.
43. To address these concerns a number of changes to parking restrictions were developed and came into effect on Friday 7 August, which included:
 - An increase the distribution and number of disabled bays by:
 - Providing 3 more dedicated spaces in the Hanns Way car park
 - Repurposing a taxi rank on Mitchell Road to provide a disabled parking bay for up to 4 vehicles
 - Introducing a 3hr time limit on the Leigh Road disabled parking bay to increase turnover
 - The provision of a 'drop off/ pick up' bay on Leigh Road (East), which can accommodate up to 3 vehicles. The parking is free of charge but is limited to 15 maximum stay.
44. These changes can be seen on the map below and the 'Shop Safe' webpage on the EBC website has subsequently been updated to show the changes.



45. Planters and Hanging baskets along the colonnades have been installed on High Street and Market street to bring colour into the town.
46. A number of community engagement events have been planned and are being delivered during August and September and include 'make and take' sessions, storytelling and musical entertainment for al fresco diners and will be run under the banner of 'We make Eastleigh'

Pavement Licences

47. On 22 July 2020, the Business and Planning Act 2020 introduced a nationwide 'Pavement Licensing' scheme which came into immediate effect.
48. This new Pavement Licence offers an opportunity for businesses such as cafes, restaurants and bars to place furniture on the highway on a temporary basis to support them in operating safely while social distancing measures remain in place.
49. The new application process, website and all the required forms were published on 10 August. As of the 28 August the Council had received 8 enquiries and expects to see further applications submitted in the coming weeks.
50. For businesses wishing to 'try before they buy', the Council is deferring the licence fee for 3 months, to encourage alternative dining locations to be explored, whilst COVID-19 restrictions are in place or if trying outdoor seating for the first time.

Enforcement

51. Since the scheme came into effect 864 parking control notices (PCN's) have been issued in the town centre, this compares to 734 PCN's issued in the same period in 2019. This shows an increase in the level of PCN's issued as a result of warning notices being issued both on- and off-street. Overall compliance with the road closure and associated parking restrictions has been good, and some restrictions have had minor alterations following feedback.
52. The Council will continue to take appropriate enforcement action for all parking contraventions and is regularly reviewing arrangements for the town centre car parks, to ensure that parking is well managed.
53. The Environmental Health Team have been working with local businesses to ensure that they introduce and enforce social distancing measures within their premises.
54. Hampshire Constabulary are responsible for policing moving traffic offences including enforcement of road closures. EBC will work with the local Police to encourage high levels of compliance.
55. The scheme will continue to be monitored and evaluated throughout the duration of the restrictions and can be removed should any safety or other concerns arise which cannot be addressed through enforcement action or improved signing.

Financial Implications

56. EBC has applied for £118,000 of European funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government through the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund (RHSSF). This funding is intended to support the introduction of additional measures in high streets across the Borough to establish a safe trading environment for businesses and customers. This funding extends to the end of March 2021 to support the medium-term revival and boost the local economy. Whilst the figure is significant, it should be noted that this funding is subject to strict criteria on its usage.
57. Whilst some of the costs of the scheme have been covered by the RHSSF, some aspects of the scheme have fallen outside the funding criteria including arts & culture events, and the planters and hanging baskets, for which ELAC have allocated £17,700.
58. Currently it is difficult to predict the level of uptake on the RingGo offer as parking patterns are not yet 'normal' and may change significantly in the coming months, especially if offices reopen and commuters return to the Long Stay Car Parks. It is estimated that the costs of Recommendations 4 & 5 in this report will be circa £5k.
59. Hampshire County Council (HCC) have developed a scheme for the town centre which will be the subject of a funding bid to the Department for Transport for £40k towards a number of town centre improvements.

Risk Assessment

60. There are risks associated with the reopening of the roads including;
 - people being unable to socially distance through a lack of space
 - the loss of potential HCC investment in infrastructure
 - concerns for the safety of pedestrians as queues force people to use the highway to maintain social distancing
 - concerns over safety resulting from the above act as a deterrent to shoppers from using the town centre
 - reputational damage resulting from the above
61. There is a risk of non-compliance by drivers. The road closure has been designed by the Engineering team in line with traffic management requirements. Road users will be clearly directed and signed with police asked to enforce if required.
62. Additionally, there are risks associated with not reopening of the roads including the loss of businesses who have been impacted negatively by the continued road closures.

Equality and Diversity Implications

63. The proposals have been assessed against the criteria and all efforts have been made to ensure that the scheme will not have a detrimental impact on any groups with protected characteristics. This includes the retention of key infrastructure, provision of alternative parking arrangements for blue badge holders and appropriate signing. The Equality Impact Assessment can be found in Appendix 2.

Climate Change and Environmental Implications

64. The current arrangements are designed to improve the ability of people to traverse the town centre, moving between facilities in a low carbon manner. Absence of cars on the high streets will improve the air and wider environment helping people and local wildlife to thrive in the town centre.
65. The scheme intends to make the town centre a more attractive destination for people arriving on foot, by bike or using public transport, by increasing modal shift and encouraging residents and businesses to change travel behaviours.
66. Some parking has been displaced to alternative locations which may impact on journey length.

Conclusion

67. The primary focus of these recommendations is to provide clarity and certainty for the period up to the expiry of the Temporary Traffic Regulation Order, 21st April 2021. They seek to attract increased numbers of shoppers into the town centre through parking offers and demonstrate a continued commitment to engage, listen and deliver organic change through on-going dialogue with all those who work, live in and use our town centre. They will continue to ensure that everyone who uses the town centre has space to access it safely encourage investment to improve the current streetscene. Doing so will encourage people to return, which will provide on-going support and continued custom to local businesses in this most challenging of times.

CALI SPARKS SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT PLANNER

Date: 28 August 2020
Contact Officer: Cali Sparks
Tel No: 6
e-mail: cali.sparks@eastleigh.gov.uk
Appendices Attached: 1- ETCAG Questions and Answers
2- EQIA

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972 - SECTION 100D

The following is a list of documents which disclose facts or matters on which this report or an important part of it is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. This list does not include any published works or documents which would disclose exempt or confidential information.

Background Papers - None.