

EASTLEIGH LOCAL AREA COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 10 February 2021

EASTLEIGH TOWN CENTRE COVID RECOVERY PLAN UPDATE

Report of the Corporate Director for Service Delivery

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Committee support the proposal to extend the temporary closure of Market Street and High Street, including a section of Wells Place, until 15 December 2021.

Summary

In response to government advice Eastleigh Borough Council (EBC) temporarily closed roads within Eastleigh Town Centre on 15 June 2020 to create a safe trading environment and support social distancing.

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

Going into 2021, as the pandemic continues there is still a significant risk to public health posed by COVID-19. Social distancing remains an essential a key part of the UK's strategy in tackling COVID-19 and therefore, it is proposed to extend the Temporary Traffic Regulation Order by a further 8 months, until the 15 December 2021.

The proposed extension to the closure will provide additional opportunity for changes to the public realm to be delivered in partnership with Hampshire County Council and for additional activities to be planned and delivered when lockdown restrictions are eased to promote Eastleigh town centre and encourage people to shop local.

The road closures remain a temporary measure and do not prevent the roads from being reopened at any time during the period covered by the Temporary Traffic Regulation Order (TTRO), should social distancing measures no longer be required. The scheme will continue to be monitored and assessed and will be reviewed regularly to determine if any changes should be made.

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. 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. Going into 2021, as the Covid Pandemic continues, social distancing remains an essential key part of the UK's strategy in tackling COVID-19.
3. On the 5 January 2021 England was moved into alert level 5, which means "transmission is high or rising exponentially" and the National Health Service is at risk of being overwhelmed. National lockdown was imposed including the closing of all schools until at least 8 March 2021.
4. In the UK, there are now three approved COVID-19 vaccines. The UK Vaccination programme began on 8 December 2020 with the most at risk groups being prioritised.
5. The Government aims to offer vaccines 15 million older and more vulnerable people by mid-February and to other priority groups by spring. They are thought to represent 90-99% of those at risk of dying from Covid-19. The rest of the adult population, another 21 million people, aims to be completed by autumn 2021.

Vaccine Phases

Jan to 15 Feb	Older care home residents, care home workers, people aged 80–70 and clinically extremely vulnerable people (under 70)
End of Feb to April	Ages 65-50 and 16-64 with underlying health conditions
By Autumn	Rest of the adult population

Duration of road closures

6. 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.
7. The road closures in the town centre of Eastleigh, which have been in place since 15 June 2020, have provided a safe trading environment, 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.

8. The scheme also capitalises on the change in travel behaviours and culture seen during the first national lockdown and encourages active travel, particularly for short journeys, which is affordable, improves health and wellbeing, reduces congestion, improves air quality and has no carbon emissions at the point of use.
9. On 15 September 2020 ELAC made the decision to keep the road closures in place until 21 April 2021 for the following reasons:
 - Covid-19 cases were increasing across the Country and across Hampshire Districts.
 - To minimise the risk of Eastleigh becoming a local hotspot.
 - To avoid the need to reintroduce road closures should infections increase, or further government-imposed restrictions be introduced.
 - As footfall in the town centre increases to provide space to socially distance.
 - 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 and to encourage more businesses to apply.
 - To increase public realm investment in the town centre from Hampshire County Council (HCC) and to consider the impact of this investment.
10. Since that time infection rate in the UK have significantly increased and is currently higher than seen in the first wave. Several new variants of the virus have now been detected in the UK, these mutations result in higher transmission rates than other variants in current circulation.
11. There is still a significant risk to public health posed by COVID-19 and it is unclear when the current national lockdown restrictions may be lifted. It is reasonable to assume that social distancing measures will still be required beyond 21 April as the vaccination programme will continue to be rolled out well into 2021.
12. Therefore, it is proposed to extend the TTRO by a further 8 months, until the 15 December 2021, taking the duration of the road closures to 18 months in total. The road closures remain a temporary measure, proportionate to the level of risk currently posed by COVID-19 and forms part of the Council's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
13. At this time no decisions on the long-term plan for the town centre are being made. The proposed change in the scheme duration does not prevent the roads from being reopened should social distancing measures no longer be required. The scheme will continue to be monitored and assessed and will be reviewed regularly to determine if any changes should be made.
14. EBC continues to work alongside Eastleigh BID on the scheme and the BID Manager has been attending the regular town centre officer working group to review the scheme and raise issues as they arise.

15. HCC have been consulted on the proposed extension and have indicated their support. Consultation with other statutory stakeholders such as the emergency services will be undertaken through the TTRO process, no objection was raised to the scheme when it was first introduced in June 2020.
16. In November 2020 Hampshire County Council (HCC) were awarded funding through the Department for Transport's Active Travel Fund (see www.hants.gov.uk/hantscovidtravel). The proposed extension to the closure will provide additional opportunity for changes to the public realm to be delivered.
17. EBC are working in partnership with HCC on designs for temporary improvements to the town centre public realm which 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.
18. The County Council is intending to undertake a 21-day public consultation on the proposed changes to the highway which will be carried out by 25 March 2021. EBC and Eastleigh BID will work to promote the consultation to businesses, visitors and local residents and encourage people to feedback their comments on the scheme.

Footfall Data

19. The road closures have been closely monitored since they came into effect. Footfall in the town centre has been measured through the network of 7 Geo-Sense footfall sensors located on Market Street, High Street, Wells Road, Leigh Road and Leigh Road Recreation Ground
20. Since the reopening of non-essential retail on the 15 June, footfall in the town centre steadily increased over the summer and autumn. However, footfall has remained below average when compared to 2019 figures.
21. On the 14 September 2020 the Government reintroduced some restrictions, limiting gatherings to six people. As infections continued to increase restrictions were heightened and Hampshire was moved into tier 4 on 26 December 2020 and into tier 5 on the 5 January 2021.
22. These restrictions have further impacted on footfall in the town centre and a greater number of businesses have been forced to close. Footfall in January 2021 has been comparable to levels seen in March 2020 and throughout the first lockdown. However, some retailers have opted to run a click and collect service and food retail and take-aways continued to be allowed to trade.

Town Centre Changes

23. Since the introduction of the scheme EBC has made a number of changes to the closure and associated parking arrangements to address issues as they have been raised. These include:

- An increase in the number and distribution of disabled bays:
 - Additional dedicated spaces in the Hanns Way Car Park;
 - Repurposed a taxi rank on Mitchell Road to provide a disabled parking bay for up to 4 vehicles;
 - The introduction of a 3hr time limit on the Leigh Road disabled parking bay to increase turnover; and
 - Improved layout of disabled parking bays in the Wells Road Car Park
- Free parking permits for local residents who live within the road closures whilst the roads are closed.
- 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 a 15-minute maximum stay.
- An exemption to the road closure for funerals and weddings (subject to 24hrs notice).
- A new bus stop provided for the Community Transport Service on Wells Place at the junction with Hanns Way.
- Additional parking and loading restrictions at the entrances to the closure to keep accesses clear.

24. These changes can be seen on the map below and the 'Shop Safely' webpage (www.eastleigh.gov.uk/shop-safely) on the EBC website.



25. In the summer planters and hanging baskets were installed along the colonnades on High Street and Market street to bring colour into the town.
26. Since August 2020 community engagement events under the banner of 'Together We Make Eastleigh' have been delivered in the town centre including 'make and take' sessions, storytelling and musical entertainment for al fresco diners and festive performances and a cargo bike courier service.
27. In January the Reopening High Streets Safely (RHSS) team began to engage with residents, businesses, visitors and workers in a high street within the Borough as part of the new project to gather information on their experiences

including operating safely during lockdown, future innovation and local community regeneration. The RHSS team will be able to support the delivery of practical measures so businesses can re-open quickly when permitted, people can get back to work and customers can return to shops completely confident that it is safe to do so.

Financial Implications

28. The costs of the proposed extension to the TTRO will be funded from the core TRO Programme budget, at a cost of approximately £500.
29. The scheme results in a reduction in the revenue from on-street parking. EBC have a funding agreement in place with HCC relating to the pay and display bays and enforcement. HCC have supported the scheme and will not be seeking contributions from EBC for the period of the lockdown. It is likely that some of these customers will be displaced to other local car parks, which will offset the reduction in on-street parking and the social distancing measure will help people to feel safe to visit.
30. The continuation of the scheme will also enable HCC investment of approximately £70k, into physical changes to the local highway.

Risk Assessment

31. There are risks associated with the reopening of the roads including:
 - people being unable to socially distance through a lack of space;
 - 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; and
 - reputational damage resulting from the above
32. 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.

Equality and Diversity Implications

33. 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 1.

Climate Change and Environmental Implications

34. The scheme is designed to improve the ability of people to traverse the town centre, moving between facilities in a low carbon manor. Absence of cars on

the high streets will improve the air and wider environment for support people and local wildlife to thrive in the town centre.

35. 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.
36. Some parking has been displaced to alternative locations which may impact on journey length.

Conclusion

37. The primary focus of these proposals is to ensure that everyone who uses our town centre has safe space to access the high street, can socially distance and to provide an inviting shopping experience. However, they also provide the opportunity to trial and evaluate changes and improvements to the public realm within Eastleigh town centre with the intention of making it a safe and vibrant destination. 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

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Appendices Attached: 1 - 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.