

Eastleigh Town Centre Update 2 June 2021

In January 2021 the Eastleigh Local Area Committee made the decision to further extend the Eastleigh town centre road closure scheme until 15 December 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.
- To increase public realm investment in the town centre from Hampshire County Council (HCC).

Since January the infection rate in the UK significantly increased and additional lockdown measures were introduced by the Government. The UK Vaccination programme began on 8 December 2020 with the most at risk groups being prioritised and has been delivered at a faster rate than was first projected.

On 22 February the Government published the 'Roadmap out of lockdown' which sets out a 4 stage timetable for lifting restrictions and the conditions which must be met for that to occur, to date steps 1-3 have been completed. Step 4, the removal of all COVID related restrictions, is due to take place no earlier than 21 June. Further detail on the timing of Step 4 is expected to be published by Government on 14 June.

Following legal advice, Hampshire County Council has advised the Council that should social distancing measures be lifted by central government on 21 June 2021, the temporary pop-up schemes which have been introduced across the County to support social distancing should be revoked. Therefore, if step 4 proceeds as planned, the Eastleigh Town Centre scheme will no longer be legally valid from 21 June and will be removed and the roads reopened.

Whilst Covid-19 infection rates have fallen over recent weeks there are still hotspots across the country. The Indian and South African variants of the virus which have been detected in the UK are still considered cause for concern by healthcare professionals and so it is possible that the Government will delay the lifting of social distancing measures, in which case the road closures will remain in effect.

Whilst the lifting of social distancing restrictions is welcomed the reopening of the carriageway to vehicle traffic will also impact on a number of activities in the town centre including:

- Businesses on Market Street and High Street with licences for tables and chairs on the highway, many of which are placed on the carriageway in the area normally taken up with parking
- A series of cultural events planned over the summer months, including the instillation of a pop-up park and live music events, within the road closure area
- The opportunity for proposed changes to the public realm to be delivered in partnership with Hampshire County Council

So as to retain the scheme and support the economic recovery of the town, the Borough Council identified a number of options relating to the continuation of the Eastleigh Town Centre road closure over the summer months. These options were considered and discussed with the County Council. The preferred option was identified as an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order, this type of TRO can be used for a maximum of eighteen months to assess if the scheme is suitable, and would allow changes to be made within the first twelve months such as reopening the roads to motor vehicles at certain times of day or on specific days of the week.

The County Council are currently analysing the responses to the recent public consultation carried out in February/ March 2021.

The County Council have confirmed that they are, at present, unable to support the continuation of the Eastleigh scheme beyond the 21 June.

Whilst the County Council requires the road closures to be lifted when social distancing measures are revoked, the team will continue to work with Hampshire County Council to explore ways to retain some of the areas which have currently been licenced for the use of tables and chairs to support businesses and the recovery of the town centre.

The programme of events planned for the town centre in the summer months will be reviewed and amended to take account of this change.