

Council Motion 24th September 2020 – Advisory Briefing Note to Cabinet 1st October 2020

1. PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING NOTE

- 1.1 To give informal advice on a possible approach that could be followed to address the Motion adopted at Council on 24th September 2020.

2 POSSIBLE DECISION OPTIONS FOR CABINET

That Cabinet agrees:

- A. To give an objective, rigorous and detailed account of business views while measuring progress and benefits, a Consultant is engaged to actively engage with retailers to understand and assess the nature of their concerns.

- B. That the current traffic monitoring that is already being carried out by Hampshire County Council is supplemented by physical observation of the impact of traffic on neighbouring roads.

- C. The Portfolio Holder Place (in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Environment) be authorised to have the road closures removed and Fleet Road reopened to traffic by 31 October at the very latest if, in his opinion, compelling and verifiable evidence has been gathered that indicates that the benefit to retailers does not outweigh any negative impact on businesses or residents.

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 As part of the Council's response to Covid-19 and in line with Government expectations, the Fleet Road pedestrianisation scheme aims to provide additional space and confidence for local people to visit shops and residents during Covid-19 restrictions. The initial pilot has however, met with concern from some sections of the community. At Council on the 24th September the following Motion was adopted:

“Despite great efforts and good intentions from all involved, there is a concern that the closure of Fleet High Street to traffic has not been a success. This Council therefore resolves to actively engage with retailers to understand and assess the nature of their concerns and to physically observe at peak times the impact of traffic on neighbouring roads. If compelling and verifiable evidence gathered indicates that the benefit to retailers does not outweigh any negative impact on businesses or residents, then this Council requests Cabinet to have the road closures removed and to reopen the High Street to traffic as soon as is practically possible and not later than the end of October in sufficient time to support the Christmas trading period”.

4 CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 The thrust of the Motion is very specific in its requirements:
- a) *There has to be active engagement with retailers to understand and assess the nature of their concerns; and*
 - b) *physical observation at peak times of the impact of traffic on neighbouring roads must be carried out; and*
 - c) *If compelling and verifiable evidence gathered indicates that the benefit to retailers does not outweigh any negative impact on businesses or residents, the High Street should be reopened to traffic.*
- All this must be determined by 31 October 2020 at the very latest.

a) active engagement with retailers to understand and assess the nature of their concerns

- 4.2 A Consultant¹ has agreed to give an objective, rigorous and detailed account of business views while measuring progress and benefits. The aim being to meet the Motion's need to engage with all retailers, businesses and other interested parties to understand concerns and collect evidence around the benefits of the scheme.

Consultant's Programme summary

Activity	Purpose
Stakeholder mapping / Online survey	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project scoping • Identifying all stakeholders/retailers by working with the BID & Council • Analysis – review existing data and feedback • Develop online survey • Discussion with elected members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify objectives • Identify, map and understand stakeholders • Establish appropriate engagement tools • Get a better understanding of local issues
Consultation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact all stakeholders and invite them to contribute to online survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give businesses an opportunity to have their say • Provide alternative options to digital feedback and allow people to engage in different ways

¹ The consultant proposed is an experienced communications professional who has worked on three major high street reviews with the veteran retailer Bill Grimsey in 2013, 2018 and 2020. Previously an adviser to a former Communities Minister, the Consultant is an LGA economic growth consultant and designed and led the LGAs first high streets leadership course earlier this year. He has worked with numerous local authorities and carried out Future High Streets Fund and Towns Fund consultations. He has extensive experience of delivering comprehensive engagement plans during the pandemic. Recent consultations include work to support high street plans in Warrington, York and Walsall and Bloxwich.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow up phone calls & letters offering option of online focus group • Carefully targeted social media campaign • Set up focus groups providing a platform for more extensive discussion • Work with business networks such as the Chamber of Commerce to maximise engagement with stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish optimum (up to 25 people) groups for detailed discussions on the issues – and gather more detailed feedback • Ensure everyone is involved
Face to face dialogue	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit Fleet and target all businesses, giving people the opportunity to have face to face conversations • Carry out clipboard surveys • Ensure rigorous examination of concerns and support to establish an objective picture in line with similar interventions – which recognises the time required to deliver tangible results • Measure benefits and gather stand out case studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure that, despite Covid-19 restrictions, there is a human face to this consultation • Make it as inclusive as possible – giving everyone a chance to contribute • Provide proper context to progress in line with similar schemes in other parts of the country
Writing up and reviewing findings	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review findings • Write up report and comprehensively represent views and what has been achieved in a short period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give an objective, rigorous and detailed account of business views while measuring progress and benefits

4.4 The use of a Consultant with specialist knowledge of the topic must be the primary preference. If, however, the timescales to enable the Consultant to carry out the full consultation programme is too short, it is still open for the Council itself, working with its partners, to engage directly with retailers to gauge their views. Given resource levels available to the Council, that engagement may not necessarily be as comprehensive as that proposed by the Consultant.

b) physical observation at peak times of the impact of traffic on neighbouring roads must be carried out

4.3 Physical observation of the impact of traffic on neighbouring road has already started with a well-attended councillor ‘walk-about’ on Wednesday with future

walkabouts arranged for each of the next few weeks. The observations will be supplemented by the comprehensive traffic monitoring data that is being collected already by Hampshire County Council.

c) The decision-making process to assess the evidence gathered and to form a view as to whether that the benefit to retailers does not outweigh any negative impact on businesses or residents.

- 4.4 The timetable set in the Motion to deliver its outcome is challenging. It needs a great amount of engagement work with evidence-based evaluation to be carried out in a relatively short period - the matter must be concluded by 31 October at the very latest. In practice there is not enough time for the matter to be determined by Cabinet itself. A proper way forward, could be to authorise the Head of Place, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for the Environment, to assess the evidence.
- 4.5 If the assessment is that there is compelling and verifiable evidence that shows the benefit to retailers does not outweigh any negative impact on businesses or residents, the decision to have the road closures removed and to reopen the Fleet Road to traffic could be delegated to the Portfolio Holder for Place.