



Fleet Road Pedestrianisation Consultation

for Hart District Council



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Introduction

On August 24th 2020, Hart District Council working with Hampshire County Council closed Fleet Road to through traffic between Victoria Street/Upper Street and Church Road. The pedestrianisation scheme was achieved through the introduction of a temporary traffic regulation order, which is part of the Fleet Town Recovery Programme. This is in line with government Covid-19 guidance and follows advice from the Secretary of State for Transport for “local authorities to make significant changes to their road layouts to give more space to cyclists and pedestrians.”

From the outset it has proved contentious and has attracted a number of complaints and objections from opposition councillors. These were based on a view that the scheme was punishing business and hurting traders' livelihoods. On 24th September a Council Motion was agreed, calling for the Council to actively engage with retailers and businesses to assess the nature of their concerns and see whether the scheme was having a negative impact. Rise Associates was tasked with carrying out this engagement over a short period to gather the views of businesses impacted by the pedestrianisation scheme and to make recommendations based on the evidence gathered.

Although the Council motion also requested an investigation into the impact of traffic at peak times on neighbouring roads, the scope of this work is focused solely on engaging with businesses in and around the Fleet Road area about the pedestrianisation scheme. The traffic element will be carried out by Hart District Council and Hampshire County Council.

Due to the short timeframes, Rise Associates began working on the consultation at the end of September, carrying out a period of stakeholder mapping and intense engagement up to 17th October.

National/international context

The Fleet Road pedestrianisation scheme is far from unique as hundreds of similar schemes have been launched in recent months across the country. Many of these command good levels of public support but it is fair to say there are a good number that don't. Some have been scrapped as a result. In the UK this is very much a battleground for the future of high streets.

In Madrid, for example, the decision to close its central business district to cars in 2018 for the first time saw a 9.5% increase in retail takings.

Across the world this change is becoming more evident. With high streets going through a period of dizzying change, the shift to pedestrianisation has come about through different needs and a recognition that high streets need to become more walkable and attractive spaces to build a stronger sense of community.

Many cities across the world are moving away from an over reliance on the car to a shift in urban planning that embraces more human scale development, principally around pedestrianisation, curbing pollution and reimagining public spaces. In Paris, for example, Anne Hidalgo was re-elected as mayor earlier this year on a promise to increase more pedestrianisation. "The city needs to evolve," she argued.

There is evidence to show that pedestrianisation can generate significant business benefits. In Madrid, for example, the decision to close its central business district to cars in 2018 for the first time saw a 9.5% increase in retail takings.

The architect Norman Foster has noted that the pandemic will accelerate this evolution, as climate change, the prospect of drone technology and new patterns of working will change the infrastructure of high streets, with less space needed for vehicles.

This change is not without difficult teething pains, though. In the London suburb of Waltham Forest, when pedestrianisation changes were introduced a few years ago, protestors carried a coffin marked 'RIP Walthamstow Village' at the opening ceremony. Nowadays the scheme is very popular and has become something of a beacon of best practice that leaders from other parts of the country seek to emulate.

Methodology

After undergoing a stakeholder mapping exercise to build a list of businesses in the area to target, the author of the report established three principal ways of engaging with businesses impacted by the scheme. These were:

- By email inviting businesses to take part in an online survey
- By telephone interview
- Face to face interview at their business

During this period, the author communicated with 99 businesses that were diverse in nature and size. Over 50 of these were face to face interviews in Fleet. Those contacted ranged from independents, start-ups and micro businesses to well-known brands, FTSE 100 companies and businesses representing every sector on the high street from services, leisure, hospitality, banking and more. The author also spoke to trade bodies such as the local BID¹, the Chamber of Commerce and people who were interested in setting up businesses on the high street. This included one entrepreneur who has just agreed to take a lease on a vacant shop, which will be opening in January.

Most of the engagement was with businesses within the pedestrianisation area, though a good sample of businesses in Fleet Road outside of the scheme were also interviewed. Furthermore, the Council distributed the survey to businesses further afield and submissions were received from neighbouring streets of St Nicholas Close and Ancells Road.

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¹ See statement in Appendix

Observations on previous evidence submitted and the nature of social media debate

The author was presented with surveys from the local Conservative Party and the BID showing differing levels of support and opposition for the pedestrianisation scheme. We make no comment on these surveys because one of them involved residents, which is beyond the scope of this consultation commission, and we do not know which businesses were invited to participate in the other survey. However a signed petition also came to our attention, which called for the immediate removal of all traffic obstacles and was signed by over 60 businesses. This deserves some attention, as a number of the businesses on this petition are identified as being in opposition to the scheme.

“Social media here is toxic. There’s no respect for other people’s views.”

Several of these businesses were approached by the author and they expressed a very different viewpoint. Some business owners were clearly in favour of the scheme, which gives us reason to cast doubt on the accuracy of this petition.

This is an important point, as the petition was a key part of a campaign to overturn the pedestrianisation scheme. The author was unable to find evidence that supported some of the disaster narrative it advanced and concludes that a good deal of scaremongering has taken place.

A decision was taken to anonymise all findings after some businesses said they would only take part in the consultation if they were granted anonymity. Typical comments on why this was necessary included:

- “I do not want to appear on Facebook and be trolled by an angry mob. No one dares show support for this scheme publicly because they know they will be shouted down.”
- “Social media here is toxic. There’s no respect for other people’s views.”

The consultation was guided by a wish to include all high street business voices and not just those that have shouted the loudest.

Through the course of our engagement, it recognised that the polarised nature of social media generated more heat than light and did not fully reflect a broader, more nuanced view.

Other factors to consider

Discussions with business sought to distinguish between the impact of Covid-19 and the pedestrianisation scheme. It found businesses that were more reliant on an older demographic, for example, fared worse than those in the same sector whose customer base comprised a broader age group. This is quite possibly because older people are the most at risk group where Covid-19 is concerned and many are not willing to go into town. This would be worth exploring further.

Similarly, it was noted that those businesses which had moved online were benefitting more than traditional bricks and mortar businesses that did not provide customers with the opportunity to buy their goods online.

For example, one of the biggest businesses on the high street only began to offer customers an online facility in the summer. It is now rapidly growing and contributes 15% towards all takings. Also, it was noticed that one of the busiest areas in the shopping centre is the Amazon mailboxes.

This is very much in line with national trends showing a massive increase in online shopping. Digital habits formed throughout lockdown are likely to harden and businesses that rely solely on shoppers visiting their store for sales are likely to suffer as a consequence.

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Summary of findings – and challenges of capturing people’s views

The consultation did not find conclusive evidence that the pedestrianisation scheme was “destroying the high street” and likely to cause a significant number of businesses to go bust.

Many businesses reported favourable trade, despite difficult conditions caused by Covid-19, and said the scheme had not affected their takings. In some cases businesses said they’d had to take on more staff as a result and were doing better.

All of the biggest anchors on the high street, reporting the highest volume of sales, were either in favour or neutral.

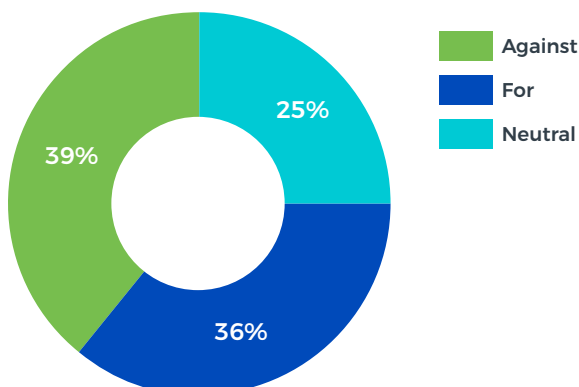
A good number of people that objected to the scheme did so on personal grounds, stating that they didn’t like it and it was causing them inconvenience.

Overall, the picture is balanced with those holding distinct views either for or against almost evenly spread. Thirty nine per cent were against and thirty six per cent in favour of the scheme.

A quarter of businesses (25%) were neutral and said they were more concerned about other issues – notably landlords refusing to discount rent and Covid-19. They said it was not having any impact on their business.

Consultation findings on whether businesses were in favour, against or held a neutral position on Fleet’s high street pedestrianisation scheme

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Some of this group had issues with the scheme and said it had not been implemented well, but felt it could be improved and were willing to give it more time. They also recognised the benefits and said they wished to be classified as neutral.

Early on in the consultation it became apparent that asking some people to give their opinion either for or against was problematic. Some people signed both the yes and no box in the online survey, saying they were in favour of trying something different but felt the scheme could have been implemented better.

In face to face interviews, this became further apparent with people asking for another option as they didn't wish to classify themselves as for or against.

This revealed a substantial body of business owners that could be converted to the scheme if sufficient improvements were made, clearer communications provided and a more support dialogue between the Council, BID and traders established.

However, the statistics outlined above don't fully reflect the nuanced picture on the benefits and cons of the scheme. Below is more detail on the supporting comments to provide a better understanding on how the scheme is impacting businesses.

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Businesses in favour of the scheme

Some of Fleet's biggest and well known businesses were in support of the scheme and there was clearly a sizeable body of opinion, albeit not a noisy one, that want the scheme to succeed. This was a diverse group, across all sectors and of different sizes, from start-ups to major high street names.

"Giving us the space to put tables in the street has been great. We had our best day ever in September and I'm in favour."

Their support of the pedestrianisation scheme was largely driven by three reasons, these being:

- Business benefits derived from pedestrianisation
- An appreciation of the new environment that is being created
- A recognition that high streets need to change and a willingness to try something new

A selection of comments on these reasons are below

Business benefits

- "Shop lifting has gone down enormously since the pedestrianisation scheme was implemented because people no longer run out of the shop with stolen goods and jump in a car. So it's saving us money."
- "Giving us the space to put tables in the street has been great. We had our best day ever in September and I'm in favour."
- "We've heard lots of negativity but it's honestly helped our business. Before lockdown we weren't doing as well as we are now."
- "Something had to happen and we really like it. Weekends are now really busy. We've now applied for some outside seating as a result."
- "We've had to get extra staff in at the weekends because of the scheme."
- "We've seen more sales since it started. Our customers tell us they like coming to the high street now."

- “I have seen an upturn in trade, I have enjoyed walking along the high street without tonnes of noise and air pollution and my family have enjoyed the events.”
- “There’s a real buzz on Saturday and it feels better. Our customers like it and we have the door open all the time for ventilation. We couldn’t do that before, because of the noise and fumes. We’re saving on window cleaning too, as they’re a lot cleaner now!”
- “We have seen a much higher footfall on a Saturday than any time since reopening again in July after the lockdown. The first Saturday of the market we saw levels of people coming in that we hadn’t seen since pre-Covid. That has continued each Saturday since.
- “I feel it would be a complete wasted opportunity if the council sadly cave in to the toxic social media presence of a small minority.”
- “The general slower pace gives more opportunities for customers to shop longer.”
- “I’m for it because my customers like it. I’ve seen how it works in London and it makes people feel safer. That’s good for business.”

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An appreciation of the new environment that is being created

- “Our business is by a bus stop and it’s a 100% better atmosphere. Before the bus would mount the kerb and we’d get fumes wafting in to the shop. It’s not pleasant.”
- “I feel Fleet needs revitalising, it needs a central focus point for events plus for customers to browse, slow down, sit down perhaps. It’s long overdue a facelift, take away the events we’ve been having and it will die.”
- “It’s really nice to walk on the high street without cars. Ten years ago I suggested to the Council it should be pedestrianised and

there should be a land train taking children and older people up and down the high street. We could make this a great place. We used to get vans parked outside right up to the window. It's so much better."

- "It's a cleaner, calmer and friendlier environment."
- "There's no pollution and no road rage. It's brilliant."
- "I live on the high street and it's so much better. Before I had to close the windows to watch TV because it was so noisy. It's a lot more peaceful now."

"There has to be some change. The high street needs a shake-up and if you're going to compete against online shopping then you have to create a destination. The idea that we can survive off people nipping in and out isn't true. We have to encourage people to stay longer."

A recognition that high streets need to change and a willingness to try something new

- "There has to be some change. The high street needs a shake-up and if you're going to compete against online shopping then you have to create a destination. The idea that we can survive off people nipping in and out isn't true. We have to encourage people to stay longer."
- "There was too much traffic here. We were used as a cut through to get to the M3 and it wasn't pleasant. How can you have a good shopping experience when you're surrounded by cars, noise and pollution? My customers say we should have done this ages ago."
- "In the beginning it was difficult, but I've got used to it. You have to try change don't you? If we stand still other places will pass us by."

Businesses against the scheme

A cross section of businesses opposed the scheme including the longest established business in Fleet. Most of those that opposed the scheme felt that high streets functioned best when people could nip in and out to make quick purchases. They believed the loss of this convenience was damaging.

Other reasons as to why they opposed the scheme included a view that it had damaged business (though this was sometimes difficult to prove²), inconvenience caused by problems associated with deliveries, frustration that passing traffic weren't able to see their shop window and a strong dislike at how the changes were implemented. The latter was arguably the most common reason for people wishing to overturn the scheme.

A selection of comments on these reasons are below

Damage to business

- "There's no need to do this. The pavements are wide enough. I'm losing business because people can't make impulse purchases."
- "We provide home delivery service and now have to detour through Albert Street which is a 20mph zone. This in effect slows us down and is a nuisance."
- "Unblock the road so people can drive through Fleet and see my shop is there. Instead they boycott the entire town centre as they cannot drive through it."
- "It is not having a good effect on customers. Sales for us are almost in proportion with our other store, just a little down, but customers are not happy about the closure."
- "None of my customers are happy about it. Sales are down."
- "We're a takeaway and it's killing us. None of our customers have anywhere to park."

"My business will fail by Christmas if this pedestrianisation is not removed in the next few weeks. I have notified my landlord of this likelihood and pre-warned an insolvency firm."

² Businesses acknowledged there were a number of factors at play - not least the fact that footfall is down across the country, we are deep in a pandemic and in recession. The behavioural shift of people moving to shop online was not always sufficiently acknowledged and there were variations in the fortunes of businesses operating in the same sector.

- “My business will fail by Christmas if this pedestrianisation is not removed in the next few weeks. I have notified my landlord of this likelihood and pre-warned an insolvency firm.”

“A lot of my customers are very old and I don’t think things have been communicated very well regarding disabled bays.”

A failure to be noticed by passing traffic

- “When we set up our businesses we consider many factors. One of which is being in a location where passing vehicles will see us. Fleet Road has considerable traffic movement. Our shop windows are our advert. We spend thousands of pounds making them look their best, we change our displays for both pedestrian and vehicle viewing.”

Dislike at how the changes were implemented

- “Return it to normal and stop causing unnecessary chaos. Everyone’s lives have been affected enough by Covid-19 without the council making life even more difficult for reasons of ‘social distancing’ - when we all know that is a complete nonsense. The council have wanted to do this to Fleet for years and are using Covid-19 as an excuse to do what they want with no consultation and a free hand out from the Government.”
- “People don’t realise the car park is still accessible. As winter approaches, people won’t walk here and we’ll lose business.”
- “A lot of my customers are very old and I don’t think things have been communicated very well regarding disabled bays.”
- “It looks ridiculous and the road has not been pedestrianised properly as cars can still drive up the road and into a car park for work down the Santander/Therapy Lounge alleyway. The ugly white cones make Fleet Road look like a Formula One track. This is really dangerous And the square flower beds are pointless. What a waste of money. Disgraceful from the Council. Not even

consulting residents.”

- “Either do the whole road and properly or not at all.”

Problems associated with deliveries

- “We’ve had a massive inconvenience with deliveries. They are having to make so many detours and it’s difficult to get stuff in. People don’t trust what’s being said.”
- “We’re really struggling with deliveries and don’t have a back door. It needs sorting out.”

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Those who identified as ‘neutral’

Almost a quarter of all respondents identified as ‘neutral’ and many felt that they were unable to pass proper judgement on the scheme because it had not been given enough time.

Some of those that registered opposition also indicated they were close to neutral too, with comments on the online survey stating, for example:

- “Should be another box for this, as we’re actually sitting on the fence. Figures are the same as last year, footfall and takings. However... I feel we may be missing sales, as people are less inclined to come in. I know this speaking to them when they come in.”

Conversations with businesses, however, showed that a good number did not feel strong enough either way to oppose or support the scheme. The reasons for this largely centred around it not having any real impact on their business and that it was too soon to say whether it was good or bad.

A selection of comments on these reasons are below

- “It’s not an issue for us. I’m more worried about Covid-19 and the fact my landlord is refusing to discount rent.”
- “It doesn’t bother us at all. I can see some people getting very exorcised online, but as a business it hasn’t affected us.”
- “Better signage is needed but I don’t really have a problem with it. Put me down as neutral.”
- “It’s not affected my business one jot – and we need to do something. I’d like to give it more time to make a proper informed decision on whether it’s good for Fleet or not.”

“If they’re going to do pedestrianisation then do it properly. There are still cars on the street and it feels like we’re in limbo. We don’t want a half-way house. They (the Council) need to make their mind up.”

Recommendations for improvement

In the feedback gathered, there were many comments on how the scheme could be improved and it was clear that its implementation had not been without teething problems.

Before addressing specific suggestions, it's worth noting general comments on how the scheme might gather more support. Some felt that it had been done on the cheap and that it should have been presented as part of a wider vision for Fleet. Others liked the fact the council were embracing change, but felt it did not compensate for years of under investment.

Some comments which addressed this are below.

- “There has been an historic lack of investment from landlords and the Council and a failure of political leadership to address the challenges facing our high street. Most people accept that we have to do things differently, but we do need a vision.”
- “If they're going to do pedestrianisation then do it properly. There are still cars on the street and it feels like we're in limbo. We don't want a half-way house. They (the Council) need to make their mind up.”

Examples of other suggestions are:

- “I feel the council should remove the bollards at the back of Branksome Wood carpark to allow access to the businesses that need access to their parking. That way the High Street can be completely pedestrian only and it allows a lot more space for events. As at the moment it looks really untidy and messy and even if you put planting in, it's still going to look untidy because of the cars accessing the area. My other concern is it's single track and what happens when you have two cars needing to pass. To reverse I think is a hazard because people are crossing over all points and feeling they have right-of-way over the cars and this makes it dangerous.”
- “The pedestrianisation does need to be extended so businesses in

“There has been an historic lack of investment from landlords and the Council and a failure of political leadership to address the challenges facing our high street. Most people accept that we have to do things differently, but we do need a vision.”

Fleet Road between Victoria Road and Reading Road benefit as well (especially for the night time economy). In the short term there needs to be a method for highlighting businesses outside the area.”

“Our customers don’t know how to get to our car park and we could do with better signage.”

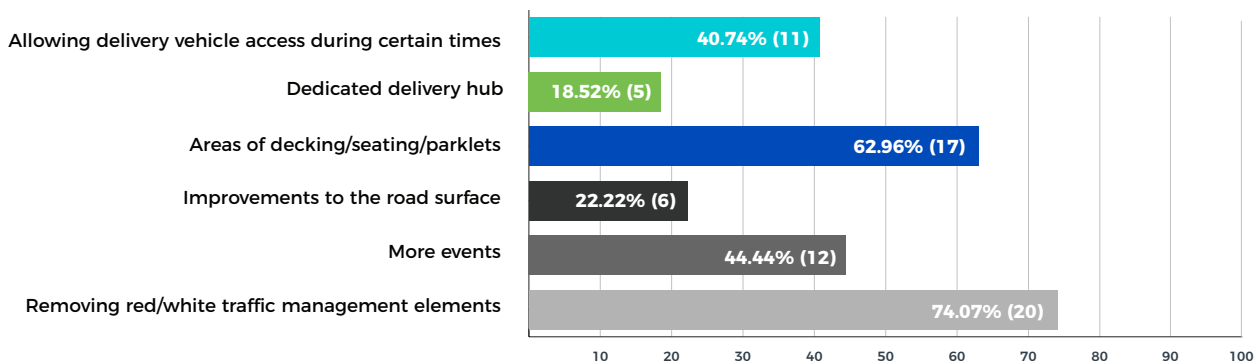
- “Food Stalls/Markets as Fleet lacks variety and can be difficult for lunch time options, Xmas German Bars/Markets that are around for a prolonged period. More events in general - What use is blocking off the road if it’s going to remain empty and not utilised? I understand the idea is to allow more space for social distance but equally the high street is dying - there isn’t anything to draw people from outside town.”
- “I would like to see the pedestrianisation to extend up to Gurkha Square.”
- “The scheme has restricted access for our goods deliveries to the front of the store in the morning. Better access and communication is needed to allow understanding of business needs. I’m in favour of the schemes aim to bring events to Fleet but I feel more communication is needed between the businesses and the council to understand their needs.”
- “There needs to be some sort of vehicular access at certain times and I’d like to see a budget apportioned to deal with pavements, planting and bollard arrangements. We’re losing a lot of trade to Farnborough and other areas, and we need to change. If pedestrianisation is part of that then fine because we need to create an environment that people want to be in, not just for the sake of shopping. This needs to be part of a bigger vision.”
- “Our customers don’t know how to get to our car park and we could do with better signage.”
- “I think this scheme needs to be in combination with cycling/ walking schemes and disabled access needs to be fully considered - also a potential of opening for some of the week and closing for some of the week could be explored as an option to appease all residents and businesses.”

- “I wonder if the closed off area isn’t too big though. Branksomewood road is very busy, has a doctor’s surgery and a pharmacy as well as one of the town’s busiest parking areas. Access to Branksomewood Road from the high street would be preferable in my view. The busiest pedestrian part of town is between Church Road and Branksomewood Road in any event. And opening the High street up from Branksomewood Road instead of Victoria Road would make a difference to the traffic load on the other parallel roads in Fleet, which have not been coping terribly well with the additional traffic. As many people are working from home at the moment, I think this will become more important at some point in the future when the traffic increases again with people commuting to work.”
- “People go to Farnborough because there is a better choice of shops – and they’ve got a Primark. We need something to differentiate Fleet. I’d like to see more events and the market every day.”

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For the online survey, respondents were asked what sort of changes they felt could improve the scheme. Answers (from those that responded) are below.

**What sort of changes do you think would improve the scheme?
Please choose as many options from the wish list.**



Answered 27 Skipped 12

Conclusion

A consultation of this nature would normally last longer than the short period in which it was carried out – and it would have been preferable to keep the consultation open longer, speak to more businesses and explore some of the challenges identified in more detail. However, due to political pressures, it was critical that a verdict from the traders was delivered quickly – so the consultation was carried out during a short and intense period.

Despite the constraints of Covid-19 meaning that most consultations are currently moving to a digital only approach, the author was pleased to be able to facilitate over 50 face to face interviews with businesses on the high street, as this afforded a richer level of engagement.

This engagement, combined with online survey feedback and a number of telephone interviews provided a rich and representative sample from which to draw recommendations. But before we offer these, we would like to include a few general observations on Fleet's high street.

This is an extremely challenging time for high streets everywhere. Almost twice as many shops disappeared from the UK high street in the first half of 2020 as in the same period in the previous year. It's also worth noting that the British Retail Consortium referred to 2019 as the worst year on record for retail – so it's clear that massive changes are sweeping through our high street and retail is shrinking.

Many places are recognising this and beginning to prepare for a different post pandemic future. It would be wrong to think that we will swing back to the status quo once Covid-19 is over. Many of the retail jobs that are being lost now will not return. Change is not an option. It has to be embraced.

Fleet faces a number of pressures – most notably a stronger retail offer in neighbouring areas. Equally, it does not have an obvious retail anchor or a public realm strategy providing a heart for Fleet in the form of a plaza, square or other key gathering point. It does have Gurkha Square, but in effect this is a further surface level car park, and is only used on Saturdays for the market.

Many places are recognising this and beginning to prepare for a different post pandemic future. It would be wrong to think that we will swing back to the status quo once Covid-19 is over. Many of the retail jobs that are being lost now will not return. Change is not an option. It has to be embraced.

However, despite this, there are many positives - and interviews demonstrated an impressive level of resilience. Three new businesses that had opened during the pandemic were interviewed and they were very optimistic about their future. Likewise, an entrepreneur who is about to open a shop on the high street demonstrated a similar bullishness.

Fleet has been named the healthiest, happiest and wealthiest place to live in Britain on several occasions, and it undoubtedly enjoys an advantageous position. There is a strong customer base with high disposable income and healthy levels of civic pride.

It could be argued, though, that this position of strength has prevented a sense of urgency and the need to introduce necessary changes to ensure Fleet is fit for the 21st century and able to adapt to challenges facing all high streets.

High streets cannot remain pickled in aspic - and, across the country, countless local authorities are making significant investments in public realm, leisure, housing and other developments to ensure their high streets are fit for purpose. As one of the most desirable places in the country to live, Fleet can ill afford to let a key barometer of economic and social health fall into decline.

Delivering change will require leaders across different sectors to work together.

To support the political leadership in developing a long term vision for the high street, it is recommended that the Council consider establishing a Town Commission comprised of key community and business stakeholders to work with the local authority in developing a 20-year plan for Fleet high street and accelerate digital transformation.

This lack of stability makes it harder to create a much-needed long term vision for the high street and to plan for the future. With this in mind, it is recommended that the Council consider establishing a Town Commission comprised of key community and business stakeholders to work with the local authority in developing a 20-year plan for Fleet high street and accelerate digital transformation.

As one of the most desirable places in the country to live, Fleet can ill afford to let a key barometer of economic and social health fall into decline.

Recommendations for the future of the pedestrianisation scheme

Given that there is no clear consensus on high street pedestrianisation, with those in favour and against being evenly balanced, and a quarter of all businesses interviewed adopting a neutral stance, it is recommended that the scheme is extended until its impact can be properly assessed.

However, any extension should include further investment and incorporate changes to help businesses overcome problems with deliveries.

A further option for the council to consider if it does not have the resources to give the scheme sufficient support to manage delivery concerns, would be to keep the scheme open on weekends only.

It is further recommended that the scheme is recognised in terms of liveable streets and the trend of prioritising people over parking, which has seen cities across the world make high streets traffic free. It should not be seen as temporary scheme but rather a testbed to create a new more community focused environment to support the high street.

This should be supported by a long term vision for Fleet which seeks to redefine its high street offer and create a distinctive destination, ideally supported by a strong events programme.

These goals will only be achieved by businesses and local leaders working together – and it cannot be ignored that debate around the scheme has been marred by unnecessary abuse and an aggressive social media environment. Grown up, mature discussions have not been held and some supporters of the scheme have felt unable to air their views for fear of being shot down.

This is not healthy or productive and the Hampshire Chamber of Commerce has offered to facilitate online debates, if required, to bring businesses together for further discussion.

Above all, it is recommended that all parties seek to establish a stronger culture of collaboration to view the big picture and prioritise a healthy future for Fleet.

Appendix

Statement from Fleet BID regarding the pedestrianisation scheme

“COVID is accelerating the decline in high streets as shopping destinations. More people are now shopping online and fewer people visited Fleet in August than before lockdown. As a BID we believe that brave decisions need to be made and something needs to change or Fleet will continue to decline. For a town to thrive it needs to be a place that people want to visit. In this context, Fleet Road temporary pedestrianisation has been an opportunity to trial something different. The scheme was implemented by Hart District Council to allow more shoppers to maintain social distancing and support the economic recovery for the business community.

As a BID we had reservations about the scheme, particularly the speed with which it was announced and the lack of detail which would show the opportunity this presents for Fleet. Having spoken to businesses in favour and against the scheme, Fleet BID decided to organise COVID safe activities and events to support economic recovery of the town by encouraging people to come back into Fleet, benefiting both them and the businesses they support. Feedback on these events has been overwhelmingly positive and the events have brought people into the town so that business have the opportunity to benefit from the increase in footfall. We have encouraged businesses to get involved and we know that businesses have benefited from these events.

We have been saddened to see the hostility that has been directed to those expressing support for the trial and, for a town that has a reputation for being safe, friendly and welcoming, we are concerned that this reputation has been damaged by the negativity and division which has been created, particularly on social media. Whatever the outcome of the review, we hope that this will be a catalyst for all organisations and the wider community to come together to create and deliver a shared vision and regeneration of our town that meets the needs of the local community and enables businesses to thrive.”

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RISE ASSOCIATES

matt@riseassociates.co.uk