



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Name and date of Committee	Cabinet: Wednesday 13 October 2021
Report Number	AGENDA ITEM NO. 9
Subject	REVIEW OF TEMPORARY TRAFFIC RESTRICTIONS IN WITNEY HIGH STREET
Wards affected	All Witney Wards
Accountable member	Cllr Suzi Coul – Cabinet Member for Finance Email: suzi.coul@westoxon.gov.uk
Accountable officer	Will Barton, Business Development Officer Will.barton@publicagroup.uk
Summary/Purpose	To report the results of the consultation survey on the temporary restrictions in Witney High Street and for members to consider next steps in light of current pandemic situation.
Annexes	Annex A – Results of Witney High Street survey
Recommendation/s	It is recommended that Cabinet:- <i>a) Support the retention of the temporary traffic restrictions in Witney High Street for a further period until January 2022;</i> <i>b) Support the immediate removal of the temporary pedestrian guard rails whilst retaining a measure of pedestrian/ vehicular separation through strategic use of planters;</i> <i>c) Supports the Oxfordshire County Council pursuing funding for design of public realm enhancements that could support more permanent changes to traffic movements;</i> <i>d) Requests that the Highway Authority undertakes additional public consultation on any design alternatives prior to any final decision on any scheme design or permanent changes.</i>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Healthy towns and villages• A vibrant district economy
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/ Consultation	Public consultation survey – results attached at Annex A

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1.** The Council, using powers granted as part of the national Covid pandemic response, sought, and implemented, temporary traffic restrictions in Witney High Street and Market Square to enable improved social distancing for town centre users and external dining arrangements for the hospitality sector. As well as limiting access a temporary pedestrian guard rail was installed to increase pedestrian space as part of the 'Reopening High Streets Safely' campaign in June 2020.
- 1.2.** National restrictions were lifted on 19 July 2021 but cases of COVID have remained particularly high nationally and in West Oxfordshire with the current case rate at a level similar to that seen during heightened restrictions. Officers have followed advice from the Director of Public Health to only gradually ease restrictions as the economy has gradually reopened.
- 1.3.** The temporary restrictions have given the opportunity to assess how the town would function with reduced traffic along the High Street. This report sets out the results of a public consultation on the measures and options for the future of the High Street. Ultimately, any decision on permanent changes will be made by the Highways Authority (Oxfordshire County Council (OCC)) in close liaison with this Council but given the proximity of the end of the traffic order (January 2022) a view on the longer term arrangements so it can be shared with the highways authority.

2. MAIN POINTS

- 2.1.** The temporary measures in Witney comprise restricted traffic access to Witney High Street and Market Square, temporary pedestrian guard rail on the east side of the High Street to create pedestrian space and cordoned off parking spaces to create a seating area for the Angel near the Buttercross. Additional table licenses have also been provided for the Market Square area.
- 2.2.** The traffic restrictions allow buses, taxis, blue badge holders, cyclists and pedestrians to continue travelling along the High Street/Market Square. There is a lack of clarity on deliveries and enforcement has been light touch to date.
- 2.3.** A public survey was undertaken to gauge views on these measures. In total 1,346 people responded to the survey. The full results are attached in Annex A. In summary:
 - 60% (808 people) felt safer with the restrictions and 26% (351 people) did not;
 - 54% (729 people) thought they had a positive impact on the town and 32% (437 people) did not;
 - 64% (846 people) said the extra pedestrian space should be retained whilst 36% (484 people) would like the restrictions removed and the High Street returned to its pre-COVID state;
 - 85% (1,133 people) said the council should continue to support outdoor dining in appropriate places.

- 2.4.** Approximately 30 responses were from organisations or businesses. Of these responses 11 - Stagecoach, Oxfordshire Association for the Blind, the Woolgate Shopping Centre, Witney Library, Windrush Bike Project, Ace Taxis and five businesses (none of whom are located in the restricted part of the High Street) were in favour of the restrictions being retained.
- 2.5.** A further ten businesses (eight of whom are based on the restricted part of the High Street) are opposed to the restrictions and see them as a hindrance to their trade. This is based on concerns regarding footfall and other issues such as the enforcement of the measures and the Council would attempt to address these concerns as far as possible as part of a permanent scheme.
- 2.6.** We did not receive formal responses from either Witney Town Council or Oxfordshire County Council. However, the Witney Traffic Advisory Group did discuss the restrictions and there was a significant majority view in favour of retaining the restrictions in the High Street.
- 2.7.** Thames Valley Police did respond to the consultation and suggested that the restrictions should be kept but only if they are made permanent and are accompanied by requisite signage. They also suggested that the restrictions should apply to all vehicles.
- 2.8.** The results of the survey show general support for the measures. Common themes in the comments made include:

In support of retaining the restrictions

Town feels safer for pedestrians, improved air quality, better shopping experience.

In support of removing the restrictions

High Street has lost its 'buzz' without the traffic, not enforced so people not taking any notice, footfall is down, shops are losing out on passing trade.

General observations

The temporary pedestrian guard railing is ugly, blue badge parking in the High Street/Market Square needs improving, the traffic restrictions need to be enforced.

3. OPTIONS FOR FUTURE OF THE MEASURES

- 3.1.** In terms of the High Street/Market Square between Welch Way and the Buttercross there is a decision to be made regarding the temporary measures:

Option 1 - Remove all of the restrictions and re-open the High Street/Market Square to all traffic

All of the restrictions could be removed and the High Street/Market Square re-opened to all traffic.

This would alleviate the concerns raised by some local people and some of the High Street businesses around the impact of the restrictions on the High Street. However this presumes that footfall is impacted purely by the restrictions and this premise does not seem well founded. It also goes against the outcome of the consultation survey which shows that the restrictions are supported by the majority.

In addition allowing all traffic back through the restricted area would seem to be counter to the Climate Change commitments of the Council which seeks to reduce the dominance of cars and enhance active travel.

Given that 55% of respondents thought the traffic restrictions had a positive impact on the town and 64% thought we should retain the extra pedestrian space should this option be chosen the Council would need to work closely with local businesses and residents with an aim of increasing the attractiveness of the town centre for all to increase footfall.

Option 2 - Retain the restrictions

The consultation demonstrated general but not unanimous support for retaining the restrictions. It was clear from both those that supported the restrictions and those that opposed them that some improvements could be made in any event and it is clear that some of these could be done immediately without waiting for the end of the traffic order or indeed any decision on permanent changes:

- The temporary pedestrian guard railing in the High Street is perceived as ugly. This was installed to narrow the carriageway to provide a wider footway during social distancing. This test period has shown the carriageway could be narrowed to provide wider footways whilst still retaining two-way traffic flows, noting traffic levels are reduced due to the restrictions. There is potential to replace the guardrailing with more attractive alternatives, such as planters, but there needs to be clarity on what their purpose is. The kerb in the middle of the temporarily widened footway may act as a hazard to some pedestrians including those with mobility impairments and to wheeled users (wheelchairs, mobility scooters, pushchairs and prams).
- There are concerns about the enforcement of the traffic restrictions. However, if made permanent, the two ends of the scheme could be redesigned so that signage makes clear which vehicles are permitted to travel along the High Street. The design of these would also be more attractive and in keeping with the historic town centre character.
- There are concerns from businesses about deliveries. Some businesses in the High Street/Market Square do not benefit from a rear service yard and have to receive deliveries from the front. There needs to be clarity that delivery vehicles will not be penalised. The restriction could be revised to allow for access and loading.
- Concerns were raised by disabled drivers about the suitability of some of the disabled parking spaces in the High Street/Market Square. These could be reviewed to ensure they are fit for purpose.

- To retain the restrictions beyond 3 January 2022, the Council will need to apply for a permanent Traffic Regulation Order to replace the current Temporary Traffic Regulation Order which expires on 3 January 2022. This would involve consultation and a fee of £3,250. The decision would be delegated to OCC officers if no objections are received during the consultation or be made by OCC Cabinet Member for Highways Management if objections are received.

Temporary seating space for The Angel

- 3.2.** A number of parking spaces near the War Memorial are subject to a Temporary Traffic Regulation Order and have been cordoned off to create an outside seating space for The Angel. The area is still very well used despite the Angel being able to fully open inside. It is proposed to retain this area so the business can make full use of it until the TRRO expires in January irrespective of the decision on the High Street measures.

Long term future of the High Street

- 3.3.** Following the temporary closure, OCC is considering the long-term future of the High Street and Market Square. From the test environment that has been created by the temporary restrictions there is opportunity to make these permanent, most likely through a two-step approach and subject to appropriate consultation.
- 3.4.** The proposed vision emerging from the County Council is to alter the High Street from a car and motorised traffic dominated space, to one that puts walking, cycling and public transport at the heart of Witney town centre. This vision will assist in the aim of promoting active and healthy lifestyles and is in line with the Council's climate change commitments.
- 3.5.** The first step would be to make the current traffic restrictions permanent (Jan 2022) and follow on as soon as funding is available with significant environmental enhancements to the public realm to improve the attractiveness of the High Street/Market Square and to help make the restrictions 'self-enforcing'. This first step could happen now or it could be implemented at the expiry of the current temporary arrangements.
- 3.6.** OCC are at very early stages, working up a concept scheme to help determine cost estimates were the measures to be made permanent. OCC has submitted a bid for £1,988,545 to the DfT's Active Travel Tranche 3 (ATT3) fund to cover the costs of the public realm scheme. In summary, the proposed scheme would:
- Make the existing traffic restriction arrangement permanent (from Welch Way to Buttercross)
 - Provide improved pedestrian crossing facilities
 - Deliver footway widening, particularly between Welch Way and Boots Pharmacy (2-8 High Street) by at least 1.5m on each side where it is particularly constrained.
 - Rationalise taxi pick up/drop off and rank space / on-street blue badge parking, whilst ensuring these are appropriately located to aid access for those with reduced mobility.
 - Implement public realm enhancements
 - Retain and renew the bus stops at Market Square

- 3.7. Once funding is secured, there would be comprehensive consultation with key stakeholders to work up the details of the scheme. If the ATT3 bid is successful works would be completed by March 2023.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. Costs to implement the temporary restrictions have been met by the national Reopening the High Streets Fund (RHSS). Any further adaptations to the temporary scheme (such as replacing the crowd control barriers and clearer signage to aid enforcement) would also be met from this fund.
- 4.2. In order to provide continuing and consistency it is recommended to implement the permanent restrictions before the temporary restrictions expire in January 2022, this would require:
- The cost of the Traffic Regulation Order (£3,250), which does not fit the eligibility criteria for the RHSS / Welcome Back fund and would need to be identified from other sources.
 - Costs for improved signage and planters – aim to be as cost effective as possible (currently awaiting costs)
- 4.3. The public realm enhancement being explored by OCC would need to be met from another source. The outcome of the ATT3 funding application is expected in Autumn 2021.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1. There will be the requirement for appropriate consultation as part of any traffic order changes and this will be conducted by the highways authority.

6. RISK ASSESSMENT

- 6.1. Given the clear split in public opinion on this matter whichever option is chosen will lead to a measure of public dissatisfaction with the outcome. Measures to support businesses that may be impacted could be considered through actions such as the Loyal Free App which seeks to increase footfall by improving the area as a destination. Other marketing of the town may also be helpful.
- 6.2. Should the area be re-opened then other mitigation to reduce the negative impacts of traffic may be necessary such as widened footways where possible.

7. EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 7.1. Any permanent changes to the scheme need to ensure that any displacement of disabled parking is properly considered and discussed with appropriate groups.

8. CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. Permanent changes to the High Street will support Climate Change Strategy and approaches to active travel.

9. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 9.1. Alternative options are considered in the main body of the report.

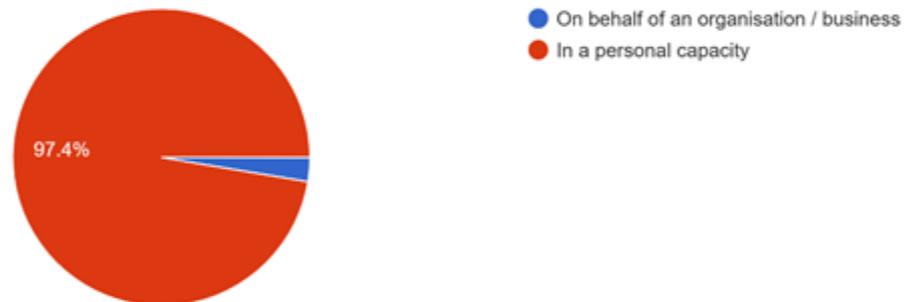
Annex A – Results of Witney High Street survey

The consultation survey closed on 4 July 2021. In total, 1,346 people responded to the consultation. The results are set out below:

Are you answering on behalf of an organisation or in a personal capacity as a resident / shopper / town centre user?

1,339 responses

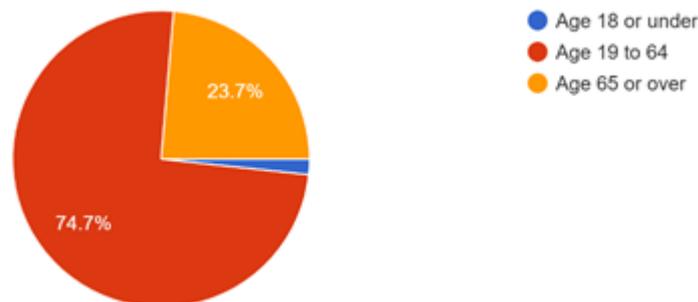
- 1,304 (97%) responded in a personal capacity
- 35 (3%) responded on behalf of an organisation or business



Are you age 18 or under, 19 to 64 or over 65

1,302 responses

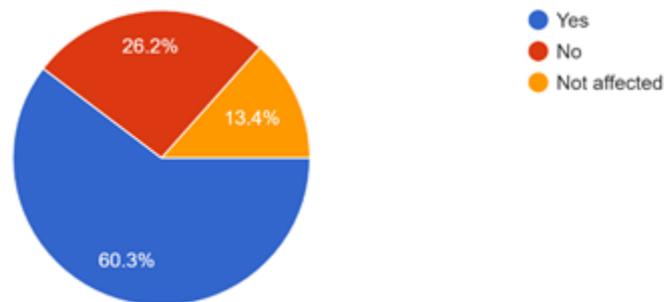
- 22 (2%) age 18 or under
- 972 (75%) 19 to 64
- 308 (24%) 65 and over



Do you feel safer having traffic restrictions in place and the extra pedestrian space?

1,339 responses

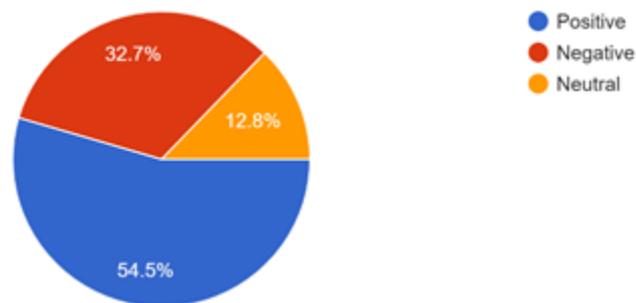
- 808 (60%) Felt safer
- 351 (26%) Did not feel safer
- 180 (14%) Were not affected



What impact do you think the traffic restrictions have had on the town?

1,337 responses

- 729 (55%) thought the restrictions had a positive impact
- 437 (33%) thought the restrictions had a negative impact
- 171 (13%) thought the impact of the restrictions was neutral



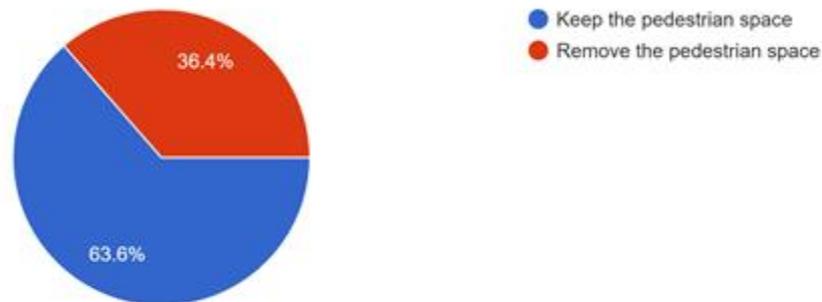
When asked for evidence to support their response, 677 left comments with the most common themes below:

- 258 (38%) said the High Street was nicer for pedestrians, shoppers & cyclists
 - 103 (15%) were concerned that the measures displaced traffic problems elsewhere
 - 60 (9%) were concerned they couldn't park near the shops they wanted to visit
 - 41 (6%) thought the loss of traffic removed the hustle and bustle of the town centre
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Do you think the extra pedestrian space along the High Street should be retained or removed when Step 4 of the Government's roadmap is reached?

1,330 responses

- 846 (64%) would like to keep the extra pedestrian space
- 484 (36%) would like to remove the extra pedestrian space

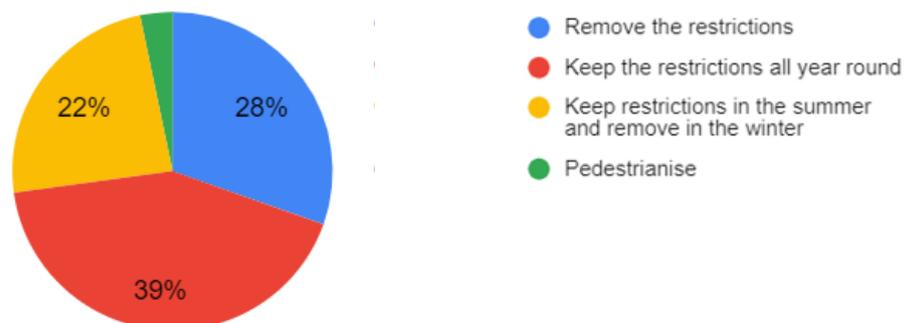


What do you think about keeping the restrictions for traffic in order to allow more space for pedestrians and hospitality businesses in summer and lifting the restrictions in winter?

1,206 responses

Of those that responded to this question:

- 336 (28%) want the restrictions removed
- 461 (39%) want to keep the restrictions all year round
- 255 (22%) support keeping the restrictions in summer and removing them in the winter
- 39 (3%) support full pedestrianisation



Should the Council continue to support outdoor dining in appropriate spaces?

1,336 responses

- 1133 (85%) support space for outdoor dining in appropriate places
- 92 (7%) said the Council should not support outdoor dining in appropriate places

