

SUBJECT: Re-Opening of Town Centres

**MEETING: Joint Economy and Development and Strong Communities
Select Committees**

DATE: 21st July 2020

DIVISIONS/WARDS AFFECTED: All

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 The report affords the committees an opportunity to examine the work undertaken to re-open town centres following the easing of lockdown restrictions and to understand the rationale for the decisions that have been taken.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Members evaluate the effectiveness of the arrangements in place.
- 2.2 That Members engage in the development of further changes that may be required as arrangements are revised in response to learning and feedback from residents, businesses and visitors.

3. KEY ISSUES

- 3.1 Since the declaration of COVID-19 as a global health emergency, the nation has experienced changes to our daily lives that are unprecedented in modern times. Prior to the virus, the Council was already considering ways in which it could reduce carbon emissions to make visits to town centres a much more pleasurable experience for pedestrians and cyclists alike, creating environments where the car is no longer paramount and enabling town centres to become much safer and friendlier destinations. This approach is advocated by the latest Welsh Government transport and land use planning guidance.
- 3.2 On 27th May Cabinet received a report on 'Unlocking our Town Centres.' This included reference to a bid to Welsh Government for funding for low cost, high impact, experimental measures to be introduced into town centres. Measures suggested by Welsh Government included: footway widening by using carriageway width; road closures with modal filters for cyclists; temporary parking removal or restrictions; decluttering of footways e.g. by consolidating signs. The measures have focused on nine settlements: Abergavenny, Caldicot, Chepstow, Gilwern, Magor, Monmouth, Raglan, Tintern and Usk. Each High Street has required a different response.
- 3.3 The Council undertook public engagement to seek views of residents and businesses and this engagement was used to help shape proposals, which included the closure of roads in town centres in order to widen pavements and allow for social distancing and queuing outside shops. Guidance for businesses has been developed alongside

posters and a campaign encouraging people to shop locally. On 19th June the First Minister Confirmed that non-essential retail would be able to re-open on Monday 22nd June. Subsequent decisions have lifted the 5 mile travel restriction from 6th July, allowed self-catering accommodation to open on 11th July, and allowed food and drink to be served outdoors only and hairdressers to open from 13th July.

- 3.4 This joint Select Committee is meeting four weeks after the re-opening of town centres. Committee will receive a presentation from officers on progress that has been made, the response to the changes and learning that needs to be considered to enable on-going improvements to be made to ensure that our local businesses are supported and that our town and village centres are safe places for businesses, residents and visitors.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION (INCLUDES SOCIAL JUSTICE, SAFEGUARDING AND CORPORATE PARENTING):

- 4.1 All decisions have been undertaken following the completion of a Future Generations Evaluation. These have continued to be revised and re-iterated in response to feedback and as more evidence becomes available. One example is the potential negative impact on people with certain physical disabilities from the re-location of on-street disabled parking bays. On-going dialogue has resulted on parking arrangements being revised to mitigate, as far as possible the negative impacts, while recognising that we continue to operate within a global health emergency.
- 4.2 The virus has resulted in a growing recognition of the need to build climate change into a green recovery. While recognising the adverse impact on many aspects of our lives the benefits include improved air quality due to reduction in driving and increased support for local shops which can be capitalised on as part of the transition towards the next phase of the council's response.

5. REASONS:

- 5.1 To ensure that Members understand the rationale for the decisions that have been taken regarding the re-opening of town centres and inform any future changes that may be needed learning from the experience of the early weeks.

6. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 6.1 The project has been delivered by colleagues from Highways, Operations, Economic Development, MonLife, and Communications with support from the Digital Team. £438,500 Welsh Government grant for sustainable transport measures in response to COVID-19 has been awarded which will fund many of the measures. Some aspects might be funded by bids to the COVID-19 emergency fund. Others, such as the car parking proposals, will be funded by MCC existing budgets.

7. CONSULTATION;

- 7.1 An engagement exercise was carried out ahead of the re-opening of non-essential retail to get ideas about the most effective ways to enable town centres to operate with safe social distancing arrangements. Nearly 1500 responses were received and these helped inform the proposals that were developed. These proposals were then shared as part of a series of engagement meetings held with County Councillors, Town/Community Council representatives and representatives of the business community.
- 7.2 There have been particular concerns about the impact on people with disabilities. The chairs of the two Select Committees have met with representatives of Monmouthshire Disability Advice Project to understand in more detail any potential negative impacts of people with protected characteristics.

8. AUTHOR:

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