

<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>RE-OPENING CHEPSTOW HIGH STREET TO VEHICULAR TRAFFIC</b>
<b>MEETING:</b>	<b>CABINET</b>
<b>DATE:</b>	<b>27<sup>th</sup> July 2022</b>
<b>DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:</b>	<b>CHEPSTOW</b>

**1. PURPOSE:**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to invite Cabinet to decide whether or not to revoke the Experimental Order that closes Chepstow High Street to traffic except for blue badge holders accessing the parking bays on Bank Street and except for deliveries to businesses between 4pm and 10am. Revoking the Order would re-open the High Street to all vehicular traffic as per the pre-pandemic arrangements.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 2.1 That Cabinet supports the unanimous request of the locally elected County Councillors for Chepstow and the Transforming Chepstow Masterplan Steering Group and revokes the Experimental Order that closes Chepstow High Street, thereby re-opening Chepstow High Street to vehicular traffic.

**3. KEY ISSUES:**

- 3.1 On 27<sup>th</sup> May 2020, Cabinet received a report on 'Unlocking our Town Centres.' This included reference to a bid to Welsh Government for funding low cost, high impact, experimental measures in town centres to enable social distancing, support local businesses, and encourage active travel (walking and cycling) in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. 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 were initially focused on nine settlements: Abergavenny, Caldicot, Chepstow, Gilwern, Magor, Monmouth, Raglan, Tintern and Usk. Approximately £650,000 Welsh Government grant was awarded.
- 3.2 The Council undertook public engagement in May/June 2020 to seek views of residents and businesses and received 1483 responses. This engagement was used to help shape proposals, which included the closure of Chepstow High Street to through traffic in order to allow for social distancing and queuing outside shops, and to support outdoor trading. Guidance for businesses was developed alongside posters and a campaign encouraging people to shop locally. Measures were further informed by a series of meetings with locally elected representatives and business representatives in May and June 2020, feedback from the Disability Advice Project via Adults Select Committee on 16<sup>th</sup> June 2020, and a multidisciplinary team of officers.

- 3.3 On 19<sup>th</sup> June 2020, the First Minister confirmed that non-essential retail would be able to re-open on Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2020. This announcement unexpectedly increased the urgency with which measures needed to be implemented so that social distancing and outdoor trading could be supported. Subsequent decisions lifted the five-mile travel restriction from 6<sup>th</sup> July 2020, allowed self-catering accommodation to open on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2020, and allowed food and drink to be served outdoors only and hairdressers to open from 13<sup>th</sup> July 2020. To respond to this, a programme of interventions was implemented with speed largely using emergency powers under highway legislation to implement traffic orders quickly. All of the measures were temporary trial measures and, unusually (but because of the emergency circumstances), were implemented without further prior consultation or engagement, but were then subsequently adjusted in response to feedback and monitoring of their effectiveness or to respond to any unforeseen issues.
- 3.4 An Emergency Traffic Order was put in place in June 2020 to close Chepstow High Street to traffic except for blue badge holders accessing the parking bays on Bank Street and except for deliveries to businesses between 4pm and 10am. The purpose of the Order was to enable social distancing and outdoor trading during the covid-19 pandemic.
- 3.5 However, in order to retain access to three disabled person parking bays on Bank Street, it was necessary to allow blue badge holders to drive up High Street at any time to access those spaces. This has meant that High Street is neither fully open nor fully closed, hindering the desired achievement of a fully people-friendly environment. Moreover, blue badge holders have reported being verbally abused by other members of the public, not realising that access is permitted or not realising that the car contains a blue badge holder. There are also frequent reports of vehicles using High Street that should not be (i.e. not blue badge holders).
- 3.6 Other changes included the provisional of additional disabled person parking bays in Welsh Street car park, provision of planters and parklets on High Street, and provision of a raised platform at Beaufort Square to create a civilised space. Although this was designed to fully accord with Welsh Government design guidance, some people reported feeling unsafe crossing the road so a zebra crossing has since been added to respond to that feedback.
- 3.7 The measures were kept under review throughout the pandemic including via meetings with County Councillors for Chepstow, representatives of Chepstow Town Council and business representatives; regular Business Resilience Forum meetings; Cabinet Member briefings and Select Committee.
- 3.8 As the health-based restrictions surrounding the pandemic eased, the focus shifted to the long-term regenerations of our town centres. As per the intent of the Welsh Government funding, discussions focused on to what extent any of the trial changes might work as permanent alterations, either as they are or with alterations, to support future high streets. High Street businesses have been affected throughout the UK by a number of factors, such as:

- the 2008 economic downturn when spending reduced (and more recently in 2022 with the emerging cost of living crisis);
- out of town retail diverting spend away from town centres (although very little of this exists in Monmouthshire, Chepstow High Street is affected by its proximity to Cribbs Causeway and Newport Retail Park, Spytty, as well as its proximity to larger retail centres such as Cardiff and Bristol city centres);
- the growth in internet shopping, accelerated by the pandemic;
- business rates and property rent (both significant issues in Monmouthshire)

Although the future remains uncertain, high streets are generally becoming leisure destinations for eating, drinking, leisure experiences and boutique/gift shopping rather than going home with bags full of physical items.

3.9 In September 2021, the then Cabinet approved an Experimental Order which maintained the closure of Chepstow High Street (or allowed for amendments) as a trial for up to 18 months. This was to enable time to explore and consult on options for potential permanent changes to Chepstow's town centre, with the intention of making the High Street more people-friendly, less car-dominated and better suited to the changing role of our high streets. A link to this report is provided below. Although Cabinet's decision delegated Authority to the Chief Officer to make alterations in liaison with the relevant Cabinet Member(s), it is considered that revoking the Order goes beyond an 'alteration' and consequently a Cabinet decision is needed.

3.10 In March 2022, a first stage of consultation was undertaken to seek views on the long-term future of the High Street. The results are summarised at Appendix 1. The survey showed a clear majority preference for the High Street to be re-opened to vehicular traffic. Highlights from the consultation are:

- Approximately 1925 people responded;
- 61% were aged 36 to 65 and 63% were female;
- 56% lived in Chepstow and 40% lived in surrounding villages (postcode data was not collected);
- 58% normally travel into town by car, 39% walk, 2% take the bus and 1% normally cycle;
- Most visits to the town centre were for non-food retail (46%) followed by leisure purposes (including café and restaurant visits) (31%);
- 30% of respondents visit the town centre twice a week and 28% once a week;
- The preferred alternative location to shop for 50% of respondents was Cribbs Causeway with the reasons given being retail choice, free parking, no bridge tolls, availability of other leisure activities e.g. cinema and restaurants;
- In terms of desired improvements, respondents would like an improved town centre offering an improved shopping experience, more events and generally being more shopper-focused. However, 59% said that they are not willing to put up with congestion and delays on A48 to achieve a more pleasant shopping environment;
- 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they want a high street that is convenient to drop into for less than an hour. However, 80% also agreed or strongly agreed that they would like a high street where they can spend a few hours shopping, eating and drinking;

- 77% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the High Street closure to traffic has had an unacceptable impact on traffic congestion on the A48. Only 43% want a high street that is people focused rather than car focused;
- Respondents were asked to rank a number of options by preference for the future of the High Street. 49% identified re-opening the High Street to traffic as their first preference. 1105 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this option while 552 strongly disagreed. 1192 respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with keeping the current arrangements.

3.11 One of the clear messages was the view that the High Street closure has impacted on traffic flow on the A48, with the view that the High Street created a useful release valve for free-flowing traffic. The data suggests that the contribution that High Street makes in terms of traffic flow is low, and anecdotal evidence is that when, prior to High Street's closure, there is severe congestion on the A48, the High Street was also at standstill. However, the strength of feeling is clear and locally elected members request that High Street be re-opened to address local concerns.

3.12 Officers had intended that a second, more detailed consultation would be undertaken in July/August 2022 to seek opinion on detailed, drawn-up options. These were likely to have been:

- Re-opening High Street to vehicular traffic as per pre-pandemic arrangements;
- Re-opening High Street to one-way vehicular traffic (up-hill), which would also facilitate public transport proposals;
- Re-opening High Street to vehicular traffic on a part-time basis, for example allowing traffic through at peak commuting times and closing it to traffic during the middle of the day; or
- Complete closure and pedestrianisation (included as an option for consideration but knowing it would be unlikely to be popular).

3.13 Based on a number of factors including the response to the initial consultation, discussions with local businesses, and a desire to avoid the consultation on the emerging Transforming Chepstow Masterplan becoming unhelpfully dominated by this single issue, the Steering Group for the Transforming Chepstow Masterplan (formerly known as the Chepstow Placemaking Plan), including all Chepstow's County Councillors and nominated Town Councillors, unanimously requested that the High Street be re-opened to traffic. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Sustainable Livelihoods, Councillor Paul Griffiths, has indicated his support for this action.

3.14 At its first meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2022, the Place Scrutiny Committee set out its forthcoming work priorities. These included scrutiny of the continued closure of Chepstow High Street, due to concerns about its impact on traffic flows and businesses. The next Scrutiny Committee meeting is on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2022. In the context of the reasons for including this topic on its workplan, it would be a perverse outcome if scrutiny activity delayed the very outcome being sought. The Chair of that Committee, Councillor Lisa Dymock, has since been briefed on this proposed Cabinet report and has confirmed in writing that she no longer wishes for the matter to be scrutinised by that Committee, to expedite matters.

- 3.15 It is disappointing that it has not been possible at this time to achieve any consensus among the public for an option which would limit traffic flows through the historic High Street of Chepstow. The Council maintains its objective of working with the community of Chepstow to shape a shared vision for the town which will match of the ambitions of residents, balancing the needs of pedestrians, vehicle users, traders, visitors and residents.
- 3.16 Consequently, Cabinet is invited to revoke the Experimental Order insofar as it relates to Chepstow, which will have the effect of re-opening Chepstow High Street to vehicular traffic as desired by the locally elected representatives for Chepstow and the majority of responses to the first consultation. It is worth noting that a separate Order is in place until Christmas 2022 for Sunday closures for the market to take place. This Order is not affected by the proposed revocation of the Experimental Order, nor would any future application for part-time closures for markets or events be affected by this decision.
- 3.17 The planters and parklets will need to be removed. Where possible, they will be re-used elsewhere.

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

- 4.1 A Wellbeing of Future Generations Equalities Impact Appraisal is attached at Appendix 2. There are no corporate parenting or safeguarding concerns, nor issues in relation to our economic impact duty. Amendments were needed to the trial closure to provide mitigation in relation to impacts on protected characteristics, specifically access to disabled person parking bays. Re-opening the street does not adversely affect that access.

**5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL**

- 5.1 Table One below therefore provides an options appraisal of the proposal:

<b>Options</b>	<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Risks</b>	<b>Comments/Mitigation</b>
Re-open High Street to vehicles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responds to public consultation and the wishes of locally elected representatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Missed opportunity to consult on and trial regeneration and placemaking to future-proof the town centre;</li> <li>Re-opening the High Street to traffic will not alleviate A48 congestion;</li> <li>Re-opening the High Street to traffic will not address the wider issues facing high street businesses e.g. internet shopping etc.</li> </ul>	Different approaches could be considered in the future, following wider discussion with businesses and the local community
Continue with the trial road closure while consulting on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunity to consult on and trial regeneration and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This topic dominates the consultation on the</li> </ul>	

alternative designed-up options for the future of the high street	placemaking to future-proof the town centre;	Transforming Chepstow Masterplan; <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The local community feels like it isn't being listened to having responded to the first consultation</li> </ul>	
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**6. REASONS:**

6.1 Based on a number of factors including the response to the initial consultation, discussions with local businesses, and a desire to avoid the consultation on the emerging Transforming Chepstow Masterplan becoming unhelpfully dominated by this single issue, the Steering Group for the Transforming Chepstow Masterplan (formerly known as the Chepstow Placemaking Plan), including all Chepstow's County Councillors and nominated Town Councillors, unanimously requested that the High Street be re-opened to traffic. The Cabinet Member for Economy and Sustainable Livelihoods, Councillor Paul Griffiths, has indicated his support for this action. It is therefore recommended that Cabinet agrees to revoke the Experimental Traffic Order insofar as it relates to the trial closure of Chepstow High Street, which will have the effect of re-opening the High Street to vehicular traffic as per pre-pandemic arrangements.

**7. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:**

7.1 All resource implications will be met by existing budgets and teams. Where possible, planters and parklets will be re-used locally.

**8. CONSULTEES:**

Cabinet  
 Senior Leadership Team  
 Communities and Place DMT  
 Monitoring Officer  
 S151 Officer  
 Colleagues in Highways Management, Highways Ops and MonLife regarding potential re-location and re-use of the planters and parklets.

**9. BACKGROUND PAPERS:**

The previous Cabinet approved experimental traffic orders to retain the trial measures for up to 18 months in September 2021: the report can be viewed [here](#).

The Economy and Development Select Committee met on two occasions to consider the re-opening towns trial measures:

- The report for 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020 can be viewed [here](#)
- The report for 26<sup>th</sup> July 2021 can be viewed [here](#)

**10. AUTHOR:**

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**11. CONTACT DETAILS:**

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**Appendix 1: Results of the initial consultation (March 2022) on Chepstow High Street Closure**

**Appendix 2: Wellbeing of Future Generations Assessment**