

**EXTRACT FROM THE DRAFT MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF POLICY AND  
PUBLIC INITIATIVES PANEL HELD ON 9 JANUARY 2019**

**21. Colchester High Street Pedestrianisation**

The Panel considered a report by the Assistant Director Policy and Corporate giving details of the background for a discussion of proposals for pedestrianisation or traffic reduction in Colchester High Street.

Rachel Forkin, Transport and Sustainability Manager, presented the report and responded to members questions.

Also in attendance to assist the Panel members in their discussion were Alan Lindsay, Essex County Council's Transportation Planning and Infrastructure Manager, Councillor Kevin Bentley in his capacity as Essex County Council's Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Councillor Martin Goss, Portfolio Holder for Waste, Environment and Transportation.

The Transport and Sustainability Manager explained that the potential for managing traffic in Colchester High Street had been the subject of discussion for a number of years. Most recently the removal of all non-essential traffic from the High Street had been taken forward in 2013 with experimental traffic regulation orders (TROs) being introduced. The scheme was between the hours of 11am and 6pm, although buses, taxis, private hire vehicles, motor cycles and cycles were allowed to access at all times. A revised version of the scheme was introduced in October 2013 limited to:

- 24 hour bus lane on North Hill (southbound carriageway)
- 24 hour bus lane on Middleborough (right turn to North Hill)
- 24 hour bus lane on High Street (right turn to Queen Street)
- 24 hour vehicle prohibition on Cowdray Crescent.

These elements were later made permanent with the aim of reducing the appeal of the High Street as a through route for general traffic and therefore reduce traffic volume in the High Street.

In advance of agreeing any future scheme for pedestrianisation or traffic reduction objectives, a vision for the High Street would need to be agreed and potential schemes would need to be informed by best practice and further study work. Baseline data, including air quality, footfall, cycling levels, public transport use and public transport journey time, would also need to be collected against which to measure the impact of changes. Potential benefits were:

- Improvements to air quality;
- Improvements to the pedestrian environment:
  - Easier to cross the road;
  - Boost café culture
  - Make the market environment more attractive;
- Improved Public Transport reliability;
- Improved connections for pedestrians and cyclists into and across the town centre;
- Modal shift to more sustainable means of transport;
- Potential increased footfall and spending.

Potential impacts included:

- Difficulty balancing the needs of different users including pedestrians, businesses, deliveries, local residents;
- Providing alternative arrangements for buses and taxis if they can no longer pick up passengers on the High Street;
- Access to and availability of Blue Badge parking;
- Traffic displacement and increased traffic volumes on roads around the town centre;
- Impact on traffic and residents in the Dutch Quarter;
- Impact on deliveries.

It was highlighted that pedestrianisation could take different forms and be implemented in different ways, such as the removal of all vehicular traffic, giving priority to pedestrians, removal of non-essential traffic and traffic reduction. The report included a series of scenarios to aid initial discussion and explore different options. Essex and Colchester Councils were working in partnership to develop a Transport Strategy for Colchester, setting out a vision for Transport to 2033, in line with the Local Plan. Background data was being collected and consultation on objectives and issues was expected for early 2019. It would be important to ensure continuity between the Transport Strategy work and a traffic reduction project.

The next steps for a traffic reduction project were outlined, proposing the appointment of consultants to undertake early public consultation with all those having an interest in access to the High Street, with initial views being sought on whether the High Street could be pedestrianised and options for how this could be achieved as well as prior engagement with interested groups including Transport for Colchester, local businesses and residents, access groups, walking and cycling groups, bus operators and taxi operators. If the consultation indicated support for implementing a project, work would be undertaken with partners and interested groups to carefully plan further details including access rights.

The Transportation Planning and Infrastructure Manager referred to the need to identify the vision and objectives of a project and for the adoption of a partnership approach, not only with interested groups but also across the two local authorities. He gave further details of the previous scheme introduced in 2013 and the impact of the TROs which had been put in place. He referred to the monitoring group which had been established to gather views and feedback, including footfall, public perception, air quality and public transport. He agreed that it was important to establish the objectives early in the project and to learn from previous experiences.

The Chairman explained that the Panel was not a decision making body, its role was to listen to opinions and concerns about the issue and to make recommendations to the Cabinet for consideration.

Sir Bob Russell addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He explained that he lived close to the town centre area and supported the views expressed by Mr Dean. He urged the Council not to disturb the equilibrium of the town centre. He acknowledged the reported support for a pedestrianisation scheme but was of the view that the many disadvantages would outweigh any benefits. He referred to the difficulties due to the location of the town

centre on a hill and within Roman walls with only two of the four gates allowing vehicular access. He considered 75% of the town centre was already pedestrianised, whilst the High Street had already been reduced to a one lane highway with footways of very generous proportions. He was concerned about detriment to businesses and public services and was of the view that measures to reduce traffic further would have a negative impact on traffic problems on Cowdray Avenue and Magdalen Street.

Sarah Shehadeh addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). She supported the views of Sir Bob Russell in terms of the existing levels of pedestrianisation and the location of the town centre on a hill. She considered the current arrangement in the High Street worked well as it was not difficult to cross, unlike Head Street. She was also concerned about the impact on bus services.

Nick Chilvers addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He considered the report to be balanced and identified the complexities of the issues. He was of the view that interested groups such as, resident groups, bus operators and taxis, needed to be consulted as well as the independent retailers and national chains. He considered all retailers would be able to cope and manage changes with time but he warned that changes to bus stops would impact on older residents, they may opt to shop elsewhere and this would have a considerable negative impact on trade. He was of the view that consultation needed to include residents living above shops and food establishments and that the market should not be allowed to dominate opinions. He considered the consultation needed to be well publicised, to not include a list of questions and sufficient time needed to be allocated.

Julian Elliott, representing First Essex Buses addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He acknowledged the aspiration for a strong local economy and concerns about high levels of congestion and air quality issues but he explained that it was important that access for buses into the town centre was maintained. The bus services operated a cross town pattern and if buses were not able to access the High Street this would have a knock on effect on the operation and cost of the services. Experience from High Street closure days had demonstrated that bus patronage decreased with an associated negative effect on traders. He urged consideration be given to buses being permitted to serve the High Street to allow residents to access facilities and support the local economy. He argued that buses were the best use of road space and most efficient mover of people and disturbance to bus access would create a need for infrastructure elsewhere which may prove difficult to accommodate. He confirmed that First Bus was very keen to work constructively with the local authorities to find the most suitable solution to enable to get into the heart of the town centre and were very willing to engage in any part of the process.

The Chairman welcomed the support for the process from Mr Elliott and asked whether bus service punctuality was likely to improve should other vehicles be excluded from the town centre.

In response Mr Elliott confirmed reduced congestion in the town centre had the potential to improve punctuality but this was subject to reduced congestion across the wider area.

Stuart Johnson, on behalf of Colchester Cycling Campaign addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He explained that Colchester Cycling Campaign welcomed measures to limit the amount of motor traffic

in the town centre as it would improve the town centre through the encouragement of more walking, cycling and the use of public transport. He also acknowledged due consideration needed to be made for access to be maintained for people with disabilities. He reported that measures seeking to encourage walking and cycling had been shown to improve commercial outcomes. He was of the view that whatever scheme was adopted in the future it needed to include provision for bi-directional access for cyclists on the High Street. He welcomed the opportunity to participate constructively in future consultation.

Robbie Spence addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He welcomed the report, supported traffic restrictions rather than outright pedestrianisation with a preference for no private cars and trade vehicles only out of hours only but allowance for buses, taxis, Dutch Quarter residents and two way access for cyclists. He suggested rising bollards with number plate recognition, together with a 5mph speed limit in order to create a more pleasant and safer area for pedestrians.

Alan Short addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He considered better things could be done with the High Street and cited Durham City centre which was pedestrianised but also built on a hill and surrounded by a river. He was supportive of improvements to the public transport system and vehicle control. He was concerned about the current cost of bus fares and the chaotic system operated by different bus companies and the need for improvements to bring incentives for people to choose not to use their cars. He supported a comprehensive plan including maintained access to the town centre for people with disabilities, the whole town centre becoming as car free as possible and the introduction of congestion zones.

Ken Walker addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He considered the High Street to be the beating heart of Colchester and fundamental to the future health of the town. He was of the view that the council needed to determine its goals and objectives to support the High Street to ensure that the businesses and communities prospered and that these needed to be set out in a plan alongside one for pedestrianisation. He suggested each step in the process needed to be assessed relative to those objectives and that the objectives needed to be formally articulated and shared together with the practicalities and strategies to address issues or problems. He was particularly concerned that resources should not be wasted until these preliminary steps had been taken. He further suggested that measures to assess the success of the process needed to be put in place and adjustments made if things went wrong. He referred to scepticism about other measures such as work at Ipswich Road and considered that objectives needed to be understood by residents and fully publicised using local media.

Robin Webb addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He explained that he was a Chartered Civil Engineer living in the Dutch Quarter and commended the previous speaker. He had been disillusioned with previous schemes because of lack of feedback and co-ordination. He explained the problem for residents of the Dutch Quarter who could only access the area from the bottom of North Hill and the need for traffic to be spread out. He considered the congestion would be worse if the High Street was pedestrianised. He advocated the determination of an overall objective for the scheme, fully supported and thought out,

referring to a previous scheme which had identified accident reduction but with poor evidence to support this.

Brian Lewes addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He was the proprietor of a cycle shop in St John's Street. He referred to congestion which he attributed to the restriction of traffic through the town centre and the prevention of traffic getting out of the town centre. He advocated the re-introduction of two lanes in the High Street and the widening of Head Street to enable access round buses. He was also concerned about the closure of Queen Street from the High Street and the congestion caused by circuitous routes around the town and the associated air pollution from stationary vehicles. He supported access to the town centre to enable people to get in and out of the town quickly and was of the view that pedestrianisation would kill off the town centre. He also supported the construction of a ring road.

Bodo von Broen addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He was a resident of the Dutch Quarter and considered it imperative that the High Street was pedestrianised in order to improve safety in the town centre road network. He referred to the pedestrianisation of Chelmsford and Ipswich which had improved business in these town centres. He did not consider there was sufficient footfall in Colchester and the market was suffering detrimentally. He considered it would be easy to achieve by moving deliveries to the early part of the morning and traffic could be diverted as was the case at weekends.

Barbara Patterson addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). She welcomed non-pedestrianisation and referred to people opting to shop out of town due to the cost of car parking. She considering it important to reduce business rates to encourage smaller independent shops and could not see any justification to restrict vehicles in the town centre.

Rowena Macaulay addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). She spoke in support of inclusive access, the impact on blue badge holders, disabled and older users' of public transport and shared spaces. She spoke in a personal capacity and on behalf of Walk Colchester, an organisation concerned with the creation of attractive and safe walking environments for all and to be inclusive. She was not representing Fair Access to Colchester. She was not in principle against full or part pedestrianisation and had followed debates on shared space for some time. She was not sure that it would well in Colchester, particularly in relation to the relocation of disabled parking spaces in close proximity to the town centre. She was of the view that in 2013, discussions had been premised on a decision which had already been taken, which was for the removal of all cars from the High Street. She did not consider this to be a good way to start a meaningful consultation and hoped this would not be repeated. She explained that many people relied on public transport and were, by reason of their disability, from lower socio-economic groups. She acknowledged that buses were poor in terms of emissions and often ran intermittently but they did have capacity to bring large numbers of people right into the town centre. She also acknowledged that shared space was a contentious issue and she referred to a petition to stop all moves towards shared space pending further research being undertaken was being presented to the Government jointly by the National Federation of Disabled People, Transport for All and the Royal National Institute for the Blind.

David Harper addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Meetings General Procedure Rule 5(3). He referred to his former home town of Newport in Monmouthshire which had been a thriving town but had significantly deteriorating following the pedestrianisation of the town centre. He explained his regret at the change to a town he had loved and warned against this happening to Colchester.

Councillor Luxford Vaughan referred to the problem of air pollution, asked about progress with the introduction of electric buses, whether there were any funds to assist bus companies with this and how this impacted the plans for Rapid Transport Systems for new planned developments. She was of the view that the problem of air pollution would only be moved to a different location and that measures needed to be pursued to actively improve vehicle emissions. She was also not convinced that the objectives of a pedestrianisation scheme would adequately assist retailers.

The Chairman suggested that the subject of electric buses might best be deferred to the Panel's discussion on Sustainable Transport which was due to take place at the next meeting.

The Transport and Sustainability Manager acknowledged the need for all modes of transport to be looked at if one of the objectives of a future project was the improvement in air quality. She confirmed that Rapid Transport plans would need to be looked at in conjunction with any pedestrianisation planning. She indicated that she would need to investigate further the issue of subsidies for electric buses.

Councillor Scott-Boutell referred to partnership funding and the ratio of resources which was being allocated to support this project. She asked for consideration to be given to the introduction of electric hopper buses to open up the town centre for all.

Councillor Goss confirmed that there was a budget allocation of £120,000 but the intention was for funds to be allocated in stages, starting with a consultation followed by an assessment of project viability. Any implementation of a scheme would need approval from Essex County Council as Highway Authority and he confirmed that he had been working closely with Councillor Bentley, in his capacity as Essex County Council Cabinet Member for Infrastructure towards the creation of a Transport strategy for Colchester. He acknowledged the need for all interested groups to be involved in the process and that lessons had been learnt from the experience in 2013. He also confirmed that no measures would be taken prior to undertaking a consultation exercise.

Councillor Buston welcomed the report and the contributions made by members of the public. He considered the current traffic restrictions in the town centre had brought problems as well as benefits. He acknowledged the need for the High Street to continue to thrive but did not consider this was entirely dependent on pedestrianisation or otherwise. He agreed with the suggestion for a comprehensive plan to be formulated and acknowledged the specific characteristics of Colchester which made it difficult to compare to other towns. He also acknowledged the references to congestion and the view that the town needed to be opened up rather than closed down to traffic. He was concerned about the cost of any further pedestrianisation proposals and was of the view that additional resources should not be utilised for this purpose at this time.

Councillor Harris strongly welcomed the partnership approach to the project, the intention to consult widely and the intention to work in a staged arrangement. He acknowledged that previous initiatives had not been implemented appropriately and

was of the view that wide consultation was imperative. He was concerned about the potential for air pollution problems to be moved rather than eliminated and the additional cost to businesses of out of hours deliveries.

The Chairman invited Councillor Bentley to address the Panel in his capacity as Essex Cabinet member for Infrastructure. Councillor Bentley welcomed the opportunity to hear the views expressed by the public and to participate in the meeting. He referred to the subject of pedestrianisation being considered on numerous occasions over the time he had lived in the Borough and that the population of the town had increased from 94,000 to 190,000 in that time. He considered the matter related to the whole network of roads in the town centre not just the High Street and commented that Colchester High Street was one of very few through High Streets in East Anglia. He did not consider the location of the town on a hill and between Roman walls was a matter of significance. He advocated an approach to the project which sought to identify what was trying to be achieved and what it was that people wanted the town centre and the High Street to be and what it was that people wanted the town centre to look like in 50 years' time. He considered many things to be possible but questioned what things would be acceptable. He also referred to measures to reduce air pollution and improve congestion and advocated involving all interested groups in the process.

The Chairman invited Sam Good, from Colchester Business Improvement District (BID) to address the Panel. Mr Good explained that the BID was a business led body and its boundaries were wider than just the High Street. He acknowledged the need to consider what the future would be for the town centre and for the reasons for part or complete pedestrianisation to be identified. He confirmed that the BID would be very willing to participate in the process on behalf of businesses in the town centre.

The Chairman invited Councillor Cory, Leader of the Council to address the Panel. Councillor Cory attended the meeting and, with the consent of the Chairman addressed the Committee. He explained that he had been encouraged by the representations which had come forward and considered it was the start of a process which would involve many people and interested groups. He acknowledged the need for a framework for the process to be established and welcomed the helpful comments made by Councillors Goss and Bentley. He was very supportive of the Panel accepting responsibility for progressing the project and for work to be undertaken to determine whether pedestrianisation might contribute to the revitalisation of the High Street. He invited Councillor Bentley to clarify the support available from the County Council to address congestion issues and warmly welcomed the work being undertaken towards the creation of a Transport Strategy for Colchester. He also acknowledged the importance of clarifying what people wanted the town centre to look like.

Councillor Bentley explained that the transportation work was not just in relation to the High Street but that it encompassed transportation issues for the whole of Colchester, the focus of the work being in relation to increasing traffic and how the associated congestion issues could be dealt with. This may also involve how the displacement of traffic, by pedestrianisation, is dealt with and how more sustainable alternatives can be considered.

Councillor Goss acknowledged the issues identified by Councillor Bentley. He confirmed that the model identified for Chelmsford was being looked at with a view to producing a masterplan for transport for Colchester. He confirmed that consultation was

planned on what the future for transport in Colchester would look like.

Councillor Davies voiced her concern that discussion about potential implementation of a pedestrianisation scheme was premature and that work needed to be undertaken on the options and implications as an initial step in the process.

Councillor Scott- Boutell referred to the items of business contained in the Panel's work programme and suggested that the business encompassing sustainable transport, air quality and pedestrianisation were all inter-related and there were merits in looking at all of these subjects holistically. She supported the proposal that all options and implications for Colchester High Street needed to be given due consideration.

Councillor Harris was also of the view that various opinions had been presented at the meeting and that it was important that consideration be given to the various options.

The Chairman thanked the members of the public for their attendance and their contributions. He referred to the plans for a transport masterplan for Colchester, mentioned by Councillors Goss and Bentley and the need for the process for the High Street to identify what was wanted in the first instance. He agreed that opinions had been expressed at the Panel's meeting but these may not be representative of the reviews of residents of Colchester generally. He welcomed the opportunity for the Panel to undertake, on behalf of the Cabinet, the process of identifying objectives by means of a thorough consultation exercise and determining the next steps on options for the High Street.

Councillor Cory was of the view that the progress made at this meeting had been encouraging but he considered a wider debate needed to be facilitated to ensure the widest spectrum of views could be forthcoming. He welcomed the Panel's willingness to continue with the work, subject to the other work commitments of the Panel, and considered it was likely that support from the Cabinet would be forthcoming for the Panel to progress the next steps of the process.

Dan Gascoyne, the Assistant Director Policy and Corporate, explained that work had commenced with other groups in the town centre on formulating a bid for submission to the Government for the Future High Streets Fund and that, whilst there were other locations which may be more economically challenged, this would assist with the issues discussed at this meeting as well as the wider town centre heritage issues. He confirmed that the submission would be for funding in the order of £3 to £5 million, the deadline for which was towards the end of March 2019 and, as such, it may be possible to update the Panel at its next meeting.

*RESOLVED* that the report and background information on Colchester High Street, together with the subsequent discussion be noted.

*RECOMMENDED* to Cabinet that approval be given to the Panel to progress the next steps regarding options for Colchester High Street, including agreeing objectives, gathering baseline data and consultation with all stakeholders and the public.