

Somerset West and Taunton Council

Executive – 24 February 2021

East Street and St James Street, Taunton.

This matter is the responsibility of Executive Councillor Member Cllr Mike Rigby

Report Authors: (East St) Sarah Ellwood, Active Travel Officer and (St James St) Matt Parr, Project Manager

1. Executive Summary / Purpose of the Report

This report is split into two recommendations, which contribute to the same goals and objectives. The first details a plan to increase participation in active travel, reduce private car and public transport use whilst enabling social distancing in Taunton town centre, centred around new interventions on East Street. The second seeks authorisation for SWT Officers to work with the Highway Authority to make a permanent traffic regulation order on St James Street, following the successful 12-month trial closure which ended earlier this year.

2. Recommendations

For the Executive to approve:

- 2.1 Officers continue to work with Somerset County Council's Highways team and representatives of disability interest groups on proposed modifications to vehicular access on East Street in Taunton to increase active travel and enable social distancing. Specifically, instructing them to:
 - 2.1.1 Limit vehicular access and restrict traffic movement to one direction only (from the Fore Street junction, exiting onto East Reach/ Silver Street)
 - 2.1.2 Creating cycle lanes in both directions and offering additional cycle parking
 - 2.1.3 Create additional Blue Badge parking on Magdalene Street, Billet St and the Crescent Car Park
- 2.2 The 12-month trial scheme for St James Street be made permanent.

3. Risk Assessment (if appropriate)

The East Street scheme is subject to Road Safety Audit which will be carried out by Somerset County Council following detailed design.

4. Background and Full details of the Report

4.1 East Street

- 4.1.1 In May 2020 the Government announced a £2 bn funding package to increase levels of active travel in the UK. This grant was broken down into two phases: Emergency Active Travel Fund Tranche 1 to enable social distancing while allowing non-essential retail to reopen in July after the first national lockdown; Tranche 2 seeks to embed these changes in travel habits and create more permanent schemes to increase active travel in the long term.
- 4.1.2 Following the first national lockdown and the reopening of non-essential retail, June 2020 saw the closure of East Street to allow for social distancing and increase walking and cycling. This was intended to reduce reliance on public transport to allow continuing social distancing, whilst reducing the need for increased dependency on private car use that would contribute to traffic congestion and air pollution. A temporary barrier was added to the Fore Street junction at the Burma Memorial roundabout and was marshalled throughout the day to allow emergency vehicles and retail deliveries one-way access on to East Street.
- 4.1.3 Throughout this time, a longer-term solution to the marshalled temporary barrier was also being sought and the Council launched consultations – both online and directly with key stakeholder representatives.
- 4.1.4 An interim measure that was initially introduced to allow socially distanced shopping throughout December remains in force. To address the needs of those with the most severe mobility needs, Blue Badge holders are permitted one-way access to park on East Street before 10 am. There is no expectation for Blue Badge holders to have exited East St by any specific time, however, the current access hours are in place to minimise the number of vehicles on East St during the busier shopping hours. Subject to consultation with Highways and a review of usage, this could be extended. A longer-term plan for East Street has now been developed that incorporates public realm improvement work, consultation feedback and allows for continuing social distancing.
- 4.1.5 To further enable disabled access to the town centre, the Council, working in partnership with Somerset County Council, agreed to create additional Blue Badge parking bays on Billet Street and on Magdalene Street, with two additional Blue Badge spaces in the Crescent Car Park. The layout of the proposed car park on the bus station site in Tower Street will also have an increased proportion of Blue Badge bays when it comes into operation in the new year.
- 4.1.6 To alleviate traffic congestion that may be caused by the East St closure, traffic modelling will be undertaken to inform any longer term plans to permanently pedestrianise East St. Any permanent plans will be subject to further public consultation.

4.1.7 Cycle lanes will be created which will enable two-way directional travel for cycles 24 hours a day and new cycle storage and street furniture will be added to complement the anticipated increase in cyclists this scheme will see. This will also be subject to road safety audit and best practise for cycle infrastructure.

4.2 St James Street

4.2.1 In 2017, Somerset West and Taunton Council, working closely with Somerset County Council as Highways Authority, commissioned WSP Transportation and Infrastructure consultants to understand the current traffic and public realm environment in Taunton town centre, and recommend improvements which will support the Council's strategic vision for Taunton as the South West's first Garden Town.

4.2.2 Within this central aim, the team developed a project which sought to:

- Reduce the traffic dominance to provide a better pedestrian environment.
- Create better pedestrian/cycle linkages and signage.
- Upgrade public spaces.
- Support the Car Parking Strategy.
- Support good public transport, including coach parking.

4.2.3 The project to close East Street, Hammett Street and St James Street was initiated, and subsequently went through many iterations of research, design and consultation. In the first quarter of 2019, the Council reengaged with town centre stakeholders to review the original project goals and the scope of delivery for Phase 1 of the project. Three working groups were conducted with representatives from Taunton Area Cycling Campaign, Taunton Taxi Association, the Chamber of Commerce, Avon and Somerset Police, Taunton Transition Town, SCC Area Highways, WSP (Project Consultants), First Group Buses, Compass Disability and Taunton Visitor Centre.

4.2.4 The group agreed to initiate a 12-month trial on St James Street in May 2019, prior to the first Cricket World Cup fixtures the following month. This was to be supported by post-implementation feedback sessions, quarterly monitoring reviews and "stop or continue" checkpoints at month 6 and month 12.

4.2.5 The Council held a post-trial meeting of the stakeholder working group on 16th September 2020. The stakeholder group agreed that the outcomes from the trial are very much in line with the original project goals (above). In addition, the traders felt the closure had enabled them to form a cohesive 'Independent Quarter' brand and strengthen their co-ordinated marketing activities, particularly online. However, they did feel that the quality of the scheme could be improved and requested that the Council make this a priority moving forward. The final step will be for SWT Officers to work with the Highway Authority to make a permanent traffic regulation order.

Future High Street Funding

- 4.3 The recent allocation of Future High Street funding to SWT will contribute to town-wide active travel projects that will link up St James St, East St and onto Vivary Park (see Diagram 1). This funding, combined with potential Community Infrastructure Levy (CiL) allocations will give the opportunity to work a comprehensive scheme to improve cycling infrastructure in the town, complementing the two schemes highlighted in this report.
- 4.4 As a result, it may contribute to improvements along East St in the longer term. However, this phase of East St temporary closure works will be funded by the (provisional) £80k Active Travel Funding (Tranche 2)

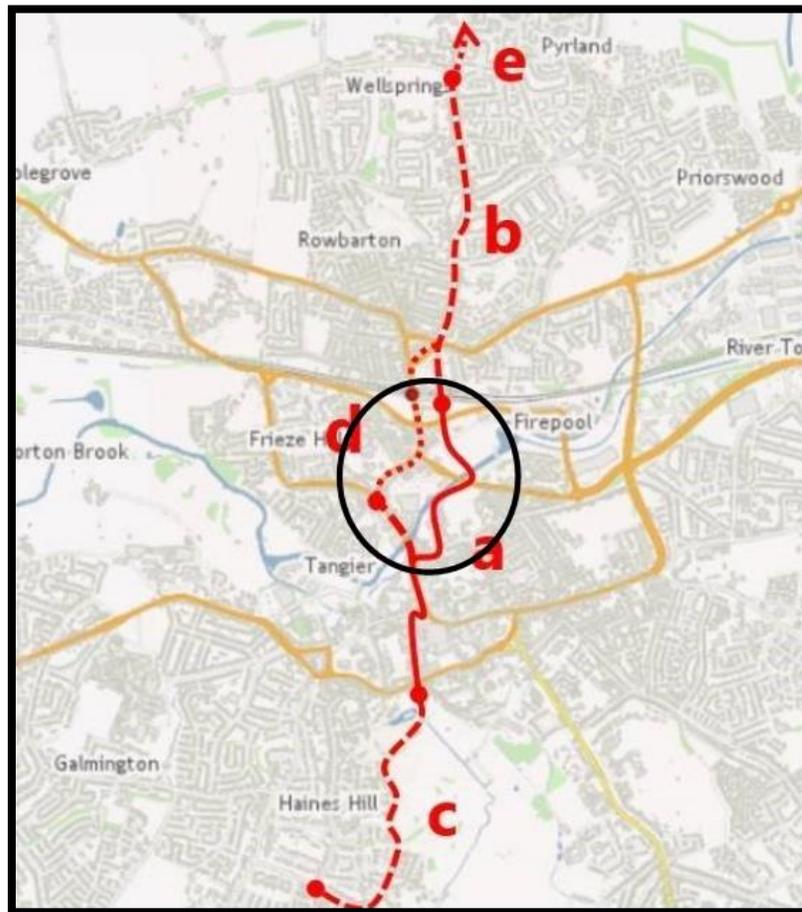


Diagram 1: 'Red Route – North to South Corridor'
draft Taunton LCWIP by Somerset County Council

5. Links to Corporate Strategy

The plans to modify access to East Street and St James Street are cost-effective ways to achieve a number of Corporate Strategy outcomes.

- 5.1 Increasing cycling and walking has been promoted by the Government to reduce reliance of public transport while social distancing is in place. Increasing participation in

active travel reduces transport carbon emissions which contribute up to 30% of the UK's total emissions. This not only contributes to the slowing of climate change but reduces traffic congestion, improves air quality, and can significantly benefit the physical and mental health of the community.

5.2 This plan will also contribute towards the delivery of strong, sustainable transport infrastructure. By increasing low-cost transport choices, access to employment, education and retail is improved, and our built and natural environment is enhanced by greener transport solutions.

6. Finance / Resource Implications

6.1 East Street

A provisional sum of £80k has been awarded to SWT from Tranche 2 of the s Department for Transport's Active Travel Fund, with further funding secured from Garden Town (£49.4k)

The scheme to date has been funded by Tranche 1 of the Active Travel Fund which was awarded in September; the Reopening High Streets fund has contributed to the costs of barriers after the Tranche 1 funding was expended.

Estimated project expenditure:

| Item | Cost £k |
|-------------------------------|---------------|
| Detailed design/ consultation | £20 |
| Barrier | £19 |
| Signage / white lining | £20 |
| Cycle Storage | £7 |
| Utilities / surveys | £10 |
| Contingency @ 10% | £7.6 |
| Total | £83.6k |

6.2 The above figures are indicative at this time, subject to detailed design and site surveys. These will be a mix of revenue and capital, to be confirmed when final allocations are received.

6.3 Maintenance costs will be added to the budget when known.

6.4 St James Street

Costs to upgrade the street furniture in and around St James Street will be explored as part of the work to upgrade the crossing to Goodlands Gardens, and other schemes identified in the FHSF bid.

7. Legal Implications (if any)

East Street will continue to be SCC's legal responsibility for the duration of the scheme and therefore no legal implications are foreseen.

8. Climate and Sustainability Implications (if any)

These recommendations will help SWT to achieve our carbon reduction target and improve air quality by reducing reliance on private car use and increasing levels of cycling and walking in Taunton.

9. Safeguarding and/or Community Safety Implications (if any)

N/A

10. Equality and Diversity Implications (if any)

10.1 Following extensive consultation with stakeholders which is planned to continue throughout implementation, the East Street scheme has been designed to ensure people with severe mobility issues continue to be able to access retail by allowing timed access to park on the majority of the street.

10.2 SWT and SCC have implemented other measures, such as increasing the number of dedicated blue badge bays in Magdalene Street, Billet Street and the Crescent Car Park, in addition to the existing Shopmobility scheme in the Orchard Centre Level 2 car park. There were previously no dedicated blue badge bays on East Street at all.

10.3 SWT has carried out an Equalities Impact Assessment form and is in the process of contracting an independent Access Audit on the East St scheme to provide an objective appraisal of the scheme.

11. Social Value Implications (if any)

Both schemes have the potential to result in significant social value. A reduction in private car use will improve air quality and help slow climate change, noise pollution will be reduced and increased participation in cycling and walking will improve health and wellbeing.

12. Partnership Implications (if any)

These proposals have been created in partnership with Somerset County Council; monitoring and evaluation will also be carried out with continuing collaboration.

13. Health and Wellbeing Implications (if any)

Creating places for people to cycle and walk is a cost-effective way to improving health and wellbeing that can see benefit to cost ratios of up to 35:1 (DfT 2014). Restricting private vehicular access to East Street and St James Street will encourage modal shift.

This will, in turn, enable more active travel in the town centre which will help to improve health and wellbeing.

14. Asset Management Implications (if any)

N/A

15. Data Protection Implications (if any)

N/A

16. Consultation Implications (if any)

16.1 East Street

16.1.1 As well as direct consultation with key stakeholder group representatives, SWT launched an online consultation in August to gain feedback from all user groups on their experiences of the East Street closure. The results of this consultation saw 53% of participants believing the closure had been a success, 37% felt it had not been a success, 10% were undecided. Positives were seen as more space (83%) and the ability to cross the road safely (80%). Negatives were the impact on traffic movement around the town (75%) and the loss of on-street parking (41%).

16.1.2 Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of East Street will continue, and SWT will be launching additional consultations with the public and key stakeholder groups, in line with the DfT's requirements for the Active Travel Fund Tranche 2. This will likely be direct consultation with the relevant stakeholders (as listed below) rather than another public consultation.

16.2 St James Street

16.2.1 Three working groups were conducted with representatives from Taunton Area Cycling Campaign, Taunton Taxi Association, the Chamber of Commerce, Avon and Somerset Police, Taunton Transition Town, SCC Area Highways, WSP (Project Consultants), First Group Buses, Compass Disability and Taunton Visitor Centre.

16.2.2 The group agreed to initiate a 12-month trial on St James Street in May 2019, prior to the first Cricket World Cup fixtures the following month. This was to be supported by post-implementation feedback sessions, quarterly monitoring reviews and "stop or continue" checkpoints at month 6 and month 12.

16.2.3 SWT has contributed to lighting and banners for the area as part of the promotion of the "Taunton Independent Quarter".

17. Scrutiny/Executive Comments / Recommendation(s) (if any)

Scrutiny recommended that the following comment be inserted into recommendation 2.1:-

“and representatives of disability interest groups”.

The recommendation as it currently reads has incorporated this change with the support of the Portfolio Holder.

Democratic Path:

- **Scrutiny / Corporate Governance or Audit Committees – Yes 3rd Feb 21**
- **Cabinet/Executive – Yes 23rd Feb.**
- **Full Council – No**

Contact Officers

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