

Our Ref: PSIP Q1 Review

Monitoring report for May 13th – August 12th 2019

Date: 02.09.19

1. Background

Somerset West and Taunton Council, working closely with Somerset County Council as Highways Authority, commissioned WSP 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.

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;
- Improve the quality of the walking and cycling routes, cycle lanes and bike parking;
- Support the Car Parking Strategy;
- Support good public transport, including coach parking.

WSP were also tasked with considering ideas that could be implemented in the town centre on a **12 month trial basis**.

The project was initiated in 2017, and since then has gone 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.

The working group broadly agreed with the original project goals, with some slight amendments to include better cycling and coach parking provision, perception of

safety and evening economy, and further consideration for taxis as Public Service Vehicles. 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 a post-implementation feedback session on 27th June and the first of four quarterly monitoring reviews on 2nd September. At outset of the project, the reviews at 6 and 12 months were designated as be "stop or continue" checkpoints, requiring a positive decision to continue with the trial based on monitoring and feedback. The further development of solutions for Hammet Street and East Street are awaiting clarification of a strategic review of town centre activity prior to further spend.

This report was drafted to help inform the first quarterly monitoring review, and reviews the following discreet topics for the period May 13th – August 12th 2019:

- **Traffic Flows**
- **Footfall and Car Parking**
- **Stakeholder Observations and Feedback**
- **Council Response to Observations and Feedback**
- **Summary and Next Steps**

The quarterly reviews will continue throughout the trial, supported by a series of further reports and monitoring review meetings.

2. Traffic Flows

SCC statement summarising the changes in traffic flows around the town centre arising from the closure of St James St on the 13th May 2019

Assessments of traffic flows have been made from the network of traffic counters and using data taken from the Urban Traffic Control (UTC) system. This has enabled us to look at traffic flows before and after the closure and also assess changes in vehicle flows and delays.

Traffic surveys taken before St James Street closed show it was carrying an average of 4,500 vehicles per weekday. The traffic using this route has had to reassign around the network leading to changes in flows on roads around the town centre. Initially over the first few weeks after the closure there was a notable increase in traffic on Bridge Street, which caused some additional queuing and backing up of traffic along North Street at peak times. Although the increased delays on this approach were similar to pre-Christmas flows, and this has now gone back to pre-closure levels. The traffic has now split and is distributed to both East Street and Tangier Way.

The data is showing changes to traffic movement as follows:

- An increase in traffic on Bridge St northbound (heading out of town) of nearly 1,000 vehicles per weekday.
- Eastbound flows taken from near the Shell Garage on Priory Bridge road show an increase of 600 vehicles in weekdays heading out of town.
- However, traffic flows on Bridge St into town have decreased by around 800 vehicles per weekday
- Increase in traffic flows on Tangier Way by around 10-15%
- Traffic flows on North Street, Taunton (taken from near the old British Home Stores site) show that 2,300 fewer vehicles are using this road in a weekday
- The A38 by Mary Street is showing an increase eastbound heading towards East Reach of around 700 vehicles in a weekday
- Traffic flows on East St, heading away from the town centre, have increased but the UTC system at the East Street / East Reach junction has adapted to this and delays on this approach have not increased.

In summary, as a result of the St James Street closure traffic has had to find new routes around the town centre and whilst there has been some changes in traffic movement, apart from the first few weeks there has not been an increase in delays and the highway network is now coping well with the change.

3. Footfall and Car Parking

The latest footfall count figures provided by Springboard show that whilst the number of pedestrians in the town centre as a whole continues to decrease, reflecting the national trend of a consistent fall in footfall in most areas, footfall levels measured outside Hubbox, which offer an approximation for the St James Street / Riverside Place area, appear to be increasing. When compared to the same period last year, the number of visitors has increased as follows:

- by 4.7% from 59,612 to 62,405 counts in May
- by 1.7% from 62,398 to 63,477 counts in June
- by 6.9% from 62,344 to 66,634 counts in July

This represents an average increase of 4.4% for the quarter (May – Jul 19). The counts elsewhere in the town centre, measured outside 1) Primark, 2) Marks and

Spencer, and 3) Clarks, represent an average decrease of 9.2% over the same period (see Appendix 1).

Ticket sales for the Coal Orchard car park have decreased when compared to the same quarter in 2018. This is partly due to a reduction in the number of spaces to allow enabling works to take place for the new development. Feedback from traders suggests the road closure has also contributed to fewer shoppers using the car park, as it is now more difficult to access from the town centre. The reduction in car parking provision and income at Coal Orchard has been partly offset by available capacity in nearby Wood Street car park, where revenues from ticket sales have increased when compared to May – July 2018.

4. Stakeholder Observations and Feedback

Six traders towards the eastern end of St James Street have submitted complaints since the trial began, as well as one trader within the closed section. Four traders from Riverside Place and one trader in The Courtyard have also submitted complaints. One trader within the closed section has praised the scheme and successfully applied for a pavement cafe permit.

The vast majority of traders who have provided feedback have reported loss of footfall and revenues since the start of the trial. In percentage terms the losses reported vary from 13% to over 50%. One trader has kindly provided trading figures for the period, which show a 20% decrease over the period compared to 2018. As the other loss of income reports are largely anecdotal at this point, the Council would like to request figures from as many traders as possible in order to understand the issues more thoroughly.

Other concerns raised by traders and residents include:

- lack of vehicular, cycling and pedestrian signage;
- damaged refuse and residual waste;
- signalling timing at traffic lights;
- dangerous/illegal driving on St James Street;
- access to the theatre;
- traffic delays;
- near misses between cyclists and pedestrians.

Formal representations to the Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) are being collated by SCC as Highways authority, throughout the 12 month trial. A site plan of the closure authorised by the TRO is attached in Appendix 2.

5. Council Response to Observations and Feedback

The project team has reviewed vehicular, cycling and pedestrian signage around St James Street, Middle Street and Canon Street with SCC Highways colleagues. Enhancements have been made where possible, such as enhanced cycling signage at the eastern end of St James Street. The Council's Marketing and Communications team is currently producing promotional signage (board, maps, pennants, links to website maps, etc) to install in and around the area to bring more focus to the street. A social media push for the area has also been initiated.

The Council has also engaged with Somerset Waste Partnership to visit St James Street and provide recommendations for seagull proof containers to prevent damage to refuse left out by private residential occupiers, and with ID Verde to ensure they attend St James Street on Monday mornings to clear up any residual waste from refuse collections. A summary of these actions is provided in Appendix 3.

Further to reports of increased congestion, the project team contacted SCC regarding signalling timings in town. SCC provided the following response regarding signals management and any changes required:

"The traffic signal junctions that we have identified that may be affected by the St James street closure are as follows:

- Wood street/Bridge street
- Staplegrove road/Station road
- Priory Bridge Road/Station road
- East street/East reach

All of these traffic signals sites are currently using a traffic control system called MOVA. This system optimises the signal timings on a vehicle demand basis, it is a reactive & self-managing system that will help to reduce congestion in real time. All of the above sites have been validated prior to the closure to ensure maximum efficiency. The junction of Wood Street/Bridge Street gives a higher time priority to the Wood Street arm (Third Way) to the detriment of The Bridge (town centre) as we want motorists to use this route rather than the town centre. Although we recognise that there are slightly longer queues at peak times on The Bridge, it is envisaged that this will change in time as motorists experience this slight delay and seek alternative routes but only time will tell. We are continuing to monitor the signals on a regular basis to ensure maximum efficiency."

Vehicles driving against the one way system or through the pedestrianised area have been reported to Avon and Somerset Police Community Speedwatch. The

web site for reporting these incidents is

<https://www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/accidents/#/>

6. Summary and Next Steps

In summary, as a result of the St James Street closure traffic has had to find new routes around the town centre and whilst there has been some changes in traffic movement, apart from the first few weeks there has not been an increase in delays and the highway network is now coping well with the change.

Footfall counts on the junction of North Street and St James Street represent an average increase of 4.4% for the quarter (May – Jul 19). The counts elsewhere in the town centre, measured outside 1) Primark, 2) Marks and Spencer, and 3) Clarks, represent an average decrease of 9.2% over the same period. Ticket sales for the Coal Orchard car park have decreased when compared to the same quarter in 2018, has been partly offset by available capacity in nearby Wood Street car park, where revenues from ticket sales have increased when compared to May – July 2018.

The Council has recently deployed Localities staff on the ground to conduct surveys with customers/users of the Coal Orchard car park, St James Street, Middle Street and North Street. The feedback provided suggests that public perception of the project is generally good, however the majority of traders who have contacted the Council (13 in total) have lodged complaints about the scheme. The project team has endeavoured to implement the improvements suggested wherever possible, and will also purchase an additional footfall counter to be directed specifically at St James Street. The next quarterly monitoring report for the period 13th August – 12th November will be published before Christmas.