

WIDEMARSH STREET, HEREFORD

PROPOSED EXPERIMENTAL PEDESTRIANISATION SCHEME

PROGRAMME AREA RESPONSIBILITY:
HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORTATION

CABINET

28TH APRIL, 2005

Wards Affected

Central

Purpose

To agree the implementation of an experimental traffic scheme to achieve partial pedestrianisation and an improved pedestrian environment in Widemarsh Street and High Street.

Key Decision

This is a Key Decision because it is likely to have a significant effect on communities living or working in Herefordshire in an area comprising one or more wards. It was not included on the Forward Plan. A Notice in accordance with Section 15 of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Access to Information) Regulations 2000 was sent to the Chairman of the Environment Scrutiny Committee.

Recommendation

THAT the following experimental Traffic Regulation Orders be introduced during the summer of 2005, immediately following conclusion of the High Street element of the Eign Gate enhancement works, for a minimum period until at least 31st December 2005:

a) Prohibition of Driving Order

the effect of which would be to prohibit the driving of any vehicles between the hours of 10.30am and 4.30pm daily as follows:

- i) Widemarsh Street (U80000)**
from its junction with the A438 Newmarket Street in a southerly direction to its junction with the High Street.
- ii) High Street (U8000)**
From its junction with the U80000 Widemarsh Street in a westerly direction for its whole length to its junction with the U80000 Broad Street.
- iii) Exemptions will be included for emergency services vehicles and for vehicles that have legitimately entered Bewell Street.**

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
Stephen Oates, Head of Engineering and Transportation on (01432) 260780

b) 20 mph Speed Limit

the effect of which would be to impose a maximum speed of twenty miles per hour on the U8000 Widemarsh Street and High Street from its junction with A438 Newmarket Street to its junction with Broad Street.

c) Berrington Street/West Street/Aubrey Street

further investigation and appropriate consultation to see if traffic management measures are needed to address concerns of potential congestion of pedestrianising Widemarsh Street.

Reasons

The implementation of this scheme as proposed will improve the amenities of the area by creating a safer and more convenient environment for pedestrians in Hereford City Centre, whilst still permitting vehicular access between the hours of 4.30pm and 10.30am.

Considerations

1. Between 27 July to 8 October 2004, Widemarsh Street (south of the Ring Road) and High Street were closed to traffic to enable Transco to undertake essential maintenance works to gas mains in the area.
2. Surveys conducted during these works demonstrated strong public support for the improvement in pedestrian conditions. Of those surveyed, 72% of pedestrians and 59% of retailers surveyed favoured some form of pedestrianisation for Widemarsh Street and High Street.
3. Further public consultation consisting of a consultation leaflet and a public meeting was undertaken in January and February 2005 in order to obtain views on proposals to implement a trial pedestrianisation scheme in Widemarsh Street and High Street later in 2005.
4. 293 completed questionnaires were returned out of a total distributed of just under 1500, a 20% rate of response. Of the responses, 81% were in favour of a trial pedestrianisation, 65% were in favour of a trial to continue through to December 2005. On the specific options for pedestrianisation, 45% were in favour of a 10.30am to 4.30pm closure and 38% were in favour of full 24 hour daily closure (with exemptions for service access outside core shopping hours).
5. The positive response to both consultation exercises provides a strong basis for developing a long term traffic reduction scheme for the City Centre. The first stage would be the implementation, on an experimental basis, of one of the two options offered in the 2005 public consultation.
6. The purpose of the experiment would be to provide evidence, before any final decision is reached, of the traffic impact of the necessary restrictions. This would ensure the opportunity for public consultation and debate based on the actual experience of the scheme. By the nature of an experimental scheme, any physical measures to implement the scheme should be low cost to minimise the potential for abortive expenditure.

7. Although the 2005 consultation does show some significant support for total pedestrianisation of the streets (ie through traffic excluded at all times), this option would be very difficult to enforce because of the requirement to allow servicing access outside core shopping times. As in High Town, any access gates would have to be left open during the servicing periods, allowing any vehicles access to the streets if drivers were to disobey the regulatory signs. With the likelihood of peak hour congestion on the alternative routes, it can be assumed that there would be significant degree of non-compliance, as with the similar ban on access to East Street.
8. On balance therefore, the option of banning all traffic between 10.30am and 4.30pm (but not at other times) is considered to provide the most viable option for an experimental pedestrianisation scheme. The restriction could be enforced by installing a gate across Widemarsh Street on the south side of its junction with the Ring Road, to be opened and shut manually each day (Monday to Saturday) by the council's contractors servicing the city centre. Prohibition signs would be placed at the entrance to the street and these should be sufficient to give effect to the traffic restriction on most Sundays.
9. To prevent danger and congestion at the junction of Widemarsh Street with the Ring Road, it is important that traffic is not able to travel from the northern arm of Widemarsh Street to southern section of Widemarsh Street when the road is closed. During the Transco works, this was achieved by closing the gap in the central reservation of the Ring Road throughout the period of the works. For an experimental pedestrianisation scheme operating during only part of the day, the closure of the gap would be achieved by a gate to be operated in conjunction with the gate at the entrance to Widemarsh Street. Additional signing will be required.
10. Consultations about the detailed form of access restriction will be necessary with the Emergency Services. There would be operational advantages in being able to lock the gates during the pedestrianised periods but it is possible that objections will be made by the Emergency Services unless access cannot be ensured at all times. If manual locking is not acceptable, regular monitoring of the gates will be necessary to ensure that they stay closed. In any longer term scheme, this issue might be addressed by some form of automation.
11. Although any permanent scheme could be supported by associated variable traffic signalling and signing, any features for the experimental scheme will be manually operated. Some modification of the signal heads on the traffic signals at the junction of the Ring Road and Widemarsh Street will be required to prevent confusion with prohibited movements.
12. In preparing the formal traffic orders for the experimental scheme, consideration has to be given to the requirements for traffic that uses Bewell Street, which is restricted by a "No Entry except for Access" order. Permitted traffic may currently exit via Widemarsh Street and High Street. Although much of the traffic actually uses the Tesco bus station as a means of exit on to the Edgar Street Roundabout, this route is not defined as adopted public highway.
13. Within the timescale available for implementing an experimental traffic scheme during summer 2005, there is little option but to provide legal exemption in the experimental traffic order for vehicles to enter Widemarsh Street and High Street if they have entered Bewell Street for legitimate access purposes. Improved signing will be provided in Bewell Street to highlight the restrictions on access during the periods of pedestrianisation in Widemarsh Street.

14. Some concern was expressed during the consultation about pedestrian safety at 4.30pm when the roads are reopened to through traffic. Although traffic speeds are likely to be low, the introduction of a 20 mph speed limit would assist in reinforcing the special nature of these streets and provide some safeguard against unreasonable driving behaviour when the initial “wave” of traffic is released when the gates are opened. A 20mph limit would be consistent with the Council’s longer term policies for the treatment of the City Centre environment.
15. On the basis of the responses to the recent consultation, discussions need to continue with specific groups before and during any experimental scheme to address the detailed concerns raised. These groups include the Taxi Association, the Bus Operators Forum, Hereford Cathedral and security companies.
16. The consultation also highlighted some concern about potential traffic congestion in West Street, the alternative access to Broad Street. This will be investigated to see if further traffic management arrangements need to be introduced and if so they will also be monitored during the experimental pedestrianisation period.
17. Implementation of the experimental scheme would be programmed to coincide with completion of the road works in High Street, as part of the Eign Gate refurbishment scheme. These works, which will start in early May 2005, are anticipated to last for about one month and will require the closure of High Street to all traffic. During that time Widemarsh Street (south of the Ring Road) will only be available for essential access traffic which will have to enter and leave at the Ring Road.

Alternative Options

As described in the report.

Financial Implications

1. The sum of £45,000 has been allocated in the 2005/06 Local Transport Plan programme for an experimental traffic scheme in Widemarsh Street. This is anticipated to cover the costs of the physical implementation of the scheme but the operating costs for opening and closing the gates may have to be supported by contributions from the existing revenue budgets for management of the City Centre.
2. In the event of the scheme becoming permanent, Local Transport Plan funding or Prudential Capital borrowing might be considered for substantial streetscape enhancements of Widemarsh Street and High Street.

Risk Management

The proposals in this report have been developed as a result of the positive public reaction to the closure of Widemarsh Street in 2004. The option of implementing an experimental traffic scheme is, in part, a recognition that there has been less time than usual to develop a full assessment of the traffic implications of the proposals. By using the experimental order process, the Council is recognising that there is a risk that the scheme will prove unacceptable when implemented.

A previous traffic reduction scheme for the City Centre did cause considerable public disquiet and has highlighted the importance of full public consultation and debate if the Council is to minimise the risk of damage to its reputation for delivery of effective local transport schemes.

On the basis of the effects of the closure of Widemarsh Street for the Transco works in 2004, it is considered that public safety will not be adversely affected by these proposals, either through road casualties or air pollution.

Consultees

Consultation with the public.

Background Papers

None identified.