

Summary of deliberations of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee 11 and 13 January 2006

In reviewing the experiment to pedestrianise Widemarsh Street, Hereford the Community Services Scrutiny Committee heard evidence from a wide range of key stakeholders.

The meeting was a follow up to the meeting held on 26th January, 2005 when the Widemarsh Street Review Group, established by the former Social and Economic Development Scrutiny Committee, considered the then proposed experiment to pedestrianise Widemarsh Street, Hereford.

Summary of Evidence from Key Stakeholders on 11 January 2006

- The Committee had received a number of written submissions in advance of the meeting, these included:
 - Letter from Cllr Alan Taylor, Hereford City Council, suggesting that new disabled parking spaces could be provided in Norgate Street during the hours Widemarsh Street was closed to traffic.
 - Letter from Mr and Mrs Jones, Hereford Residents, who were against pedestrianisation. Also outlined was the additional problems with finding disabled parking spaces since pedestrianisation and a suggestion that if pedestrianisation was to remain in place then access should be allowed to buses, taxis and disabled badge holders.
 - Letter from Nick Romans, Manager, Marks and Spencer, discussing taxi access to the store from East Street and a reduction in elderly customers now that taxis could not collect them from High Street.
 - Letter from Georgia Smith, Association of Town Centre Management on issues to consider when considering a pedestrianisation scheme and the retail climate.
 - Letter from Steve Zanker, Commercial Director, First Buses, calling for a quality city centre bus stopping area and priority road measures for buses. The letter proposed that Widemarsh Street could be the site of a new bus terminal for Hereford.
 - Letter from Paul Keetch MP stating that “pedestrianisation could be advantageous as long as access for the disabled, vehicular and other modes of transport inclusive, taxis and bus/coach access can be included in the final scheme.” He also wished to see “swifter access incorporated to allow ambulance and fire services in particular immediate entry through the gates and not losing valuable, potential lifesaving moments waiting for gates to be unlocked.”
- The Committee received a petition signed by 108 members of the public at *Beads-in-Abundance*, Capuchin Yard, off Church Street, Hereford which supported the pedestrianisation scheme subject to a review of access.
- The Police Representatives informed the Committee that: from their perspective there were no additional traffic problems caused by the experiment; emergency response times had not increased; problems with emergency vehicles accessing Widemarsh Street in the day had been resolved; there were safety problems with vehicles exiting Bewell Street into High Street, with vehicles reversing to park in Norgate Street and with vehicles waiting on the ring road to enter Widemarsh Street prior to its opening. There had been a reduction in crime during the hours in which Widemarsh Street was closed to traffic. Subsequent to the meeting on

the 11th PC Colin Mears provided an email stating that access to Widemarsh Street to all vehicles would provide no significant reduction in congestion on the ring road and that they believed that if the gate stayed closed until 6.00pm it would eliminate most of the current potential danger identified when traffic re-enters Widemarsh Street at 4.30 pm when many people were still shopping.

- The Representatives of the Taxi Association informed the Committee that: congestion in the City had increased which had resulted in a 20% reduction in takings; the number of rank spaces had reduced; free phone calls from people calling taxis from Marks and Spencer had reduced by 60%; fewer elderly people were using taxis than before; traffic tailbacks to enter the ring road had increased; drivers were working an extra 2 hours a day to earn the same income prior to pedestrianisation; pick up points to the rear of Marks and Spencer were no good to customers who lived south of the river; the pedestrianised area should be open to taxis and buses; alternatively a taxi rank down the length of Broad Street was proposed; Tesco's taxi rank was described as chaos.
- The Representatives of Stagecoach Bus Company informed the Committee that: Stagecoach now used Maylord Orchards as its stop closest to the City Centre; moving stops had increased journey times and inconvenience to customers; takings and passenger numbers dropped when pedestrianisation was initially introduced but had now recovered; it was felt that buses and taxis should be allowed access to the pedestrianised area.
- The Representative of the Phillip Morris store informed the Committee that: takings were on or above target in the last three quarters and this could be due to pedestrianisation; deliveries had improved to the store but pressure had increased for shipping out online orders at the end of the day; sales of large heavy goods had reduced; Widemarsh Traders Association were in favour of retaining pedestrianisation; he was conscious of potential danger to pedestrians when traffic was reintroduced at 4.30pm.
- The Jeans Station Representative informed the Committee that: summer trading had been difficult due to Eign Gate refurbishment but had now improved; deliveries now arrived earlier; customers were happy with pedestrianisation; in the long term he favoured the installation of an automated gate at the entry point to Widemarsh Street thereby to allowing taxis and buses access to the pedestrianised area.
- The Marks and Spencer (M&S) Representative informed the Committee that: takings had been down fractionally but he could not attribute this to pedestrianisation; M&S deliveries had not been affected; a taxi collection point at the rear of M&S was not favoured by customers; conscious of wider traffic problems in the city the M&S representative suggested that perhaps the scheme should be reconsidered, if not, then the area should be open to taxis and buses.
- The Chave and Jackson Representative informed the Committee that: the store was performing in line with the company's other stores; concern was expressed regarding the City's traffic problems; there was a suggestion that existing loading bays in Broad Street be used for short term parking at weekends.
- The Bill Jackson Estate Agent Representative informed the Committee that: retail businesses in the Broad Street/King Street/Bridge Street area had declined by

5% since the experiment was introduced; traffic problems had impacted upon the operation of his business.

- The Left Bank Village Representative informed the Committee that a downturn in trade had been experienced during the experiment as fewer coaches were visiting the City.
- The Access for All Representative informed the Committee that: most patrons were pleased with pedestrianisation however, there were problems with vehicles entering the area during its closure and with cyclists; some elderly people were no longer visiting the city as they could not be dropped off in the city centre;
- The Royal National College for the Blind representative informed the Committee that: partial pedestrianisation was confusing particularly as vehicles could enter the zone via Bewell Street; there were problems for visually impaired people where High Street met Eign Gate as it was now difficult to differentiate between the road and the pavement as they were the same height with too discreet a colour difference; previous to pedestrianisation visually impaired people had been disadvantaged by vehicles mounting the pavement and causing obstacles.
- The Hereford Cathedral Representatives informed the Committee that: visitor figures to the Cathedral had dropped since Widemarsh Street had been closed to traffic both in 2004 and 2005; coach drivers had reported difficulty in accessing the venue; a drop off point at the Shirehall was not considered to be convenient for most tour operators.
- The Hereford City Partnership representative informed the Committee that: 2005 had not been a particularly good year for retail; it was important that visitor access to the Cathedral was maintained as these visitors increased the city's economic viability; if coach operators could not access the Cathedral easily they would soon find somewhere else to visit; West Street was not a suitable alternative access point for coaches.
- Herefordshire Council's Acting Cultural Services Manager provided evidence to the Committee that: visitor figures to Hereford Museum had declined between 2003-2005 but this was in line with figures from neighbouring authorities; visitor numbers to the Old House had increased; visitor figures to the Tourist Information Centre had reduced in line with national trends. Subsequent to the meeting on the 11th Members were informed at the reconvened meeting that the visitor figures presented at the meeting on the 11th which showed a reduction in visitor numbers were made up from statistics from April-December. However, if visitor figures for June-December were viewed, during the time of the experiment, visitor figures had actually increased.

Summary of Reconvened Meeting on 13 January 2006

The Committee had received a number of written submissions in advance of the reconvened meeting, these included:

- Email from PC Colin Mears.
- Letter from Maurice Jones, summarising the points made at the earlier meeting.
- Copy of the Petition signed by members of the public at *Beads-in-Abundance* as received at the earlier meeting.

- Letter to Jim Lawes from Mrs T Minton highlighting her personal problems experienced since the closure of Widemarsh Street.
- Letter to Jim Lawes from Anne Rolfe, Royal National College for the Blind, highlighting the problems experienced by visually impaired people since pedestrianisation and the refurbishment of Eign Gate.
- Letter from Widemarsh Street Traders Association, in favour of pedestrianisation also highlighting problems which need to be addressed to improve the scheme including: introducing measures to prevent cyclists in the pedestrianised area; introducing measures to prevent vehicles entering High Street from Bewell Street; introduction of more dropped kerbs for disabled visitors; consideration be given to altering the time which vehicles re-enter Widemarsh Street in the afternoon; and that pedestrianisation be introduced during Christmas late night shopping.
- Letter to Stephen Oates, outlining visitor trends since pedestrianisation had been introduced in Widemarsh Street and its impact on coach visitors, the Cathedral and Hereford generally.
- Three articles from the local press, one article against pedestrianisation and two in favour.

The Committee was grateful for the time taken by all those who presented evidence to it both in person and in correspondence. It also noted the evidence provided to it from the Head of Highways and Transportation which highlighted key issues which had arisen during the monitoring process implemented during the pedestrianisation experiment. The Committee recognised the complexity of pedestrianisation and the arguments both in favour of and in opposition to the scheme and the numerous potential variations to the scheme. It was clear that there was no easy solution which would meet the aspirations of all parties.

Two main proposals were finally made to the Committee, one in favour of reopening Widemarsh Street to most traffic and the other in favour of retaining pedestrianisation with suggestions to improve the current scheme including: extending the hours of the road closure from 4.30pm to 6.00pm; providing better provision for taxis including new rank spaces; providing new bus and coach stops; better road signage to enable visitors to access the City and pay on exit car parks.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet Member (Highways & Transportation) consider the range of views expressed by the Community Services Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 11th January 2006 and reconvened on 13th January 2006, and has particular regard to its two principal conclusions, that:

(a) the Committee supports a form of pedestrianisation in Widemarsh Street, Hereford;

and;

(b) that taxis, buses and coaches should not be granted special access to Widemarsh Street if a form of pedestrianisation is approved.