



Mr Mark Saccoccio
Town Clerk, Leighton – Linslade Town Council
The White House
Hockliffe Street
Leighton Buzzard
Bedfordshire LU7 1HD

Date: 10th November 2021

Dear Mr Saccoccio

Pedestrianisation of Leighton Buzzard High Street ETRO – next steps

Thank you for your letter to Stephen Mooring, Head of Sustainability, sent on the 7th October 2021. I wanted to take this opportunity to respond myself in my capacity as the Executive Member for Community Services, with responsibility for highways and traffic management.

The minute reference 255 from the Town Council Meeting on 27th September 2021 is noted and this letter responds to the issues raised.

At the meeting concerns were raised about the decision-making process with respect to the ETRO and in particular the breadth of engagement and consultation with various stakeholders to help inform this decision. Alongside this the longer-term plans for any regeneration of the High Street, of which pedestrianisation is likely to be a key feature was also highlighted.

Below I will endeavour to respond and clarify the Council's position with respect of these issues.

1) The decision-making process with respect to the ETRO and in particular the breadth of engagement and consultation work with various stakeholders to help inform this decision.

The Council has delegated various powers in relation to traffic matters to myself in my capacity as the Executive Member for Community Services. In making decisions on traffic matters it is required that the views of local Councillors, residents and stakeholders are considered.

So, with respect to a final decision concerning the Leighton Buzzard High Street ETRO, there is a clear commitment that this will be informed and shaped by stakeholder views and data driven. This is going above what is required with respect to ETRO's where it is stated that only the first six months of comments must be taken into consideration.

This six-month period is effectively reset when the ETRO is amended based on feedback for an additional six-month period, as was the case in this instance when it was amended in October 2020 to allow access for taxis, people with rear parking accessed off the High Street, works/service vehicles and the removal of access for Blue Badge Holders.

Hopefully this provides some reassurance that any future decision will be based on the best available information and data.

With respect to the gathering of this data, alongside the views and opinions of High Street users and stakeholders, examples of the engagement underway were set out in the email from Stephen Mooring to the Town Council and CBC ward councillors on the 30th of September. This highlighted that the Council is actively gathering information from several sources and whilst not directly specified, this does include engagement with the different user groups identified in your letter.

To clarify, and provide more detail, below is an overview of the range of work underway.

- a. Town Centre users: This will primarily be collected through High Street benchmarking (previously carried out in 2019), working alongside the Town Council. This has proven to be a really effective way of getting the views and opinions of Town Centre users and businesses (including Leighton Linlade residents and visitors to the town). The 2019 round of benchmarking saw 1163 responses to the Town Centre user survey alone. This round of benchmarking will include specific questions on the ETRO and pedestrianisation. Noting your request for comprehensive consultation I want to reassure you that we will ensure that this benchmarking survey is widely promoted in the area and featured on our website to maximise response rates. We will highlight that it includes an opportunity for as many residents, businesses, and other stakeholders to get involved, have their say and be consulted on the future of the ETRO.
- b. Bus companies: A meeting regarding the ETRO has been held already via the Council's Public Transport Team. This will be followed up with further individual meetings with the separate bus companies as necessary. We have not been able to locate a local representative group for bus users but anticipate this will be picked up through the High Street benchmarking.
- c. Taxi drivers: We are awaiting details of a representative who can speak on behalf of taxi drivers via colleagues in licencing. Regardless, taxi drivers will also have scope to express their views via the Benchmarking survey.
- d. Disability Groups: We are following this up through the Disability Resource Centre who have put us in contact with local groups and will promote the Benchmarking survey. This will also be highlighted for comment at the next Equalities Forum meeting.
- e. Cycling Groups: We are liaising with BuzzCycles as the focus point for engagement with local cyclists.
- f. Walking Groups: We are liaising with the local Living Streets representative.
- g. Emergency Services: This is being carried out through the CBC Traffic Management Team, as is the case with all TRO's.
- h. Waste Services: We are liaising with CBC Waste Services Team albeit most collections are carried out by commercial providers.

In addition to this, comments received throughout the ETRO time period will be summarised and included in the TMM report. We would of course welcome comments from Leighton Linlade Town Council with respect to the ETRO.

I am also aware that LLTC have held your own Town Centre Workshop for community members and stakeholders (facilitated by IntoPlaces Ltd), with a focus on the key trends that could help make the town centre in Leighton Buzzard better. As well as having CBC officers in attendance, the Council has provided LLTC with information relating to the ETRO for use in this workshop and the outputs of this session will also provide additional insight that will inform the ETRO decision and the further inform and shape the development of future plans for the High Street (covered under point 2 below).

In addition to this, and as detailed in the email of the 30th of September, work is underway on an economic impact assessment of the ETRO and pedestrianisation as a way to increase footfall into the town centre. This will not only inform the ETRO report but is also crucial with respect to any future funding bids for possible further works.

The final decision with respect to the ETRO is scheduled for the Traffic Management Meeting in March 2022. Depending on feedback received there is still scope to make further amendments between November and January with the aim of informing the final decision. For example, this could be used to test some of the feedback we are receiving, such as the impact of buses not being able to drop off on the High Street on bus patronage.

- 2) The longer-term plans for any regeneration of the High Street.** The Council recognises the impact of the nationwide trend with respect to how changes in consumer habits are impacting on the High Street. This was a trend that was evident before the Covid-19 pandemic, which has essentially exacerbated and sped up the impacts and implications of this.

The ETRO was implemented primarily to enable town centre users to return to the High Street in a way that allowed for social distancing as well as aiming to create a welcoming environment. This is by no means a final proposal and if pedestrianisation is to be brought forward on a more permanent footing then further work is needed to better accommodate a wider range of needs as possible.

To this end, the ETRO has provided invaluable learning as to what works and what the key issues are. I note that LLTC have asked for options with respect to what the High Street could look like.

Officers have informed me that proposals that considered elements of pedestrianisation were provided previously as part of number of projects put to the Town Council for consideration for funding in 2015. This was as part of the Council's Market Town Regeneration Fund, which provided funding for Town Councils to bring forward projects that would benefit their town centres. At that time, I understand that LLTC made the decision not to take this forward in the suite of MTRF projects they put forward for funding. Regardless, these would need to be reviewed in the context of all that has changed in the six years since they were proposed.

The opportunity to engage the range of stakeholders that the ETRO has provided does, and will, provide key information on shaping future proposals. It is important to stress given the nature of ETRO's there is no scope to use the engagement linked to this process to seek comment on a wider set of proposals.

The development and delivery of future proposals would of course be dependent on funding to support the design, consultation, and eventual works. This in itself has become far more challenging with the anticipated second round of the Future High Street Fund essentially being changed to the Towns Fund, which focused on a number of failing High Streets nationwide (none of which were in Central Bedfordshire).

Central Government have changed their emphasis in the last 24 months to “Levelling Up”, with the intent of providing investment to the most disadvantaged areas of the UK, which again adds further challenges in securing funding. However, the Council does have a strong success rate and remains committed to maximising income from such opportunities.

To this end it is essential we all work in partnership to provide clarity and narrative around the needs of Leighton Linlade, the benefits, and outcomes we hope to achieve. It is challenging to provide robust arguments and meet the criteria of funding opportunities when they do arise, even for those areas specifically targeted, let alone those areas, such as Central Bedfordshire, that aren’t considered a priority in the levelling up agenda. It is important we recognise the value of lobbying central government too, as such the role of our MP is particularly important.

Whilst the route forward, specifically in relation to access to funding to deliver future improvements, is currently unclear, we welcome LLTC’s commitment. We are keen to continue to build on successful projects, such as the Market Town Regeneration Fund, to deliver improvements that enable the High Street to be resilient to future challenges, adapt to the changing patterns in consumer spending habits and ultimately thrive moving forward.

Yours sincerely



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