

ANNEXE B**Leatherhead High Street and Church Street
Consultation with Businesses
Autumn 2010****Introduction**

Following a decision by Mole Valley District Council to allocate funding towards environmental improvements in High Street and Church Street, Leatherhead, a period of consultation began to determine how that funding should be spent. The project is a pilot project with the County Council under the 'Total Place' initiative. This initiative encourages both Councils to work together where there are overlapping responsibilities to deliver seamless services. The County Council has also committed itself to making a financial contribution.

A Leatherhead Town Centre Advisory Group was formed to assist with the development of the project. The Group is made up of representatives from both local authorities and local organisations. The Advisory Group considered that it was important to set short term decisions on funding within the context of a longer term vision. They agreed that it might be helpful to review the Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) that is central to the management of access to High Street and Church Street and the County Council's Local Committee gave its approval to a review.

It was also agreed that there should be consultation with organisations, businesses and individuals before decisions are reached. It was considered that individual businesses should be consulted first because of the potential impact from a review of access and the public realm on businesses with frontages on High Street and Church Street resulting.

This report summarises the results of that survey.

Interview Arrangements and Questions Asked

Personal interviews were conducted with each business that has a frontage onto High Street and Church Street. Offers to interview businesses elsewhere in the town centre were made through the Town Centre Manager's newsletter. One business took up this offer. The type of businesses ranged from retailers to banks to restaurants. Some key property agents were also interviewed, as was the Swan Shopping Centre management and the current chairman of the Chamber of Commerce. The Theatre and the Travelodge were also included.

The questions were grouped into different categories.

Part one asked basic questions about the name of the business and the name and position of the person responding.

Part two asked questions about the opening hours, the numbers of people employed and the current business climate.

Part three asked about the arrangements for deliveries to the premises.

Part four requested views on the arrangements for vehicular and pedestrian access to High Street and Church Street, including car parking. Questions were asked about the impact on business and customer perceptions. Respondents were invited to suggest ways in which the Traffic Regulation Order might be amended, if at all.

Part five asked about the priorities for spending in the town centre both now and in the future.

Type of Business Interviewed

In total 51 businesses were interviewed out of a possible total of 64. Some business were easier to establish contact with, others required several attempt to contact and, in a few cases, contact was never established.

Of those that were contacted, the distribution in terms of type of business was as follows:

A1 (shops) 30; A2 (financial and professional services) 5; A3 (restaurants and cafes) 8; A4 (drinking establishments) 2; A5 (hot food takeaways) 1; C1 (hotels) 1; D2 (cinemas and theatres) 1; sui generis (others) 3.

Opening Hours

Opening hours vary considerably. Even individual businesses will vary their opening hours within the week. For example, a hairdresser can open from 9.00 am and may stay open until 8.00 pm two or three times in the week. They may also open on Sundays. One retailer not open on Sunday remarked that the town is busy then and she was considering opening on that day.

Restaurants have widely differing opening hours. They may stay open until 11.00 pm, although they open later in the morning, often 11.00. Sandwich shops often open from 7.30 am to benefit from the early morning trade.

If there are standard hours of opening it tends to be 9.00 am until 5.30 pm. Monday to Saturday. However, surprisingly, few businesses stick to this standard. The venue open for the longest period each day is the Leatherhead Theatre.

Size of Businesses

This judgement is based on the number of employees. A distinction is not always drawn between full time and part time employees, but there is a considerable amount of part time working. Charity shops not only employ volunteers, but one shop can 'employ' up to 20 over a period of time. Several businesses are one 'man' bands, whilst the largest number of employees in any one business was 50, but this only added up to 9 full time equivalents. 25 businesses employed under 10 employees.

Business Confidence

A quick question was asked to gauge the current buoyancy of the business. Not all answered this and some may be either talking the business up or down. However, in most cases it is considered that honest answers were given. Of those that answered the question 22 businesses were either doing well or were reasonably satisfied with their business performance. Another 14 were either pessimistic or felt that business was worse than previous years.

Deliveries

It is important to understand how businesses cope with deliveries to their premises since any changes to access arrangement could make these arrangements more difficult or impossible. For that reason, questions were asked about where deliveries came in, how they came and when the came.

The general impression of the current situation is that businesses work around the constraints of access and have become used to delivery arrangements, even if they are not always easy or convenient. There are one or two exceptions. Deliveries can be straightforward where there is rear access and the bulk and frequency of deliveries does not present any special challenges. Church Street businesses usually have on street or rear access and can accept deliveries at any time. Similarly, there are a few High Street premises that have rear access from the Swan Centre service deck or Elm Road. The one significant exception is Englishman's Castle which has access through the barrier during the day to storage facilities in the Church Street car park. Large, continental lorries deliver to the front of the shop and smaller vans back up off Church Street into the storage space.

Flexibility to determine when deliveries come will depend on whether the delivery company is servicing many premises within a region and whether it is a courier. In both these cases it becomes very difficult to dictate delivery times. When asked if there was scope to be flexible about delivery arrangements and times, most said there was not. If further constraints on deliveries were to be suggested, there would need to be careful consultation with the businesses concerned.

Some High Street premises will take deliveries during the day. There are a number of cases where this is achieved by parking up in front of the Church Street barrier or elsewhere on the periphery and using trolleys to reach the premises. In one case the delivery comes in from the Institute end, against regulations. Premises serving food have the most complicated delivery arrangements because of the daily need to provide fresh produce. One sandwich bar has 2 deliveries per day. In a few cases, deliveries to one business depend on the co-operation of another business whose land is use to park up a vehicle and unload.

Views on the Current TRO and Access Arrangements

Businesses were reminded of the current arrangements for vehicular access and car parking. Questions sought to examine the degree to which access for vehicles during the main part of the day (currently not permitted) and in the early morning and

evening (currently permitted) was important for the success or survival of their business.

The answers given were sometimes not straightforward in that an answer would be given and then qualified by a different response. This reflected the understanding that whatever the solution, there were compromises and downsides. However, some clear messages did emerge.

The first is that businesses are largely content with the current arrangements. 16 businesses clearly indicated that they were content with the current arrangements, albeit that they might wish to see some small adjustments. 5 businesses indicated that they would like to see further restrictions placed on vehicular access. In some cases this was for a complete ban on private vehicles (deliveries would continue) and in other cases this would involve retaining some vehicular access in the morning or evening or both. 8 businesses indicated that they would like to see vehicular access extended during the middle of the day. In most cases this was a request for complete access, but in three cases the request was to retain the pedestrian only access during the main part of the day but to reduce its length by 2 or 3 hours. Only 5 businesses wanted to see free vehicular access throughout the day. Most of these also wanted to see the route through Church Street to Bridge Street opened. The suggestion was generally to have a one way system.

There did not seem to be a strong correlation between the type of responses given and the geographical position of the business or its opening times. For example, the hairdressers and restaurants in the town disagreed on the value of having vehicular access during the day; some argued that this did not affect business, whilst others argued strongly that it was vitally important that vehicular access and easy parking adjacent to the premises was very significant.

The most frequently cited reason for wanting to retain the pedestrian only period and even to increase it, was that it produced a better street ambience. Safety was another important secondary consideration. Even those advocating the same level or an increase level of vehicular access mentioned safety as an issue that would have to be addressed through speed humps or other measures.

The message from the businesses is that the pedestrian only period should remain, but there could be a review of the start and end of this period when the levels of pedestrian footfall reduce. This also ties into the comments on parking below.

Parking

Parking is also a complex issue. A number of businesses considered the question of parking in relation to their own business needs. If they were outside the pedestrianised area or they closed in the evenings, they often did not comment. Others commented by taking a general view, even if they felt that their own business was not directly affected.

Overall, parking was felt to be a positive thing, although most businesses were not advocating that it be extended to the middle of the day. Restaurants in particular felt it was important to their trade to have evening parking. A significant number of

businesses did, however, suggest that parking, even in the evening, was problematic. The reasons they gave were based on the negative environmental effects, the desire to create a different, more relaxed ambiance or for safety reasons. In all, 9 of the 34 businesses that commented on parking had a negative view of parking. The rest felt that some form of parking was helpful to either their business or the economy of the town as a whole.

However, even amongst those that advocated provision for parking within the pedestrianised street, there was a strong call to introduce more discipline into the parking arrangements. Sundays in particular can be problematic during the day when cars block businesses, some of which are open for trade. Some wanted to see parking confined to specific areas to allow more room for outdoor seating. Others asked for restrictions in the form of limited time, to encourage a turnover of customer parking; this applied more to those advocating parking during the day.

The period from 4.30 pm to 6.00 pm, which is the period for deliveries only, seems to be a source of conflict. It is not clear how often this occurs, but at least a couple of businesses mentioned this. During this period the barrier in Church Street is raised. Non-delivery vehicles sometimes take the opportunity to park in the High Street. Either they are not clear about the restrictions or they take a chance. When a parking ticket does result, it causes conflict and unhappiness. From observation during the filming of the video to accompany the consultation, it appeared that there is quite a lot of illegal parking during this period and, therefore, a review might be necessary. There appears to be mixed views on the question of enforcement. Some called for more of it and others considered that enforcement was overly officious.

Ideas for Enhancement

Businesses were asked to indicate what short term measures might be funded from the S106 money that is available for High Street and Church Street. They were also asked for ideas that might be implemented in the longer term. A wide range of suggestions were made. The greatest number of comments (16) related to the paving. Some comments relate to work that is already planned. Comments were made about the BT junction box, but these have not been listed below since the problem has been addressed. The list below shows the full range of suggestions, with the most popular at the top of this list.

1. Improvements to paving
2. Remove the statuettes
3. Signage improvements
4. Planting/hanging baskets
5. Street furniture improvements (various but particularly consistency of design and additional seating)
6. Removal of the High Street/Bridge Street Ramp (some wanted a vehicular link and others sought removal to open up the views of the street)
7. Enhancements to the Church Street area
8. Greater diversity of shops
9. Improved public transport
10. Traffic calming measures on High Street

11. More town centre events
12. More car parking or lower charges
13. Improved lighting
14. Cycle racks
15. Car parking pay on exit
16. Repair the cladding on the ramp
17. Drainage improvements
18. Improved pedestrian/disabled routes into town
19. promotion of the town
20. Park and ride facility
21. Improvements to the market
22. Provision of shop front grants
23. Reinststate the clock tower (presumably in North Street)
24. Retain the statuettes
25. Provide long stay parking for residents
26. Enhance the Epsom Road approach to High Street to make it welcoming
27. More seating
28. Remove Penny Black pinch point
29. Electronic town map
30. Enhancement of alleys and passages
31. pressure wash of surfaces
32. Change Sainsbury's entrance back to encourage footfall back into High Street
33. Improve attitude of traffic wardens
34. Improve Bridge Street

The top 7 on the list are the ones that recur regularly in the responses. Other than these, the significance is in the range of suggestions, some of which are contradictory.