



SCC LOCAL COMMITTEE (WAVERLEY) 13 November 2020

AGENDA ITEM 7

WRITTEN MEMBER QUESTIONS

One Written Member Questions has been received from Cllr Jerry Hyman:

“Does the Committee accept the validity of the facts expressed by businesses and residents (as emboldened below) and that we must in all reasonableness remove the Farnham Covid road measures immediately?”

I attended a Farnham Local Liaison Forum Zoom Meeting for Businesses on 2nd November as an Observer, at which all of the local entrepreneurs attending expressed deep concern regarding the severe impact on independent retailers being caused by the roadspace reallocation Covid-19 measures. Their message represented the views of the many retailers to whom they had spoken, including Farnham’s established ‘Shop Alert’ group, and echoed the views of the vast majority of residents and businesses in the many ‘traffic congestion’ posts that seem to have dominated the popular local Facebook and ‘Nextdoor’ social media forums over the past few months.

The congestion is preventing shoppers from visiting Farnham and is shifting traffic to the Upper Hale Road, to the Dora’s Green Lane and Crondall Lane cut-through, and to south Farnham residential rat-runs - which residents have always been promised we will not do! Emergency vehicles are regularly experiencing severe delays due to gridlock. Everyone wants better pedestrian conditions in the town centre, but most people have long recognised that alternative routes must be provided first.

The businesses requested that Surrey allow them the best chance of surviving and recovering from the pandemic’s impacts by ordering the immediate removal of the planters and cones.

Producing LLF leaflets with the headline of “Farnham is Open for Business”, while at the same time causing unacceptable congestion by removing road capacity, for no real benefit, is just self-contradictory, and it’s causing unnecessary suffering for our businesses and residents. If we really care then we must listen and act accordingly. Unfortunately the businesses’ representations were dismissed lightly by the LLF Chairman with a cursory response of “*That’s a view, there are lots of other views*”, and were further dismissed by Surrey’s project manager as being “*blinkered*”. Apart from claims that some unnamed people like the flowers, there was no good reason given as to why the restrictions should not be removed.

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I can attest to the veracity of those businesses' position, having myself sought the views of numerous residents and businesses, and so must urge members to appreciate that the common understanding is that **the current retention of the Covid road system is based upon two false premises, i.e. that 'we have no choice' and that 'the benefits outweigh any negative impacts'**. In fact, **it is our choice, and there are no real benefits**. Understandably, our intelligence and/or ulterior motives are in question.

I ask that you give careful consideration to the facts:

Firstly, **the system was put in place as a 3-month trial, to compensate for narrow pavements, in order to enable queuing outside shops and to allow pedestrians to pass each other**. We've since learned that the **scientists now accept that there is very little risk of contracting the virus outdoors, in passing**, and that common sense says that **any people who are afraid to walk past each other in the open air are certainly not going to risk entering shops**. And in practice we've seen that **few people use the extra 'pavement' space** and that **there have been precious few problems, if any, from queuing outside shops**.

Secondly, **the Covid system does not actually cover the places where narrow pavements are an issue, which are:**

- **in Downing Street, at the top, and at the bottom by the Chemists'; and**
- **in The Borough, outside the Queen's Head at the bus stops, and along from WH Smith's to the Royal Deer junction.**

In fact **we have cones and planters everywhere except the places where they might genuinely be considered necessary; and we can't put them in those places**, as they would prevent HGVs negotiating the junctions (as they do at the Castle Street/The Borough junction). Hence **the system is of no real benefit** and so is **not fit for purpose**. We could instead put simple pedestrian one-way-priority systems in those places, as other towns have, with pavement-widening retained where it doesn't restrict road capacity (e.g. outside Argos). We can then advertise boldly and widely that we've opened Farnham up for business.

Thirdly, **the narrowed roads make it difficult for HGVs to get through, causing regular blocking back**, and with the drastic reduction in shoppers caused by the gridlock it almost seems as though we're overrun by lorries, when in reality **Atkins have reported that there has been little if any increase in the number of HGVs passing through**. The HGV 'problem' has been **caused by the Covid system**, and the solution is blindingly obvious to most people: Remove the cause of the problem.

Fourthly and finally, if the Farnham Infrastructure Programme's 'promise' of £250 million of roads projects to enable pedestrianisation of the town centre is genuine, then logically **we must all accept that the enabling works MUST come first, as any other delivery programme can only be seen as disingenuous.**"

Frank Apicella, SCC Area Highway Manager (South West), will give the following answer:

This temporary scheme in Farnham town centre was implemented one day ahead of the official opening shops on Friday 12th June, in accordance with the new government suggested social distancing rules.

This was the first scheme of this nature to be introduced in the county, The Local MP and the Leaders of all three authorities have been involved in the evolution of project. Working closely with FTC, planters were also subsequently introduced, as the project on site advanced. Additionally, an advisory HGV & 20mph speed limit were introduced in the town centre. A ban on turning was also introduced together with NO entry from Castle Street into Park Row.

The County Council together with the Waverley BC and Farnham TC are very much aware of the varying views in connection with this social distancing scheme, through numerous meetings with councillors, and the business community, together with comments received.

Below is a joint statement provided by Surrey County Council leader Tim Oliver and Farnham Town Council leader John Neale confirming that the barriers would be replaced with planters, and the scheme managed by the town council going forward.

"Farnham Town Council and Surrey County Council (SCC) met on September 9 to review the Covid-19 pavement widening measures that have been in place in Farnham town centre since June.

These measures were put in place, at short notice, to respond to government guidelines for creating wider pavements in town centres, in order to assist in social distancing and queuing outside shops.

Whilst the Farnham scheme meets these objectives as best it can, we are conscious of the downsides of the current arrangement. Feedback from the community has told us that the scheme is unsightly and off-putting to our residents and visitors. Therefore, it's not giving the full benefits we want the scheme to deliver.

The traffic problems recently seen in the town centre have been compounded by the unavoidable roadworks that were brought forward to the, expected, quieter period caused by the pandemic.

With this experience behind us, and being mindful of the likely need to maintain effective social distancing measures into 2021, the councils have now agreed to change the scheme immediately.

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From 8pm on Friday, September 11, SCC as the highways authority, will be removing the existing barriers and we will be reconfiguring the scheme with an emphasis on using the planters to define the wider pavements.

The planters will be supplemented with some much less obtrusive temporary kerbstones and posts to ensure that vehicles are properly separated from pedestrians.

This arrangement will also make it easier for people to cross the roads without being confronted by barriers. Until the kerbstones can be installed, the separation will be defined by traffic cones.

Whilst the scheme is continued, it will in future be managed by the town council on behalf of SCC, which will ensure that any problems can be resolved quickly.

As with all COVID responses at government and local authority levels, we have to be prepared to respond and adapt according to any new factors that arise. We hope that Farnham people will understand what we are doing here and support the councils.

We are continuously listening to both our community and to our local businesses when we decide the way forward."

As the above clearly demonstrates, the project has changed and evolved to suit the needs and requirements of all users. Mobile Vehicle Actuated Signs were also introduced following discussions, to further enhance the message on the approaches to the Town Centre.

Following conversations with local councillors and the town council, we have commissioned WSP consultants to undertake an independent review of the scheme to review the affects the scheme has had on traffic volumes, congestion and pedestrian flows. We anticipate that this initial report will be available at the end of the month for consideration by Farnham Infrastructure Board. This technical note will draw evidence led conclusions as to the impacts of the scheme, looking at travel time reliability through the town during the schemes existence as well as data on footfall.

Finally, following the meeting mentioned above held on the 9th September, it was agreed to remove the metal barriers and replace them with a less intrusive delineator between the traffic and pedestrians. Whilst the barriers were initially removed the agreed temporary kerbs subsequently ordered with posts to act as segregation, with a more aesthetically pleasing profile. Surrey County Council propose to install these temporary kerbs next week, and carry out a full evaluation of the scheme with clear and transparent outcomes of the study.