

Re-opening Saxmundham Town Centre after Coronavirus emergency

Proposals to support citizens' safety and economic recovery

DRAFT Paper by Jeremy Smith, Chair, Saxmundham Town Council, June 2020

A. Purpose of paper and summary of proposals for consideration

This paper sets out options for action to be taken by the relevant tiers of local government (county, district, town council) to enable Saxmundham to implement measures that meet the following aims:

- To keep citizens safe as they go to and use the services and shops on the High Street, and to provide an town centre environment in which they feel it is safe to use those facilities;
- To encourage and help local businesses as they re-start or intensify economic activity in the town centre, and to provide an environment which encourages potential customers and visitors

In addition, to achieve these aims, we need

- To manage the process effectively, consult stake-holders and provide information in accessible form to all local residents.

Saxmundham Town Council has consulted a group of local business people (in the absence of a business organization), and has discussed the issues at its meeting held (by Zoom) on Monday 1st June.

Both Town Council and business people consider that to meet the above aims, measures need to be taken now in relation to the way the High Street operates, to ensure that pedestrians can move safely and in accordance with guidance on social distancing. In a nutshell, if nothing is done, as footfall increases pedestrians will be forced more and more to step into the highway, which carries two-way traffic, to pass other pedestrians including those waiting to enter business premises. This is because the pavements are generally narrow, and in parts extremely narrow.

The paper sets out a series of options, designed to address this problem in a variety of possible ways, and on which we would value discussion with and advice from local government professionals in particular on highway issues. Advice on likely costs of relevant options would also be sought.

Our in principle preferred option, prior to such discussion and advice, is Option 1, namely

- A pedestrian-prioritised High Street, with a reduced speed limit for vehicles (to 20 or 10 mph) and alerting signage.

This can be combined with other options, including pedestrianisation of Market Place (which would enhance pedestrian safety and enable the café to use the street for chairs and

tables, for example), with one-way use of pavements along the High Street, and with a pedestrian priority on Station Approach, the narrow street linking High Street to railway station and its car park.

We then raise other possible options to enable people to use the street safely, but these may have a greater impact on traffic movements around the town. We emphasize that ‘no action’ would mean people taking risks in any event by stepping into the road to follow social distancing rules.

Finally, we put forward a proposal to engage a part-time communications manager/consultant for say 4 months to undertake work on consultation and communication involving business community, Town Council and the wider community, in relation to the re-emergence of the town centre’s economic activity.

B. Introduction

Saxmundham Town Council is working with local businesses to develop proposals for the successful re-opening of our Town Centre, and notably the High Street and Market Place area. We are also in discussions with East Suffolk Council’s economic development team and their market town consultants, ‘People & Places’, looking at short-term issues and proposals (the theme of this paper) and longer-term ideas and plans.

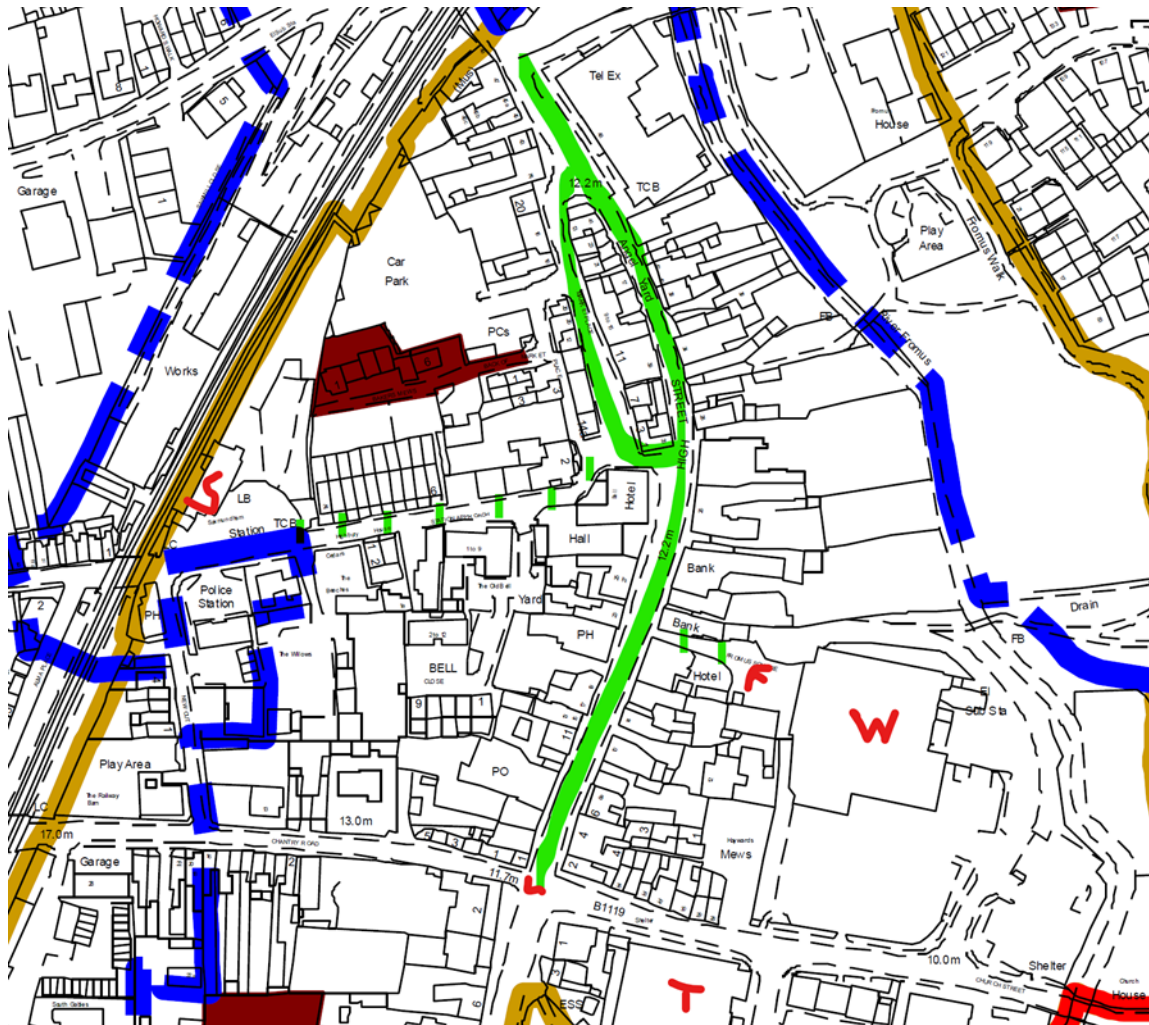
The Town Centre has two main economic focal points:

- The supermarket area, based largely on Church Street, to the east of the B1121 (old A12) with Waitrose (on north side) and Tesco (south side) as well as some other businesses including Costa Coffee and the Factory Shop. Both supermarkets have large car parks and have well-tested and used systems for citizens’ social distancing in terms of queueing outside and in internal flows. For the coming months, this area should not require much additional input in terms of physical signage, marking or barriers etc.
- The traditional ‘old’ town centre, based on the High Street and Market Place. While the High Street had some voids prior to the recent emergency, notably in the very narrow section towards the north, most ground floor units were occupied and economically active, by mainly customer-facing service-providers and retailers. However, there have been long-standing concerns about the economic resilience of the High Street, which has two way traffic, including quite large vehicles, but generally narrow pavements. The main access to this High Street area for pedestrians parking in the supermarket area is via Fromus Square, mainly owned by East Suffolk Council; there is a fairly narrow alley-way between HSBC bank and the old White Hart pub.

The High Street / Market Place area is our particular concern for the coming 6 to 9 months, as there is no way that pedestrians can stick to the pavements if they wish to move along the High Street and comply with the government guidance on social distancing. This would be the case, for most of the High Street area, even if the recommended minimum distancing were reduced to one metre at some point. There is no alternative but to step into the street

to pass, even if one way pavements were adopted. We have put together some photos taken in the last few days at different points in the High Street area, to show the state of the street and pavements visually – See Annex 1 (though on a day when few pedestrians were around).

This map, which is extracted from ESC’s map of the Saxmundham Settlement Boundary in the Proposed Policies Map Modifications appendix 2, shows the town centre layout:



The area in Blue (from the original map) shows the Conservation Area . We have added the marking in Green, to show the High Street and Market Place. The dotted Green lines show Station Approach (west off High Street) which has vehicular access to the Station car park, currently being extended, and the entrance to Fromus Square (pedestrian only access from High St)

The code for the red lettering, also added by us, is:

L = traffic lights T = Tesco W = Waitrose F = Fromus Square S = Station

C. Policy approach

Our two broad aims are:

- To keep citizens safe as they go to and use the services and shops on the High Street, and to provide a town centre environment in which they feel it is safe to use those facilities;
- To encourage and help local businesses as they re-start or intensify economic activity in the town centre, and to provide an environment which encourages potential customers and visitors

To achieve these aims, we need

- To manage the process effectively, consult stake-holders and provide information in accessible form to all local residents.

This last can be done by (a) a leaflet delivered to all 2250 households (we have experience in this, with last year's household survey), (b) use of websites and Facebook pages.

Cooperation with local business community

Unfortunately, at this time there is no organization representing the local business community. The Town Council has therefore been working closely with a number of businesses based in the Town Centre area, and with the ESC Economic Development Team and the market town consultants People & Places to develop an effective consultation and information forum. This. It is proposed, will be via the Town Council's administration providing admin support for e.g. quarterly (or as required) meetings to share information, news of developments and opportunities etc.

In preparing this paper and its proposals, with local businesses we have set up a WhatsApp group, as well as a number of individual discussions. We will be seeking to contact as many other town centre businesses as we can in the coming days, where we can find contact details.

Town Council and Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group

With support from the Town Council, the Neighbourhood Plan Steering group has been working to prepare a draft Neighbourhood Plan. This needs to take into account the impact of ESC's major Local Plan proposals for a new 800 dwelling Garden Neighbourhood to the south of the town. It is proposed to include a major policy section on the Town Centre, which includes the following – all of which predate the coronavirus emergency but which are 100% consistent with what is now even more essential, and urgent:

“Generally, it was felt that the Town Centre is not an attractive or welcoming environment for residents, shoppers or businesses for the following reasons.

- The pavements are too narrow, uneven and inadequate, particularly for those with reduced mobility.

- The roadway dominates the environment and illegal or inconsiderate parking causes congestion and obstruction.
- There is a perceived general lack of vitality.
- The northern end of the High Street is particularly narrow and considered hazardous for both cyclists and pedestrians.
- There are insufficient commodious spaces for informal socialising.
- Signage is inconsistent and inadequate...”

Arising from this, the proposed set of objectives for the Town Centre includes:

1. To encourage a mix of shops, services, residential, cultural and entertainment venues, and food and drink establishments in the town centre.
2. To give pedestrians greater priority over other transport modes in the area linking the station, the High Street and Fromus Square.
3. To discourage vehicular through traffic in The High Street.

D. Our short-term proposals for the High Street and Market Place

There is a strong consensus that, to meet the aims of (a) promoting pedestrian / customer safety, confidence, and compliance with public health guidelines, and (b) thereby to increase potential footfall and assist local businesses, urgent and major steps are required to rebalance the use of the High Street and Market Place in favour of pedestrians. Even if nothing were done, pedestrians will still be obliged or choose to use the vehicle carriageway on frequent occasions to pass by or overtake other pedestrians (many of whom move slowly), and those in wheelchairs or using mobility scooters etc. The widely used area in front of the pharmacy, for example, has a raised pavement with a wall barrier that means you have to walk in the street to get past anyone at or near the entrance.

There are a few possible ways of addressing this, which we would wish to discuss with ESC and SCC representatives

Option 1 (our presently favoured one) – A pedestrian-prioritised High Street, with a reduced speed limit for vehicles (to 20 or 10 mph) and alerting signage

This would allow two-way traffic on the street, but with pedestrians able to have far more confidence in using the street to walk in as necessary. There would need to be further ‘reminders’ in both directions at the point where the High Street narrows and curves, and is already a dangerous area for pedestrians with two-way traffic in a narrow street with narrow pavements.

It would enable people also to bypass, by using the carriageway, the frequent queues outside the HSBC bank and Ipswich Building Society premises, as well as new queues that may arise at different points once more businesses re-open. This would also help with the pedestrian access to and from the Fromus Square

This option would avoid the complexities of urgently defining and implementing the best vehicle movement system around the town, which would be required by introduction of a one-way system for the High Street, and even more so if part of the High Street were fully pedestrianised.

If a formal reduction in speed limit is likely to take too long (we do not know the timescales that would currently apply), then a large “SLOW” sign at either end, with signage explaining the pedestrian priority to enable social distancing for the temporary period, might serve the purpose.

If thought appropriate, the pedestrian priority could be limited in time, e.g. to Mondays to Saturdays, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

We would also support, as part of this option (but could also be a stand-alone) **pedestrianisation of the Market Place**, e.g. also for similar time-fixed periods. It is already closed on Wednesday mornings for the weekly market. One of the purposes would be to encourage pedestrians moving from the north end of the High Street to the south end of the street to use the Market Place rather than the narrow High Street pavement.

We wish to consult further on the introduction, as part of the “pedestrian-prioritised High Street” whether to introduce **a pavement one-way system for pedestrians**, as has been done in Southwold. Absent other measures to enable pedestrians to use the street safely, we are not yet convinced that this would be effective – but as part of an overall pedestrian priority policy, it could be a helpful addition. We will need also to consult on which direction such a one-way system would flow.

Option 2 – A widened pedestrian lane in the High Street, with a reduced speed limit for vehicles and alerting signage.

For that part of the High Street going north from the traffic lights to The Bell hotel, we think the street is wide enough to keep two-way traffic flow together with separating a strip of the carriageway on one side as an extended pedestrian pavement area. This would involve plastic temporary barriers only, we envisage. However, it would need to have gaps to enable people to cross the street not only at the current pedestrian lights, but at a few other points, otherwise this option might actually discourage people from using services in the street.

The plus side, of course, is that it would enable people to pass (though not clear whether with a 2 metre gap) other pedestrians or queue-ers with more space to spare than with the present pavements.

This could not work for the narrow part of the High Street, however, so this option would strengthen the case for a **pedestrianisation of the Market Place** to enable safer on-foot movements to and from the north end of the town centre.

The proposal for a widened pavement area would, by definition, narrow the area for two-way traffic, and so reducing traffic speed to the minimum is just as important under this

option. We would therefore favour a formal speed reduction to 10 or 20 mph if the legal steps can be taken quickly – and if not, by signage warning to ‘go slow’ etc.

Option 3 – One-way system in High Street, with wider pavements on both sides

The proposal would be to have a one way system from the Chantry Road lights to the north-end junction with Market Place (by The Edge café and The Store, thus keeping access to the ESC car park). As a short-term measure to deal with the coronavirus emergency, this has obvious pluses for the operation of the Town Centre, in that it enables traffic still to flow through the town (probably from north to south) while giving enough space to pedestrians, and potentially to cyclists, to occupy their own space safely and in accordance with social distancing guidance. It would undoubtedly lead to a more pedestrian and customer-friendly “street scene” than we have today, for the duration of the temporary measures. This depends, of course, on how the traffic area is marked off, e.g. by plastic barriers or by other means (e.g. spaced out plant boxes).

The major issue that would need to be confronted is where the traffic would flow in the other direction. There is already the somewhat notional existence in the town of the B1119 road from Saxmundham to Framlingham, which however winds through residential streets, and additional traffic in those streets would (we can be confident) not be welcomed by residents. There is also a significant risk of “rat-running” through some narrow streets, unless more traffic control measures are put in place at different points.

Once again, this option really requires – in addition to other steps - a formal speed reduction to 10 or 20 mph, if the legal steps can be taken quickly – and if not, by signage warning to ‘go slow’ etc.

Option 4 – Pedestrianization of the High Street

This option would probably operate from the Chantry Road traffic lights up to The Bell hotel. It would need to take account of vehicle movements to and from the railway station, which serves a wide hinterland (in normal times).

In some respects, this option might bring the biggest gains for the post-emergency re-opening of the Town Centre and local economy, seen in isolation. From the point of view of pedestrians, it would be the safest, and give the best chance of maintaining social distancing throughout the temporary period. From the perspective of shop- and business-operators, it is likely to bring more footfall into the town centre, provided the overall ‘offer’ of the High Street can be maintained at a good level (people will only come if there are goods or services to buy, or activities to take part in). However, it makes access to the supermarket area more difficult for those from the north of town, and could ‘nudge’ them to shop etc. elsewhere.

This option also intensifies the question posed in Option 3 of which roads would become the alternative traffic routes through the town, since the flows would need to cover both directions (north-south and south-north).

Option 5 – Pedestrian priority on Station Approach

The road from High Street (by The Bell) to the railway station is narrow and carries traffic and pedestrians. We recommend that if a general ‘pedestrian priority’ scheme is introduced, this should include Station Approach. Greater Anglia is building a larger car park so we can envisage, if rail traffic is deemed safe to use, more traffic. We wish to encourage safe pedestrian use of streets linked directly to the Town Centre, and including Station Approach would not add significantly to costs.

Option 6 – Pedestrianisation of the Market Place

We have already raised this as a possible additional element under several of the above options. But it can also be seen independently as a free-standing proposal. The Market Place includes Trinity’s café, which if the street were pedestrianized for the temporary period, could use tables and chairs using more of the street than at present. Market Place is already closed to traffic on market-day mornings. The Back of Market Place Street would also need to be controlled to prevent it being used as a rat-run.

Option 7 – One-way pedestrian system using existing pavements

This option has been raised earlier, in the context of the proposal for pedestrian priority in use of the highway. It has been used, with success it seems, in Southwold. In Saxmundham, it can reduce, but not of itself prevent, the need to step into the vehicle roadway to pass other pedestrians. It can also help in getting orderly and logical queueing arrangements on pavements, meeting distancing standards. Communication would need to be effective, to win acceptance, including the fact that one can cross the road at any safe point. i.e. no requirement to go to all the way to one end before crossing!

E. Management and communications for the temporary scheme

Saxmundham Town Council is offering to provide support and administration for dialogue and consultation with the local business community, to ensure that their views are listened to and their needs addressed. This would be ongoing, but is particularly important for the next few months as the town centre gradually ‘reopens’ for economic activity in the aftermath of the emergency, and local people and visitors start to visit and use the town’s services again – or think about doing so.

The Town Council is also commissioning a new website to carry information about the town and activities, and a section giving information on all local businesses who wish to be included. This will however not be ready at the start of the re-opening process, but can be developed in tandem. The financial resources for these two points can be provided by the Town Council.

What we do not have a resource for is a communications manager/consultant, who can work with local businesses, Town Council and voluntary sector to ensure that each step in the re-opening process is consulted upon and communicated. We see this as a part-time role of around 12 hours per week, for a maximum period of 4 months. Estimated cost: £4000.