

## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

Construction of the Loughborough Inner Relief Road was completed in early March 2014 and this enabled general traffic to be re-routed away from the former A6 which passed through the northern part of Loughborough Market Place.

Whilst most traffic will be permanently barred from using the revised Market Place, in order to determine whether bus services should be allowed continued access, Leicestershire County Council (LCC) consulted on three options regarding future bus operation:

- Option A – Buses allowed through Market Place in both directions.
- Option B – Southbound buses only allowed through Market Place.
- Option C – No buses allowed through Market Place.

LCC considered the results of the consultation on 1st April 2014 and resolved that there should be a trial of Option C (no buses allowed through Market Place).

In the light of the above decision, an Experimental Traffic Regulation Order (ETRO) has been implemented on roads in Loughborough town centre for a period of 18 months. This ETRO stops all traffic (except emergency vehicles) using part of Swan Street between 10am and 4pm. Outside of these hours, access is restricted to vehicles being used for loading / unloading, servicing and cyclists.

### **Purpose of Report**

In order to understand both the benefits and disadvantages of Option C, the County Council commissioned AECOM to:

- Establish a process of evaluating the impact of the Scheme.
- Gain an understanding of the current picture regarding the impact of the Scheme and the resulting pros and cons that the decision (on a trial basis) to prohibit buses from the Market Place has had on all relevant stakeholders.

### **Methodology**

The methodology adopted within this report considers both the process used to arrive at the trial option, and the impacts of the Scheme in terms of:

- Economy;
- Safety;
- Public Transport;
- Environment; and
- Public Realm.

In considering the above, data has been obtained from a variety of stakeholders including local bus operators, LCC, Charnwood Borough Council and the Loughborough Business Improvement District (BID). Several snap-shot surveys have also been undertaken to capture the views of retailers near the scheme, bus users, and those members of the public using the scheme area.

## Findings

### Process Evaluation

It is clear that the process followed by LCC was appropriate for a Scheme of this nature:

- Officer reports followed established planning & transport policy and the business case submission to the Department for Transport (DfT).
- There is agreement that the consultation provided sufficient opportunity for the public and key stakeholders to make their views known.
- Members enacted their democratic right to seek further public engagement at key decision points, and to ultimately amend the trial option from that recommended by their Officers.

### Economy

There is no clear picture with regards to the economic impact of trial Option C; however, analysis shows the following:

- there is no clear trend (up or down) in vacancy rates (this is against a national picture of significant retail growth since 2011). Notwithstanding this, there does appear to have been a recent reduction in vacancy rates within the BID area;
- footfall has been relatively stable since 2013, though now appears to be increasing based on the latest data;
- Car park usage is at its highest level for 5 years.
- The market Federation indicated that 80% of those it polled are now opposed to trial Option C.
- Of retailers, there is a large proportion who now think that the trial option has worsened this area of Loughborough and that the town is quieter than one year ago.
- Conversely, the majority of members of the public who expressed a view said that the town centre is now busier than a year ago.

### Safety

This was a key issue for all stakeholders when debating the continued use of Swan Street by buses. Given the decision to run trial Option C, the focus has moved from the collection and analysis of actual data (which would have been collected for both Options A and B) to more generalised findings on the potential safety of Options A and B. For example, it can be seen that:

- There had been collisions on the old A6 involving buses and pedestrians and therefore the baseline test is one in which such incidents were occurring.

- There are other examples in the UK where buses (and trams) are allowed into otherwise pedestrianised areas.
- There is little nationwide evidence on the safety performance of allowing buses into pedestrianised areas (given that this arrangement is uncommon).
- There is a strong public perception that introducing buses into Swan Street would make the area less safe than under the current regime.

### Public Transport

Option C centred the trial onto the potential impacts on bus services. From the information obtained from operators and bus users, it can be seen that:

- The impact of the scheme has not been to sever cross-town services (but this may occur in future).
- Patronage has decreased for both Kinchbus and Arriva.
- The percentage of late running services (Arriva) has worsened when compared with 2013.
- Key issues for operators relate to impacts on southbound services.
- Bus stop locations would have altered under all the Options under consideration (A, B & C). However:
  - the key issues for bus users relate to the location of the Lemyngton Street bus stop, and general uncertainty about using the new bus stop locations;
  - differences in distance from the new / former bus stop locations to key services and facilities are marginal (with the exception of the Lemyngton Street stop); and
  - bus stop locations continue to offer good access to key town centre destinations when compared with the location of competing car parks, with the exception of the Lemyngton Street stop).
- Bus users are split on their overall opinion of the scheme, with the scheme scoring highly but with no consensus on new bus stop convenience.
- Bus stop locations continue to offer good access to key town centre destinations when compared with the location of competing car parks, with the exception of the Lemyngton Street stop).

It can therefore be identified that Option A (or B) would be the best option from the perspective of bus operators and bus users.

## Environment

Based on the data available, it can be reasonably assumed that:

- The Scheme (Option C) has resulted in an improvement in air quality and the noise environment (in the immediate vicinity of Swan Street).
- There would be little difference in terms of noise when comparing Options A and B.

## Public Realm

In terms of the Public Realm, Option C is clearly the better option as:

- Ratings for the Scheme from bus users and general members of the public are high.
- An assessment of the pedestrian environment (using a nationally recognised standard assessment technique) has identified that Option C provides a better PERS benchmarking score than either Options A or B.

## **Conclusions**

Cabinet members considered the results of the consultation (held in 2013) and felt that, on balance, the additional economic benefits arising from the pedestrianisation i.e. a traffic free public space for six hours a day, outweighed the risk in reducing the bus network serving the town centre and disadvantaging bus users.

Based on the evidence collected to date, a conclusive decision cannot be drawn with respect to the efficacy of trial Option C, in comparison with the likely effects of operating Options A or B. There are, however, a number of key points that can be made:

- There is no clear evidence whether the operation of trial Option C has had a positive or negative effect on Loughborough's economy.
- The issue of road safety remains one of conjecture, however, there is a clear public perception of increased risk should either Option A or B be introduced by LCC.
- Option C scores more favourably in terms of environment and public realm factors (when considering the specific setting of Swan Street / Market Place).
- Options A and B score more favourably for bus operators and (some) bus users (who constitute a large group of people accessing the town centre, albeit that the benefits accrue mainly to those currently using the Leymington Street stops, i.e. Option B).

Whilst acknowledging that there has been an impact on bus operators and those bus users that require use of the Leymington Street bus stop, when weighed against the other key findings of the report, the conclusion of this evaluation is that:

- There is no clear evidence to suggest that the current traffic arrangements (Option C) should be altered.