

Statement from The Mayor of Totnes regarding COVID-19 Emergency measures and Active Travel Proposals

Thank you to everyone who has been writing to the Town Council with your views and ideas in response to the current COVID-19 pandemic and the emergency measures that the Town Council has so far implemented, and the additional plans we are seeking to implement. This statement is intended to inform and respond to some of the many enquiries we have received. Please forgive this singular reply, but we are currently receiving too many letters for us to respond to on an individual basis.

COVID-19 EMERGENCY MEASURES

While any decision on these measures are taken by Devon County Council (as Totnes TC is only an advisory body), any further recommendation the Town Council makes will be brought to a public meeting of the Town Council.

Road Closures:

Many people have written to us regarding the Saturday morning road closures in the town centre. (9am – 1pm) which started on June 20th. The current Road Traffic Order (RTO) is scheduled to continue until September 12th 2020. The reason for this road closure is to enable 2-metre social distancing which is difficult and often impossible on the narrow pavements and made more difficult and potentially dangerous when cars are also using the road. We are aware that we need to enable full safe access for all users of the town centre and the need to prioritise public health in particular during this pandemic.

The Town Council is seeking an independent professional survey to assess the current impact on all sectors to inform whether to extend these closures while the COVID-19 pandemic is still a threat and whether to increase the number of half closures during the week. It has proved very difficult to commission this survey to a reliable body and have this survey carried out, due to the reduced numbers of operators who would usually be available to provide this service. This will be carried out as soon as possible and survey shoppers, residents, traders, adjacent parishes, and service providers and assess:

- a. The financial, social and environmental impact and views on the current road closure
- b. Whether it should be extended for 6 months
- c. Whether there should be expansion of the road closure; i.e. should there be additional half days during the week

The TC has received a lot of correspondence, from those who seek more closures and those who think it should be stopped; we are also very aware of a high level of comment on social media and correspondence sent to Devon County Council. This is clearly a potentially divisive issue, which we wish to avoid for everyone's benefit.

One-way pavements for pedestrians on the Old Bridge: This proposal will be on the agenda of the September Town council meeting (7th Sept.), for introduction as an emergency COVID-19 measure.

Use of public spaces for restaurants, bars and cafes: South Hams District Council and Devon County Council have enabled fast-tracking of temporary applications for the use of public spaces by drinks and food businesses. This allows wide pavements and town squares to be used by the hospitality sector additional outside (COVID-19 Safe) space for tables and chairs they can serve at. This has been welcomed by many people.

SHARED SPACE: 'SHARE THIS SPACE AT WALKING PACE'

The Town Council are looking at options to reduce the 50+ % of 'through traffic' entering the town centre, so that the agreed 'Shared Space' measures can be implemented. We need to slow and reduce traffic in town for this to work and be safe. The TC has put forward a number of proposals, developed the plans and allocated some funds for measures that will make the town centre feel a lot more welcoming to pedestrians as it reopens and be less attractive to cars:

5mph Speed Limit: this is an advisory safety request to reduce speeds when vehicles are using the town centre. **Status:** Signs put up and seems to be effective when there are a lot of pedestrians

20+ wooden planters for herbs, shrubs, and trees: These will be placed along the wider pavements and parts of the highway where they will not obstruct. **Status:** All booked to be made at Landworks, funding in place for 20, awaiting approval to install by DCC. (2 have been made and are temporarily sitting in the Guildhall yard, ready to be relocated in the high street)

Imprint Road Surface: A better road surface is essential to provide a shared space 'look and feel'. **Status:** Some funding in place for Lower Fore Street. DCC unable to approve until appropriate time slot, tbc. Community Fundraiser seeking additional funds for more extended coverage.

New signage around the town: This will help visitors find the car parks and reduce cars coming through the town centre. The signage which has been commissioned by the TC with professional designers also has funding ready. **Status:** Almost ready to go. ETA tbc

Access Only: Recently County have indicated over 170 vehicles per hour coming through the town centre of which at least 52% are not stopping for shopping etc. While it is hoped that improved signage will help, a proposal is currently being considered to deter and reduce traffic coming into the town centre.

At the top of The Narrows, all vehicles would be obliged to turn left into The Lamb and there would be a No Right Turn into Plymouth Road (except for public transport and bicycles). The proposal also includes Kingsbridge Hill becoming a No Through Road to make that safer and avoid it developing into a 'rat run'. The Town council has asked Devon County Council to investigate this proposal and advise on whether all or some of it would be feasible and beneficial to the town and reduce the impact of vehicular movements. (A pilot could be introduced on all or part of this under COVID-19 Emergency Measures). **Status:** Devon County Council has not yet taken steps to investigate or advised on any timescale.

Further possibilities are also under discussion by the Town Council to help improve the access and shopping experience in the town centre and help our many independent businesses and markets back to a thriving sustainable future.

Active Travel: Despite the Government's recent announcements of generous funding for additional cycling and walking routes, regrettably, none of the proposals put to Devon County Council will be going forward. (They have agreed to only fund schemes that were already on their Capital Investment programme). The TC will be looking into how some of the proposals that have been put forward (including additional pedestrian crossing links across the town and cycle paths to Littlehempston and Stoke Gabriel) can be funded locally.

Park and Ride: Short-term: use of local School Car Parks for Weekend parking.
Long-term: Car parking provision, serviced by buses on each of the A roads leading into Totnes

Delivery Depot: We are seeking help of SHDC and DCC with establishing a delivery depot in close proximity to the town centre that could be used as an intermediary for deliveries during road closures (The TC is looking at how a local Delivery Service could then be supported). This could further reduce vehicles needing to enter the town centre.

Further Comment

There have been a lot of worrying messages put around about what is going on, suggesting all kinds of possible changes and motives for the road closures. The Town Council has been clear since mid-May, further to having been contacted by Devon County Council seeking proposals for measures to enable safe social distancing for shoppers, residents and visitors in town and city centres, to address public health issues due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is an unprecedented emergency situation, dealing with a very serious and unpredictable virus; it the duty of the Town Council to assist the higher tiers of Local Authority in this public health matter.

We are aware of the recent regrettable announcements of a major recession now taking place in the UK. The 20% drop in GDP since March on top of the 2% drop between January and March has had a wide impact. That lockdown has changed many people's shopping habits to on-line will be another blow to highstreets and local companies. It is the hope of the Town Council that the promotional work we invest in heavily through the Visit Totnes services, local and on-line information will support the town by encouraging more visitors and that they will enjoy their stay here and support our local shops and businesses, as well as more local people enjoying the many lovely walks and places to visit in the vicinity. Totnes has the benefit of being well known on the international map and national circuit of places to visit for a number of positive reasons; reasons that make this such a wonderful feisty town.

We do not agree that posting scaremongering letters or divisive messages in social media helps the situation, neither does sweeping statements about all the shops and market traders apparently doing badly, when some of them have contacted the Town Council directly and said the opposite. We need independent facts to help make the correct call. Similarly there is little point in trying to compare the failed 2013-15 traffic re-routing with this road closure; then the traffic was simply re-routed and it led to huge congestion in Coronation Road with many vehicles, including Bob The Bus, needing to drive that loop twice to make all their deliveries and drops in town. That was a disaster, this isn't and the four-hour road closure to enable pedestrians to socially distance from others by stepping out into the road without the danger of cars is needed to give more choice for more people to enable proper social distancing at this challenging time.

We are living in extraordinary times and we are all learning. We are grateful and thank everyone who has taken the time and trouble to write into the Town Council and shared their views, and those who have attended some of our meetings to discuss these issues. Whatever happens it is important that this doesn't become divisive in what has been an exemplar community at working together on many fronts to help our friends and neighbours. The road closure is just a part of a much broader set of actions to help us all stay safe, well and happy together.

This statement will be updated as changes and further decisions are made. We will keep in further communication via the Town Council meetings, website and Facebook page and local media with updates on any of these matters.

Jacqi

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