

Agenda Item 4

For decision – Next steps on School Street feasibility and consultation

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Summary

Safe walking and cycling are amongst the top priorities for the Frome community and are key objectives within Frome Town Council's (FTC's) work programme. At the Council meeting in June it was agreed that £20,000 could be allocated from the existing Resilience budget to support the development of an active travel project to enable more people to walk and cycle. The School Street project was subsequently proposed and agreed at Town Matters Committee in August. We are proposing that this project now starts in February / March 2021 when funding from the Department for Transport (DfT) has been secured. In the meantime, the proposal is to work with the schools to encourage active travel and maximise participation for when the School Street project is trialled in 2021.

Context

Since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, national interest in walking and cycling has been at a high level. The Council's 'What Next for Frome' household survey identified sustainable transport and safe walking and cycling as one of the top actions' residents would like FTC to support. An interactive map has to date received over 2000 comments and ideas on how walking and cycling routes could be improved in the town.

In response to this, we worked with an active travel transport consultant, Jess Read, to explore a range of projects that could enable more people to walk and cycle safely. The School Street programme, which involves restricting access to the roads around Oakfield Academy, Trinity First School and Critchill Academy, whilst encouraging and enabling more families to walk and cycle safely, was proposed and agreed at Town Matters Committee in August. Since then we have door-knocked and distributed surveys and leaflets to over 2500 households, held three community meetings, engaged with neighbourhood groups, discussed the project at Nunney Parish Council meeting and have continued to engage with the heads of the three schools involved. Overall, the concept has been broadly welcomed.

Update

This is the first School Street project in Somerset and will be the largest programme of its kind in the UK. Whilst national government has given emergency powers to highways authorities such as Somerset, the start-up process has taken longer than expected to approve and implement. We were working towards implementation of the pop-up pilot shortly after the Autumn half-term holiday but that now seems an unrealistic timescale.

There are several reasons why a delay in implementation to February/March 2021 seems prudent:

- The County Council are now expected to commission a road safety audit which will delay the start
- The DfT have delayed announcement of their funding, which hopefully will include £116,000 for the School Street project in Frome
- The schools involved would welcome more time for the engagement of parents of their students
- A February/March start would allow parking management measures on Weymouth Road and Somerset Road to be implemented first
- A later start allows more time for engagement and refinement of the design of the project as well as the opportunity for wider, more holistic work around the infrastructure needed to support cycling and walking across the town
- With DfT funding in place, savings would be made which could be ploughed into Active Travel Challenge work with the schools in the interim to encourage students to walk and cycle more

The proposal is that we continue to incorporate feedback, await further news on the funding situation and plan now for a February/March implementation date subject to securing DfT funding. Please note that it is understood that any DfT funding will need to be spent by the end of the financial year 2020/21.

In the meantime, it is proposed that some of the budget allocated to the School Street project is used to support an Active Travel Challenge not only for the three schools involved in School Street, but for all schools in Frome to benefit from. We know from previous experience that the Active Travel Challenge boosts the number of families travelling actively to school by 20% and has had lots of positive feedback each year.

Oakfield Academy, Trinity First School and Critchill School are supportive of this approach – engaging families over the next few months and then implementing the School Street project after the February half term. The delayed start will enable us to work closely with the schools and the wider community to maximise understanding and participation in the project. We are also working with Somerset County Council, local residents and volunteers to monitor traffic flows and active travel now so that we have a robust benchmark against which to judge the success of the School Street programme when it is implemented in 2021.

The 2021 project will still be a trial that can be amended, developed, or removed, if need be. A stakeholder group is being set up that will meet monthly to input and feedback on the project.

Recommendations

1. Delay the start of the implementation of the School Street programme until February/March 2021 subject to DfT funding
2. Approve re-allocating £4000 of the School Street budget to implement an Active Travel Challenge for all schools in the next few months