



Witney Chamber of Commerce  
c/o Great Experience Travel  
Waterloo Walk  
High Street  
Witney, OX28 6EU

Mrs Liz Leffman  
Leader  
Oxfordshire County Council  
County Hall  
New Road  
Oxford, OX1 1ND

Dear Mrs Leffman

**Re: Witney High Street, road closure**

I write in my capacity as the recently appointed Chairman of the Witney Chamber of Commerce.

We held our last meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> June when I invited Cllr Duncan Enright to give a short presentation to the attendees in respect of the current and future plans for Witney's High Street. Based on the discussion held at our earlier meeting in April when I was asked to take on the chairmanship of the Chamber there seemed to be considerable confusion as to whether a final decision had been taken on the current road restrictions and/or if there was an opportunity for the High Street to be reopened to two-way traffic. As this was the first meeting of Chamber members since before Covid, and of course, before the High Street access was restricted on the then perfectly understandable public health grounds, considerable concern was expressed about the apparent lack of any direct consultation with local businesses which could be adversely-affected by a potential reduction in footfall associated with the traffic restrictions.

At the meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> June, Duncan explained that a decision had been taken by the Council at the end of December which effectively envisaged making permanent the current restrictions, and this was in line with the results of the consultation that had taken place. A number of those who attended the meeting felt strongly that the methodology of the consultation process left much to be desired, especially as it did not appear that there was any economic impact assessment undertaken with the local businesses. The view of the meeting, strongly expressed to Duncan, was that what had been introduced as a perfectly legitimate public health response to Covid was now being used as a pretext to maintain traffic restrictions to the High Street for other reasons that had not been clearly explained or justified, especially to the local businesses.

One of my first acts as Chairman of the Chamber was to undertake a survey of Chamber Members to ascertain their views on the plans. Various unofficial surveys had previously been undertaken amongst the High Street retailers, but this survey was intended to gauge a much wider view from the membership which could then be represented to the relevant authorities. The result of this survey, which was backed up by a vote at the Chamber Meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> June was that the membership was overwhelmingly opposed to the current arrangements and wanted to see an immediate return to two-way traffic flows along the High Street.



A number of businesses stated that their turnover and footfall had seen a dramatic reduction since the introduction of the measures, together with considerable logistical difficulties caused in planning deliveries etc. Other members commented on the apparent current lack of policing of the measures which mean that many vehicles continue to use the restricted section of the High Street as a 'rat run' often at considerable speed and this was leading to major safety concerns because no one seemed able to confirm whether pedestrians had right of way when walking in the restricted areas and/or what enforcement measures were actually being undertaken to make sure that whatever restrictions on vehicle access were being enforced.

Members were not in principle opposed to coming up with new plans for the High Street. However, it was felt very strongly that these should be formally proposed, discussed, and consulted upon with a detailed economic impact assessment undertaken.

The meeting decided that, as Chairman, I should write to yourself and the other decision-makers to put on record formally that the Chamber of Commerce is opposed to the current plans and the proposal that these should be made permanent in response to the decision from the December meeting. I have also been asked that the businesses of Witney as represented by the Chamber of Commerce should be allowed to lobby for a change to the plans with an immediate return to two-way traffic on the High Street whilst proper plans are developed which won't have the adverse impact that many of the businesses feel that the current arrangements are having on their level of trade.

Duncan did explain that, as far as he was concerned, a binding decision had been taken, but as some of those attending argued strongly, there are many decisions of Government at all levels which have been overturned after a period of review. It is certainly the view of the majority of Chamber of Commerce members that such a rethink would be appropriate at this stage.

Duncan further went on to explain that significant funds had been approved for the improvement of the immediate High Street environment and that input from the Chamber members would be welcome as to how the available finance could be spent to have the maximum positive impact. To this end, I have proposed that the majority of our next scheduled meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> July should be devoted to collating ideas which can then be put formally to the relevant authorities. However, it was again reiterated by members that this should not prevent us making the Chamber's objections to the current plans known.

I look forward to hearing back from you with your response, and hopefully finding a date when it might be possible for us to meet in person, potentially with other Chamber Members, in order that the strength of opinion on this matter can be clearly expressed. It is our hope that some alternative proposition can be agreed upon which does not damage a number of the Chamber of Commerce members' businesses in the way that they feel the current regulations are doing, and will continue to do, if no alternative less business-damaging approach can be found.

Yours sincerely

David Gambier  
Managing Director  
Great Experience Travel  
Chairman of the Witney Chamber of Commerce.

Cc: Cllr Andy Graham - WODC, Cllr Liz Duncan - WTC, Robert Courts - MP for Witney.