

TRAFFIC EXTRA

Q&A WITH CLLR SARAH GIBSON



*Cllr Sarah Gibson, Vice Chair,
Town Council Highways Committee and
Chair of the Community Area Transport
Group*

There's been a huge debate in town about the recent traffic measures. What do you have to say?

I am sorry that the one-way bridge system caused great frustration and difficulty. The town council pushed for the plan with the best intentions at a difficult time. The alternate one-way on the bridge was intended to allow social distancing in this particularly narrow, dangerous place in the town centre and although it did achieve that, the resultant traffic queue meant delays and pollution to an extent that outweighed the benefits. The plan was always to modify the scheme if problems arose, as has happened and I have continued to press Wiltshire Council for improvements such as getting the red barriers replaced with the slimline poles we'd originally asked for and pressed for all the monitoring equipment to be put in place.

Why make the bridge one-way at all?

The measures were allowed under a Government emergency traffic order to encourage councils to provide for social distancing in town centres. The narrow pavements of the town bridge were an obvious place where pedestrians were struggling to distance, often having to step into the road. And now the lights have been removed, although the traffic is flowing freely, pedestrians have lost out and are finding it difficult to cross the bridge safely. In widening pavements on Silver Street and Market Street and therefore creating an effective one-way system, the historic pinch points at either end of Market Street that slowed traffic in Bradford have gone. The alternate one-way on the bridge effectively replaced those pinch points and was intended to stop an increase in non-Bradford through traffic as well as provide wider pavements for pedestrians on the bridge. It is noticeable that the 9000 vehicles across the bridge with the lights in place has now risen to around 14000 a day.

Couldn't you foresee the chaos it would cause?

When the scheme was devised in April/May, traffic levels were much lower than normal. Unfortunately, delays due to changes in government funding and other work which closed Silver Street, meant implementation was at a time when traffic levels had risen. It was still important to try because the expectation was that non-Bradford through traffic would learn to use alternative routes, reducing unnecessary traffic in

our town. Such a change in traffic behaviour does not happen overnight, but the disruption was such that Wiltshire Council took the understandable decision to remove the lights after two weeks.

Why not make pedestrians walk via a one-way system?

This was considered when the scheme was designed but highways engineers advised in May that a pedestrian crossing was not possible between the rear of the Swan and the Co-op, although now a 'courtesy crossing' has been installed. Without a crossing, a one-way pedestrian scheme would have forced people to cross at a dangerous place, which was why it was discounted. With the removal of the lights, one-way pedestrian use of the pavements is the option open to us, however Wiltshire Council's current 'courtesy crossing' is inadequate and we are pushing for a more robust crossing here. Other one-way options such as over McKeever Bridge or via the passage from the river to Church Street are more lengthy routes, as well as difficult for wheelchair users. It is not possible to oblige pedestrians to take alternative routes so, unless they are convenient, pedestrian one-way schemes may not have much impact.

Was it necessary to do anything at all?

Everyone should feel as safe as possible in our town centre if it is to thrive. This town suffered from a low footfall before the COVID crisis and this would only have been exacerbated if no action was taken. Low footfall is a daily issue

for small businesses in our town. While some people feel confident to move around town, others especially those with underlying conditions or vulnerable family members, and older people, may not. Scientific advice is to maintain at least a metre's distance, even outside. Councillors were asked by residents and local pedestrian safety groups to investigate a traffic scheme for social distancing. The design of the scheme was discussed with local resident campaign group, 'Streets Ahead'.

How much did it cost?

Final costs are not yet known, but the town council agreed to fund the scheme up to £30,000. This is to cover the costs of the implementation of the scheme, as well as the monitoring we specifically requested to provide useful data on pollution, traffic speed and volume. Design costs are covered by Wiltshire Council.

Wasn't it just an attempt to push through a one-way system for our roads?

The main purpose of the scheme was social distancing. However, we do see it as a useful opportunity to assess the impact of changes to traffic movements in the town. This is a temporary scheme, designed to last for 6-18 months and we will all need to reflect carefully on whether something similar is right for the future or not. As a temporary scheme, some improvements that seem obvious can't be done – controlled pedestrian crossings for example would need a separate traffic order to require permanent structures (Belisha beacons) and so can't be installed under the COVID temporary traffic order. Other traffic calming systems which would be used in any permanent scheme are also not in place at present, so this cannot be seen as a trial of a permanent system. A permanent scheme would need

to incorporate measures to reduce traffic flow if we are not to encourage additional non-Bradford, through-traffic.

Will one-way be right for the future?

First impressions are not always lasting. Traffic flow has improved, but we need to see whether this attracts more through traffic, with a rise in pollution. Already we have seen traffic levels increase from 9000/day when the lights were on the bridge to 14000/day over the bridge after they were removed. Through traffic quickly identifies the fastest route and with a one-way system, a journey through Bradford on Avon may be preferable to drivers than going via Staverton or the A36. If we return to a point when everyone is back in the workplace, traffic levels may increase further. There are already concerns about speed levels and traffic volume on New Road and Springfield and the impact on the residents there. We have seen a huge increase in south bound traffic on New Road and Springfield which has led to an increase in traffic noise and it is making it difficult for residents to cross safely.

Over one third of people in the Lib Dem residents survey said pedestrian safety improvements would encourage them to use our town centre more. A one-way system may well help pedestrian safety, but not if it means more cars travelling at greater speed around our town.

Can't you just add some traffic calming in?

Very important, but not that easy! Buses need to get through our town centre and so narrowing the carriage-way further is not possible – and again, as this is a temporary measure the sophisticated traffic calming measures required cannot be introduced as they require permanent infrastructure. If we are to opt for a one-way system in the long-term we will need measures that reduce speeds, reduce volume by increasing the time it takes to cross the town, and provide safe crossings

What about delivery lorries – doesn't one-way create an issue for them?

The number of areas of delivery drop offs have been increased in the town centre under this system, as wider pavements allow for incorporating loading bays. The slightly increased distance for delivery is offset for drivers by not getting stuck at the old pinch points. The bus drivers have found the new system much easier to navigate, again as they no longer have on-coming traffic in the narrow areas.

And what about a by-pass?

A by-pass is out of the question at the moment due to the cost and impact on the countryside; by-passes come with development to pay for it. The quantity of new housing that would be needed, upwards of 4000, would result in such an increase in local traffic that we would need another by-pass to save us from the first one.

How about a toll payable by all through-traffic that doesn't originate in the town or stop to use our businesses?

This is the system introduced in Bath under their Clean Air Zone, which charges polluting vehicles and in the long term could be considered for Bradford.

Anything else you'd like to say?

Finally, I'd like to add that I really value the views and opinions people are offering on this subject. Over the last couple of months I have received numerous letters, emails, phone calls and comments in the street from people who feel passionately on the subject with a wide range of different, often conflicting, views. We can never achieve the perfect outcome for everyone but as councillors we try to work towards a balanced outcome that respects everybody's views.

For more details of the decision-making process that led to the scheme, see the town council website bradfordonavontowncouncil.gov.uk/covid19-social-distancing-traffic-scheme-information/