

Rejuvenating Shropshire's Market Towns-Transport

Many town councils are thinking about how they can attract people back into town centres once the current 'lockdown' is eased.

There is a temptation to simply call for free parking to be extended throughout the year. This is understandable given that the car is important to many people, but there's no firm evidence to suggest that it will work as a solo initiative (1).

Most importantly, we need to learn from the lessons from the pandemic and focus on the welfare of our residents and look more closely at how they have changed their transport habits in the past 4 months.

Widen the Scope

Rather than just focusing on the car (the ultimate back to normal approach) we are asking town councils in association with Shropshire Council to look to a more integrated approach to bringing back people into the market towns, a way which takes into account people not wanting to drive so much, a way which enhances the very thing they are travelling to town for, as local customers are critical for many small town shops (2) Perhaps the vision should include greater emphasis on the following:

Encourage people back onto local buses

The Government has backed buses during the Covid Crisis; this needs to be continued(3).The bus companies are doing exceptionally well with their enhanced cleaning routines and distancing approaches, BUT it is time for town councils to lobby Shropshire Council to support measures that will change attitudes and encourage passengers on board.

For example, Shropshire Council could fund free travel for the rest of the year for under 21 year olds and students, possibly paid for by parking fees. It could also fund family tickets so that mum or dad and the children can ride together for the price of an adult ticket. It must hold current prices on supported services. Every town council could pledge to ensure that all buses are reinstated, supported by issuing press releases welcoming residents and visitors to town by bus.

Praise walking and cycling

Given the current measure of social distancing and drastic reduction of buses in market towns, there has been an increase in people walking for health. This habit is firmly recommended by the medical world and can be nurtured by encouraging residents to continue to walk to town rather than bring in their car (4). For example, key walking routes can be promoted on digital portals and in some cases, paper leaflets may well be better. This brings an improvement in air quality, less noise and congestion in the very centres of our community where people want to stay awhile.

Tourists from further afield

All Shropshire towns benefit from tourists and many attract most visitors from near urban areas because market towns are different: local food and products, history and ambience,(5).

Craven Arms, Church Stretton, Gobowen for Oswestry, Ludlow, Shifnal, Wem and Whitchurch as well as Shrewsbury benefit considerably from being on the national rail network and towns might like to mount a local or collective campaign to encourage visitors from further afield to their town by train-the numbers of visitors by train in Shropshire is unknown; we consider it to be understated alongside inter urban bus routes. It is, however, a market which needs to be cultivated so as to reduce car use for longer trips. In due course, the coach market can be rebuilt and this is also important for supporting independent shops and hospitality outlets.

Bus Users Shropshire recognises that things will be different in the future. Buses need to be re-established as a core element of our towns, but in partnership with other sustainable travel options.

Simply calling for one-off measures may or may well not work; we need a wider vision. It is certainly not in line with the Government's policy on Climate Change which demands continued action right now.

Thus, there's a need for a more comprehensive approach that takes into account the health and welfare of residents in tandem with economic stimulation. The two go together. If we do not act in an integrated manner which respects health, climate change and economic development, there'll be more shocks to our way of life than we currently imagine.

References

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