

REPORT TO EVENTS AND TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT REPORT



Report Reference E-20-09
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 Agenda Item 7
 Prepared by Town Centre and Marketing Officer

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report outlines a recovery plan for Knutsford Town Centre in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its aim is to:

- Review the impact of the pandemic on the town centre businesses
- Review the crisis and pre-recovery measures already undertaken
- Briefly outline the impact of the pandemic on local charities (The Welcome, Hope Central)
- Outline measures that support local businesses and encourage people back into the town centre safely.

The report recognises there are factors beyond the town council’s control not least being change in public health guideline rules, movement to a high tier with the rest of Cheshire East and the re-introduction of a regional or national lockdowns. It also recognises that as a town council there are limitations of what measures we can introduce ourselves due to powers being held by Cheshire East Borough Council.

The plan uses the Institute of Place Management’s four stage recovery framework for guidance (see figure one). The outcomes of the resident and business focus groups can be found in Appendix One and Two.

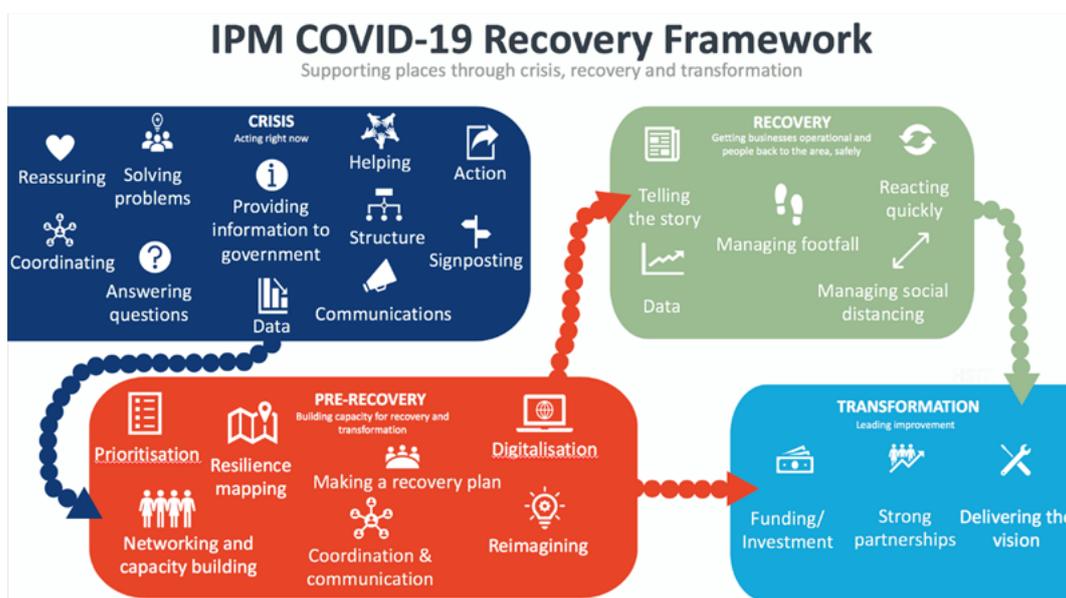


Figure One: IPM COVID-19 Recovery Framework. Source: <https://www.placemanagement.org/covid-19/>

2.0 THE KNUTSFORD CRISIS RESPONSE

Knutsford's response to the covid-19 crisis and first lockdown can be summarised as below:

- Establishment of the We Are Knutsford group and its volunteer and delivery network
- We are Knutsford flyer, banner, and posters in the town centre
- Knutsford Virtual High Street Facebook group
- KnutsfordHighStreet.com established to promote local businesses
- Essential trader set up at the Market Hall and delivery network
- Behind the door features for businesses to communicate to their customers – written or zoom interviews with the Town Centre and Marketing Officer. These were streamed live on Facebook.
- Increased social media across all platforms
- Regular video updates from the Town Mayor
- Increased newsletters and communication with the town centre businesses especially, in reference to advice regarding grant support and furlough scheme
- Zoom meeting with businesses and Esther McVey MP

As the first lockdown was eased, Knutsford moved to a pre-recovery/recovery phase. The Knutsford response was:

- Poster campaign to welcome and reassure residents town was safe to return to
- Advice to businesses regarding PPE and how to adhere to government guidelines
- Welcome back posters promoting the shops and town centre
- Communication via social media and local press to residents
- Social distancing signposts and posters (provided by CEC)
- Barriers in Princess and King Street to aid social distancing
- Welcome back video with Knutsford Town Mayor
- Covid safe 'trails' such as Monster Hero Safari and Knutsford Market Hall's Wimbledon promotion to encourage footfall

In the autumn/winter (pre and post lockdown 2) the town's response was:

- Launch of market hall loyalty scheme
- Totally Locally Fiverfest
- Week-long Pumpkin Path
- Christmas Cracker Trail
- Launch of the Knutsford Voucher
- Small development of Knutsford High Street.com to e-commerce site
- Christmas Videos featuring the Town Mayor and local businesses
- Town Mayor 'shopping' day Knutsford Guardian feature
- Zoom interview Mayor and 'Father Christmas'
- Business Focus Group

This was alongside usual marketing initiatives and events such as the Christmas Markets, free parking Saturdays and Christmas Window competition

3.0 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON KNUTSFORD - INDIVIDUALS

The pandemic and associated economic impact has naturally impacted residents in Knutsford. To provide some indication of this, information was sought from the community organisations providing response services during the pandemic.

Since its establishment We are Knutsford has taken 1,182 calls and made 1,000 food/medical deliveries. The group awarded £3,700 of Knutsford Vouchers to assessed/verified families to help them with Christmas shopping; 79 families applied for support through this scheme.

The Welcome has supplied 2,562 food parcels since January 2020 and provided over 4,000 hot lunches since April 2020, by comparison the average in 2019 was 4 hot lunches per week.

Through Knutsford2You 261 subsidised food box orders have been delivered.

In addition, Hope Central has delivered 1,200 food parcels reaching nearly 600 people (including all family members) Referrals/introductions/repeat requests to the service peaked at 54 in one week and currently average 30 per week.

A new scheme, Wrap Up Knutsford, was set up in October and to date has given out 150 children's coats to families in need and a further 46 to adults/older teens.

4.0 IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON KNUTSFORD – TOWN CENTRE

4.1 VACANCY RATES

The Town Centre vacancy rate is currently 7.69%, included in this are five units which are currently under offer.

Laura Ashley and Carphone Warehouse have both closed since the first lockdown. Jaeger is in administration although trading at present. Caffe Nero (proposed new business in the former RBS) has just approved a CVA, is on the verge of insolvency and has appointed KPMG to discuss 'their options'.

Many of these closures may have happened anyway as the high street as we know it is changing nationally. The vacancy rate is historically high for Knutsford; it is noted, however, that it is not high compared to other towns in Cheshire East or national vacancy rates.

Although it has been difficult obtaining feedback from individual shops, some smaller shops and hospitality venues that have no outdoor seating areas are suffering from low footfall and it is expected some will close in 2021.

The Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) had originally predicted that the high street would change radically over the next five years and has now stated COVID-19 has caused this to be condensed into five months. Many of the changes to consumer behaviour and business practices may not revert to pre-COVID.

4.2 FOOTFALL

Knutsford lacks year on year footfall figures. The figures from the Springboard report given to CEC show:

- September footfall was down by 18% compared to September 2019 (national trend is -35%)
- October footfall was up by 1% compared to October 2019 (national trend is -39.8%)
- November footfall was down 15% (national trend is -31%)

Although December has been busy for many shops it is expected the lack of Christmas events plus the move from tier 2 to 4 will mean a substantial reduction in footfall.

4.3 RETAILER/BUSINESS CONFIDENCE

Lockdown has been particularly difficult for the Health/Beauty and Hospitality (especially wet-led businesses) sectors.

Again, it has been difficult to obtain figures from the town centre businesses but the following has been reported:

- During the period June-August 2020 one restaurant saw a £500,000 reduction in turnover when compared to the same period in 2019.
- Hospitality venues which do not have outside spaces have been particularly hit by the ban on different households mixing inside, e.g. Project 53 has remained closed since the November lockdown.
- In the second week of December one established clothing retailer recorded their first ever zero sale day.
- Many offices are still¹ not fully occupied with many major businesses (such as TT games) still working from home. This has a direct impact on the town centre footfall, especially at lunch time and after work restaurant trade.
- 9 businesses have opened either just before or since the March Lockdown
- 6 businesses have improved or moved to larger premises
- There were record Christmas orders for one supermarket and one butcher

Nationally smaller towns are recovering better than larger cities due to experiencing fewer chain store closures, having less reliance on office workers and an increase in local shopping behaviour. The latter can be attributed to an increase in 'love for local' and a safety concern to stay local and not travel outside of the area. Barclaycard have reported a 28.6% increase in spending in independent food and drink shops (off licenses, butchers, and bakeries) in 2020 compared to 2019.

Knutsford has reflected national trends with some home/interior shops, confectionary shops ('little treats') reporting record sales with clothing struggling. Essential traders such fresh produce, small pharmacies and supermarkets have recorded record sales.

There remains a significant gap between how consumers used to feel about engaging with key sectors – and how comfortable they feel right now. One thing that changed much in recent periods is the so-called comfort gap. While 'good news' in the form of lower infection rates and progress in vaccination roll-out are likely to be the key enablers here, government, industry associations and marketing teams, all have a crucial role to play as the economy re-opens (*source BVA BDRC Clear Sight Recovery & Covid-19 December 2020*)

¹ Originally written December 2020.

5.0 RECOVERY MEASURES

The measures below are in addition to any events or other marketing initiatives already in the 2020-21 calendar, for example the Knutsfordian Exhibition, Bunny Hop, a restaurant week, potential 'Cuckoo in the Nest', Fiverfest and actions arising from the business and resident's focus groups and will be developed over time as further ideas / initiatives are generated.

Many measures will principally only require time / standard office resource but the committee has a budget in the 2021/22 financial year to cover costs involved in these initiatives.

It is noted that after two lockdowns (and now in the start of a third) Knutsford has the mechanisms to react quickly to further lockdowns. For example, Knutsford Virtual High Street, Knutsford High Street.com and We Are Knutsford are in place and able to react quickly.

The measures are focused on short term recovery; alongside this work is ongoing to deliver the *From Top to Bottom Street* proposals via Cheshire East Council and work is to continue on developing an overarching masterplan for the development of the Town Centre.

5.1 BUSINESS RECOVERY MEASURES

It is recommended that efforts focus on the following measures:

- 1) Issue a Business Confidence Survey in January including a request for turnover Sept-December figures
- 2) Continue with regular e-newsletters
- 3) Hold a landlord's forum early in the new year to focus on:
 - a. shorter leases
 - b. quicker re-purposing of empty buildings
 - c. general views on Knutsford's commercial property market
 - d. discussion regarding potential tenants
 - e. producing a Landlord's promotional pack for prospective new businesses
- 4) Videos showcasing safe service across each retail sector
- 5) Discussion with retailers, incentives to reward local online sales with in-shop discounts to encourage footfall
- 6) Continue with behind the door feature (video or written)
- 7) Continue to offer guidance and support regarding available grants and training resources

5.2 RESIDENT / SHOPPER MEASURES

It is suggested that the council undertakes a short survey to establish how consumers currently feel regarding visiting and shopping in Knutsford. The survey would be online (promoted via social media, email and local media) with paper copies available at retirement homes or to collect. The results of this will be used to loosely place respondents in the following categories (as used by consumer insight consultancy BVA BDRC) to profile responses:

Profile	Description
Cautious but content	concerned about Covid-19 but generally settled and content with a restrained lifestyle
Currently Constrained	worry that Covid-19 has brought a temporary halt to globetrotting for these financially confident and early adopters

Struggling	hit hard by Covid-19 – struggling financially
Protective but Pragmatic	everything in Moderation across spending, finances, and leisure time – a balance between health the nation and health of the economy
Less to Lose	spontaneous and optimistic for the future. Learn to live with Covid-19 and foreign travel will be back on the cards once restrictions are eased or budgets allow.
Life Goes On	protecting the economy should now be the focus and the risks of Covid-19 have been overestimated.

The following initiatives are also suggested:

Safe Shopping Mornings

Work with local shops, supermarkets and local volunteer groups and introduce a ‘safe shopping morning’. Match volunteers with those who may need assistance and support to return to the town centre. This is not necessarily physical assistance but emotional and mental support / reassurance.

Go Local for Lent

Encourage people not to give up something for lent but take up shopping local. Promote a series of local challenges that people can choose from (all or a few or one)

- Find out what can be bought locally – review your shopping habits
- Find out what can be bought, collected, or delivered locally. Commit to one order during this time
- Don’t buy from Amazon throughout Lent buy locally
- Eat out locally
- Get talking and share your discoveries (on social media via our potential monthly newsletter)
- Source one staple diet item that can be produced locally

If a national lockdown is in force during this time, scheme could be adjusted to Go Local after Lockdown.

Loyalty card

Digital town wide loyalty cards are extremely expensive to implement. A simple scheme would be to produce a business card size loyalty card where shoppers collect 10 stamps from shops for purchases over £10 to be entered into a quarterly prize draw to win £50 of Knutsford vouchers.

Adopt a shop

A simple but effective marketing scheme that originated in Dublin. A resident adopts (supports) three local businesses and makes a conscious effort to support them by buying something from them every week or two and then telling people. Adopters tell people via social media, videos and the newsletter why they chose them and what they purchased. Primarily aimed at consumers, but other shops can adopt non-competing shops.

Monthly Newsletter

Trial a monthly newsletter distributed via email and available in central locations such as the Library, Curzon, and Knutsford Market Hall. This will help reach those who are not on social media. Focus on:

- Safe shopping measures
- Local shopping champion/Adopt a Shop
- Spotlight on certain sectors (hospitality, homeware)
- Knutsford's online and click & collect options (as opposed to resorting to Amazon or other large chains)
- Where support can be found for those self-isolating
- Shop of the month
- Offer of the month
- Knutsford Voucher

Home workers

Target home workers & incentivise them to come into Knutsford for exercise or lunch during their break. This would include contacting local business-to-business companies, using social media to target residents who normally work outside of Knutsford but are currently home-based, promoting hospitality venues who offer hubs to home workers and working with different hospitality venues to offer 'bi-weekly home worker lunch hubs' (adhering to the in force COVID guidelines)

Other initiatives

Other initiatives that will be considered would include:

- Local shopping champion video interviews in addition to the written newsletter feature
- Continue to promote the Knutsford Voucher
- Ask the supermarkets if they will promote non-competing independents via social media and in store posters even pop-ups

5.3 TOWN CENTRE / PHYSICAL MEASURES

It is uncertain how long social distancing measures will remain in place and Cheshire East Council has stated barriers will remain in the town centre until social distancing measures cease. Social distancing is second nature to many but not all and residents' views remain polarised with regards to the social distancing measures in place.

It is suggested the council commission a poster campaign imploring people to be kind and show empathy to others. Possible strapline 'Be Kind for Knutsford'. This could be produced via a schools' competition and would include S H O P as a strapline:

S	Stay safe
H	Hands Face Space
O	Only stay as long as you need
P	Protect yourself and others by keeping your distance

6.0 DECISIONS REQUIRED

The committee should consider the current outlined recovery plan and authorise the Town Centre and Marketing Officer to facilitate its implementation over 2021.

APPENDIX A – RESIDENT FOCUS GROUP OUTPUT

A small resident focus group took place on Monday 24th August. 8 residents took part as follows:

Age	Background
41	Single, HR Manager
25	Single, Account Manager
60	Retired Special Needs Teacher, Married
52	Part time non-executive co director, 3 grown up children, partner
49	Married, 2 grown up children, company director
81	Retired, no children lives with partner
33	Actuary, married one child, mobility impaired
51	Married, 2 teenagers, runs a business

The aim of the focus group was to gauge residents' current attitude towards shopping in the town centre and ideas and thoughts about encouraging more people into Knutsford.

A brief overview is below –

Town immediate post Lockdown

- All disliked the barriers would prefer them to be replaced with planters not removed
- None were 'scared' of going shopping into town and thought the shops had done brilliantly in making them feel safe
- Too many things have happened at once for the barriers to be the sole reason footfall is low although they will not have helped
- Mobility impaired respondent barriers reduced parking slots for her as traffic wardens were not always around giving tickets to the '4x4 parking in the disabled bays'
- They recognised they were not perhaps representative of all Knutsford as they never park on the road always in car parks and do not think Booths is far too walk from
- Masks can have a negative effect on footfall – one no longer does leisure shopping as she hates wearing them (although she does) so now only does essential shopping
- Knutsford possibly stronger than other towns as less reliant on chain shops
- Retail was struggling already – Covid has just ripped the band aid off
- A worry that Knutsford will have to become an Altrincham before landlords bring the rent down (£175, 000 for Brassiere Blanc). Landlords are not 'living in the real world'
- Want to give back to those shops who helped them during Lockdown
- Local shops are dearer than on-line (they think)
- Extend the Eat Out to Help Scheme
- More positive stories in print and on social media needed.
- Promote other shops that are near essential – picking up a prescription, why not visit the stationery shop
- Some shops should go back to being housing
- Agreed a gift voucher will help keep spend in Knutsford
- Would like a loyalty scheme
- Pop-ups in empty shops

General Observations

- Tatton end of King Street cars go too fast
- Rarely venture past The Botanist/Stephen Edwards Electrical although Neki Café has helped a couple visit that end
- Nothing in Knutsford for the young shopper/teenager
- No basic shops for school shoes/sportswear etc
- Lack of public transport a major issue
- Canute Place is an eyesore
- Would like an outdoor gym
- Door agility/training area
- Space to sit down – a square

Actions for TCMO

- Approach Knutsford Guardian re 'shop local' stories
- Continue to promote Knutsford as a shopping/tourist destination via social media posts, videos etc
- Add 'safe shopping' element to social media posts (include shoppers)
- Continue to research loyalty schemes
- Introduce a gift voucher scheme (report submitted)
- Signage to encourage footfall to lower end of King Street
- Hold another landlord's forum and invite two members of the public
- Social media campaign to promote everyday items you can get in Knutsford (misconception it is always the dearer option)
- Re-start behind the door videos/stories of shops
- Develop shopping experiences idea – fashion and 'home' potentially for autumn 2021 with a Walking Art Trail in conjunction with Events Officer for 2021
- Explore more digital events
- Explore idea of a monthly 'shop local champion' – video and reward
- Arrange a retailer focus group
- Ecommerce website

APPENDIX B – BUSINESS FOCUS GROUP OUTPUT

A small business focus group took place on November 25th. The following businesses took part with additional written feedback from three other businesses

Please note the response from retailers and businesses to join this group was disappointing.

- Knutsford Admin
- NatWest Bank
- Biora Group
- The Courthouse Cheshire

Written only

- Mr Simms
- Cheshire Quality
- British Red Cross Shop

The focus group discussed “Trading in Knutsford before and after lockdown”

How do you feel Knutsford compares to other towns?

- Knutsford felt safe to return too – safer than some other towns although not all had ventured to other town as much
- Overall, the barriers are ugly and hated by all. All felt businesses would have paid for and nurtured their own planters and why can't this still happen? Handling of this by Cheshire East was completely wrong.
- Cheshire East control on social distancing was 'shocking'. Town Councillors should have pushed for more 'control'
- Strong support and communication from the Town Council, one described it as 'amazing'. Some knew of other town where retailers had little or no support and no guidance on grant applications
- One opened just before lockdown and felt was really welcomed into the town centre. Used Lockdown to develop the online side of the business
- Trading was slow after the first Lockdown but started to pick up. Week before the second lockdown was extremely good
- All felt supported by their fellow business owners

What do your customers say about shopping in Knutsford?

- All said customers felt safe in their shops as they had worked hard to implement safe Covid environment for shopping. Most customers were patient and understanding
- Queuing for one was a major problem especially on the narrow pavement as it has got darker. One strongly hopes for a reduction in the speed limit to 20 mph
- Most customers did not like the barriers put in place although some admitted it made their customers feel safer.
- Customers less scared after the second lockdown

- A growth in 'shopping local' – giving back to those shops to supported the community during lockdown.
- Christmas lights have been really welcomed this year. They needed the boost
- Business to Business participants felt working from home could become the norm. May only use the office for meetings. Still felt Knutsford was a 'destination' for clients but no need for staff to come in every day

What could Knutsford do better?

- Town was as safe as any town when it re-opened
- Felt safer than other larger towns
- All agreed public transport in Knutsford is appalling and it is a town geared for drivers only. They all felt this is wrong and made Knutsford seem 'out of touch' and 'out of date' with regards to environmental issues.
- Lack of public transport meant it was difficult to recruit and/or retain staff. One cited this reason (along with ease of working from home) as reason why company was closing their Knutsford office. They can rent a meeting room by the hour – why rent an office that is no longer needed.
- One felt the 'community spark' had left Knutsford and it wasn't the town they used to know
- All were strongly supported a reduction in the speed limit for the town centre. One felt it was especially important when people were queuing
- A Knutsford sign is needed on M56
- Slow cars exiting from Minshull Street to King Street (or ban)
- Landlords need to reduce rent and length of tenancy. They need to be more flexible
- Buildings need to be more eco-friendly. Be more quirky, – one cited a building in Manchester that had bee hives, roof gardens etc
- Introduce eco-friendly town wide deliveries – e-cargo bikes with Knutsford branding
- Increase town wide social media, especially videos
- Introduce a tourism strategy for the town. Knutsford is a mini York or Chester and we should capitalise on that

How do your staff feel about working in the town centre now?

- Due to adherence to social distancing guidelines all said their staff felt safe
- Some felt uncomfortable leaving their premises in the evening (especially at the weekends) due to groups walking around not adhering to social distancing.