

Ongar

Regeneration Study and Proposals

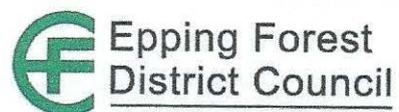
“The most successful high streets and town centres will need to change to reflect the communities they serve by transforming themselves into community hubs, playing to their strengths of offering human interaction and a unique sense of place and community”

HM Government response to an enquiry into High Streets and Town Centres in 2030 (presented to Parliament in 2019)



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Foreword

Epping Forest District Council are reviewing a number of their town centres with the objective of regenerating them and making them a better and more attractive place to live, work, visit and play. There have been numerous projects over the years to generally improve the amenities, however the UK as a whole is now in the midst of a new era which will undoubtedly change high streets up and down the country. Covid 19 has unexpectedly changed the way we live and also as a result, our relationship with our local high street and/or town centre. More people are now shopping locally and more people are working from home, which in turn is encouraging them to use their local amenities on a more regular basis. The Grimsey Review advises that high streets need to be re-invented as unique community hubs, designed around health, education, culture, housing, leisure and arts and crafts, along with retail shops. If towns can get it right, consumers should emerge from the pandemic with a stronger sense of community and a desire to support their local town centre. Strong high streets can build communities, keep crime at bay and foster civic pride and togetherness.

A YouGov poll revealed that only 9% of Britons want life to return to “normal” after the coronavirus outbreak is over. The positive from the above is that this is a great time to engage with our local communities and reinvent our town centres while the focus is on them and before things automatically revert to the “old” normal.

The Grimsey Review goes on to advise that for town centres and high streets to thrive and rediscover their community purpose we need to see:

Localism - A massive shift in power to local communities and a renewed focus on localism. Local people must be empowered to redesign their own high streets and have a say on the businesses, services and amenities that occupy it.

Leadership - Local leaders should be valued and recognised. Candidates for leadership roles should be selected for having a broad range of dynamic and collaborative skills in order to get the best out of communities. Local leaders who embrace change and are brave enough to imagine a new world have a better chance of succeeding.

Fewer cars, more green spaces - fewer streets and a huge expansion of green space, parks and town squares. Our towns must no longer be designed around the car as people learn to appreciate the benefit of open spaces.

Other important takeaways from the Grimsey Review that should be considered is the fact that there is a growing view among young adults that businesses need to be accountable to more than their bottom line and for the wellbeing of people and communities. It goes on to confirm that 72% of millennials (aged 24 to 38) would rather spend their money on an experience or an event than buying things and that this is reflected in the shift towards leisure, arts, culture and dining on the high streets. Deloitte’s 2019 Millennial Survey showed that millennials will patronise and support companies that align with their values and make a positive impact on society. Generation Z’s (aged 5 to 23) are also socially focussed with their opinions on companies formed by their ethics, practices and social impact.

The Grimsey Review confirms that town and high street plans should put sustainability and the environment at the heart of everything; should base their development on quality of life and experiences and not blind mass consumerism; should recognise and reward great local leadership; and allow local communities to develop their places to compete for people to live, work, visit and play.

Introduction

Chipping Ongar is a market town within Epping Forest district of Essex. It has a population of circa 6,600 people and an average house price of circa £555,000 (source: Zoopla). A considerable amount of residential development has taken place in Ongar in recent times and there is considerable development still to be completed. Ongar lies on its own almost equidistance from Harlow, Brentwood and Epping. In addition to the community in the Ongar area, Ongar also serves as a local centre for the extended population of the villages and hamlets in the surrounding area - for those not wishing to travel the distance or requiring the wider range of shops and services of the larger adjoining towns.

There is very little business and/or industry in and around Ongar and it could be suggested that the majority of employment within the town is around the minimum wage level. The majority of the working population of Ongar commutes outside of Ongar in a number of different directions including Brentwood, Harlow and Epping and also further afield to Chelmsford and London. With transport links being limited and no train services the majority of travel and commutes are carried out by car.

Overall, Ongar is a lovely town comprising a beautiful high street lined with attractive listed buildings. It has a historic church and what remains of a Motte and Bailey castle dating back to 11th/12th century. In nearby Greensted lies what is believed to be the oldest wooden church in the world dating back to the 6th century and the area is surrounded by the rolling Essex countryside.

Having said that the town appears to have been overlooked and has fallen slightly into decline as a result. A number of the buildings require some love and attention and the High Street and town centre have a number of maintenance issues which need addressing. The High Street is fairly spread out and has a current retail vacancy rate of circa 14% - fractionally above the national average. There are a good range of shops, however it is not felt that these are meeting the needs of a growing local community and that as a result people are tending to shop at the larger adjoining towns. In addition, the town centre does little to make itself appealing to or provide for the large number of visitors which come to Ongar each year.

Ongar is a great little town with lots of potential to re-establish itself and flourish. Action needs to be taken though to maintain the towns historic roots whilst at the same time keeping it relevant for the 21st century and the needs and requirements of its growing community. Ongar already has a fantastic community spirit, a wide range of clubs and associations and a growing community who would love to make use of the wide range of amenities, shops, services and attractions that Ongar could provide. The Town and District Council, together with numerous local people and businesses who have a genuine interest, energy and enthusiasm towards the town could make Chipping Ongar a place in which you're proud to be a part of, keen to visit and pleased to be seen in.

1. Quick Wins

There are a number of matters which could be addressed quickly and cheaply and could make considerable improvements to the town centre:

- *To sweep/clean High Street on an ongoing basis and ensure that litter bins are emptied and litter is cleared from the street/pavement.*
- *Arrange for the regular clearance of all accumulated rubbish around the recycling bins in Budworth Hall car park and also other parts of the town centre.*
- *Arrange for the cleaning/redecoration/repair of all street furniture – lamp posts, bollards, railings, planters, litter bins, benches etc.*
- *Replace broken/previously removed bollards*
- *Replace/re-lay broken and uneven paving*
- *Town centre parking should be changed to first hour free. I note that for Covid 19 the parking has been reduced to 20p for the first 2.5 hours – which is fine if you've got 20p, however if you use pay by phone, normal charges apply.*
- *Tidy green spaces and planters and weed kill high street as necessary*
- *Arrange for regular parking enforcement to combat overstays, double parking, parking on the pavement*

2. Town Management

2.1 Town Centre Leadership

Town centre regeneration is about localism and local leadership and the way to make this work is to provide local leadership with its finger on the pulse and with a connection to the local community. Therefore and accepting that this project is being driven by Epping Forest District Council, it is suggested that buy in, action and leadership should be provided by Ongar Town Council, with the support of a Town(s) Centre Manager appointed by the District Council.

All Town Councillors are local and as a result should be able to bring the local community and businesses together and develop a strong visionary plan to reinforce the distinctive heritage of the town, assist in making the town centre a real community hub and make Ongar a far more attractive town for locals and visitors alike. The role of an independent Town Centre Manager will be critical to provide professional expertise and an unbiased view on what is needed locally.

Recommendations:

- 1) Engage with Ongar Town Council (OTC)***
- 2) Obtain OTC commitment to the scheme and to providing leadership and support***
- 3) Work with OTC to establish and action a realistic plan***

2.2 Town(s) Centre Manager

It is suggested that the Council commits to the appointment of a Town Centre Manager initially on a two-year fixed term basis. The manager would act as a single point of contact to receive ideas, thoughts and views from local stakeholders and as such, would be known and trusted by businesses, retailers and residents alike. They would work with the Town Council to ensure that standards are adhered to and that the town is as vibrant and attractive to local people and visitors as possible. A review of the post would be undertaken after 12 months to assess progress against the Town Centre action plan and the success of interventions and extended if necessary.

NB. As a part of their regeneration, Stockton-on-Tees council has pulled together a multi-disciplinary team of market management, street licensing, civil enforcement and business support to manage their town centre. Stockton is a much larger town than Ongar, however the principles of hands on organisation and management are much the same.

Recommendations:

- 4) Write Job profile and agree responsibilities for Town Centre Manager post***
- 5) Post to be part of EFDC Economic team within Strategic Planning Directorate***
- 6) Town Team establishment to be priority***

2.3 Establishment of a Town Team

To achieve the required changes, considerable two-way dialogue needs to be sought from the towns' residents and businesses. Buy-in from the community is important to ensure that there is a need or requirement for any proposed changes and that as a result these are carried out with the support of the town. Ongar already has a Town Forum and it is thought that this could be used as a catalyst for pulling together a formal Town Team.

It is important that the Town Team is made up of a cross section of the community including residents, businesses and retailers. A fair representation of age, sex and race should be included and input should be encouraged from organisations such as educational establishments, religious groups, social groups (e.g. Scouts etc) together with members of the town council and tourism & visitor groups.

The library could be used to establish a Community Hub base and a place where public opinions could be shared and discussed and a centre of community well-being for the town.

Recommendations:

- 7) Decide with OTC the make up of a Town Team and what it will be called.***
- 8) If utilising current Town Forum, engage with and obtain commitment and support from Chairman and Town Forum as a whole.***
- 9) Arrange initial meeting to establish parameters and put in place plan for town team development and action.***

2.4 Attracting New Businesses and Brands

In conjunction with the Town Team, work could be done to identify key brands, businesses and/or other organisations to attract to the town and then steps taken to secure them.

Recommendations:

- 10) Put in place programme to encourage new businesses.***
- 11) Target prospective businesses.***
- 12) Communicate requirements to commercial agents.***

3. Town Offer

3.1 Town layout

My view is that to keep the town centre viable and increase footfall it is important that in addition to retail and a range of food & beverage outlets, the town centre also houses a number of other services. This would include a market, doctors surgeries, dentists, healthcare outlets, solicitors, accountants, other essential services required by the community and also a Community Hub base. Also perhaps, another supermarket. It is important however that these are situated actually in the town centre, to encourage more movement and footfall. The Post Office is now becoming more important in town centres, particularly as the banks are withdrawing. They provide the obvious postal facilities, but also banking options and a range of other services. It appears that Ongar has a part time Post Office which may or may not be open, resulting in people going elsewhere. Efforts should be made with the Ongar PO provider to extend their services and make them more reliable.

A number of parties have suggested the removal of the (free) parking on the High Street in the centre of the retail section and that this be replaced with an increased size pedestrian/pavement area for use by the town and its retailers to give the town more of a Mediterranean feel and encourage outside eating, drinking, trading and socialising. My view at the current time is that this would decrease the footfall in the town centre further and discourage trade from the town. Having said this, if the town is regenerated and provides an attractive retail offer to both locals and visitors alike then this may be a consideration for the future, but the town will need to reinvent itself as more of a destination.

The addition of the medical centre in Shelley and also the rumour of the possibility of a Tesco supermarket at the Shelley end of town does not and will not assist the footfall in the town centre. People using these facilities will not need to visit the centre of the town or avail themselves of the facilities available. Careful consideration should be given to the addition of these types of initiatives and wherever possible use of the town centre should be encouraged and supported.

3.2 Retail

The retail offer in Chipping Ongar is spread across approximately half a mile of the southern part of the High Street. The majority of the shops are situated in the middle of this stretch around the site of Ongar Castle with a lesser number towards the northern and southern ends.

There is a good range of shops offering a fairly wide selection of goods, services and facilities. The High Street has a circa 14% vacancy rate, which is slightly higher than the current national average, with a number of the units having been vacant for some time.

Comments received in connection with the retail offer include:

- Town requires an increased range of shops with more boutiques, antiques, curiosity/gift shops
- Sainsbury's is inadequate for the size of the town
- The Post Office is unreliable – people would rather travel to the sub post office in High Ongar rather than use the Post Office in Londis in Ongar
- No Banks
- More cashpoints required
- We need brands like Costa, McDonalds etc
- The shops are quiet and need more footfall
- Some restaurants are too expensive – more mid-ranged required

Talking to a local estate agent, it would appear that retail units in Ongar turnover fairly quickly and also that a number of the units have been empty for some time. My view is that if the town centre can be made more attractive and draw in a wider section of the community, together with an increased tourist/visitor economy then the retail offer should automatically increase and diversify. I think that EFDC could also assist retailers by introducing them to a range of services to encourage them to diversify and perhaps consider the addition of online, web and social media to their business.

Although Chipping Ongar is fairly residential another varying element of high streets is the progression of the weekend and evening economies. We now live in a seven day a week world with extended working hours. Businesses need to adjust to the needs and requirements of their customers and this may now include opening longer/different hours, opening on Sundays etc. The town centre manager could discuss these matters with retailers and see if there is any scope for taking these considerations further with a view to increasing footfall and also, subsequently, trade.

Although it is hard to shape the type of tenants within the high street, perhaps through consultation and ongoing contact with the retailers, the existing businesses could be developed to offer innovative and distinctive food and also experiential and community-based services.

The good news is that at the current time people are tending to shop nearer to home and using their local town centres as opposed to going to the larger out of town shopping centres. Retailers should take advantage of this and go that extra mile to ensure a clean, safe and welcoming environment offering a comprehensive range of products and services. If customers can see the benefit of shopping local and enjoy it, they are less likely to change their habits when the pandemic is brought under control.

Recommendations:

- 13) Approach Ongar Post Office operator and discuss opening hours and availability. Consider taking up with the Post Office directly.**
- 14) Town Centre Manager to work with retailers to increase the attractiveness and draw of shops with a view to increasing the viability of the High Street.**
- 15) Ongar Town Council to ensure a clean, safe and welcoming environment**

3.3 Chipping Ongar Market

The Grimsey Review highlighted the importance of markets and their positive effect on residents. In a report by the Institute of Place Management (2015) it explained why markets are economically, socially and politically critical for town centres. The report also confirmed that markets can generate footfall increases of circa 25% and have been shown to increase retail sales with market visitors spending money in other shops. The report then goes on to explain that markets provide low barriers to entry and as result can encourage new businesses and nurture retail innovation.

Chipping Ongar is a market town which has had a market running in it since the 12th century. At the current time the market doesn't operate due mainly to a lack of interest from both stall holders and the public. Having said this the opportunity still exists for the market to be reinstated.

Market day in Chipping Ongar has historically been Wednesday with the market being held within the library car park. In a town with a relatively small population that predominantly commutes out of the town, I can understand why the market isn't perhaps as well attended as it may be. The other point that sticks in my mind is the fact that the Epping Ongar Railway (EOR) brought to the town circa 45,000 passengers in 2019 (pre-covid) and moving forward have plans to increase this number to in excess of 80,000 people. The trains carrying these visitors run predominantly at weekends and on bank holidays. Bearing the above in mind I question whether it would be sensible to move the market to the weekend, when the market could be enjoyed by both visitors and locals alike. Speciality markets such as farmers, French, antique etc could also be included and perhaps tied up with services provided by EOR.

A busy and successful market will add to the attraction of Ongar as a destination, whilst at the same time providing additional footfall for other town retailers, attractions, services and facilities.

Recommendations:

- 16) Ongar Town Council to review town market and make proposals for its development including consideration of changing the market day.**
- 17) Review market layout, pitches and parking arrangements for traders.**
- 18) Speak to Epping Ongar Railway and tie up market days with the heritage rail service**

19) Put in place a calendar of feature markets i.e. Farmers, antiques, French, Italian etc.

3.4 Tourism/Visitors

I feel that the tourist/visitor economy in Ongar is undervalued and as a result overlooked. The town should be a real tourist destination with its historic high street, churches and Motte & Bailey Castle, to name but a few, all settled in the stunning Essex countryside. The Epping Ongar Railway (EOR) brought approximately 45,000 visitors to Ongar in 2019 (pre Covid) and with expansion plans underway could see this increasing to upwards of 80,000 visitors per year (post Covid).

The interesting thing is that the EOR brings the majority of its visitors over the weekends and on bank holidays. On Sundays and Bank Holidays, the majority of Ongar is closed and the market which could provide a visitor interest, when it's running, is held on a Wednesday.

Further, the Motte and Bailey Castle which could provide a major visitor interest is overgrown and inaccessible and the Essex Way path leading up to Greenstead and St Andrews Church, thought to be the oldest wooden church in the world, is muddy and again fairly inaccessible, in anything other than the finest weather and/or for the able bodied wearing appropriate foot ware.

Visitors can add real value to a local economy. Robertson and Fennel (2007) demonstrated that of visitors secondary spending, 24% was spent on food and drink, 19% was spent on gifts and clothing and 11% was spent on souvenirs. In general terms if an attraction can provide a dwell time of up to 2 hours then this encourages spending on drinks and snacks. If this dwell time is extended to 4 hours plus, then this generates spending on a meal. There is undoubtedly the potential for visitors to spend 4 or more hours in Ongar but the shops need to be open and the attractions need to be accessible and provide real visitor interest. If this could also be combined with busy and well run market then I feel that the visitor economy could add greatly to the future success and buoyancy of Ongar High Street.

At the current time, visitors arriving at Ongar station have very little to entertain them. There is no signage from Ongar station to the town centre and if and when they arrive in the town centre there is currently little to keep them entertained.

My view is that Ongar Castle should be developed to make it accessible and much more of a tourist attraction and the town centre and its range of historic buildings developed to increase their attractiveness and encourage visitors to explore the town and in turn avail themselves to its shops and facilities. My thought is that EFDC should consult with Historic England and see if there are any grounds for the Motte and Bailey Castle and for Chipping Ongar as a whole to be restored and become a truly historic destination town.

With the general shift away from consumerism, more people working from home and the requirement for increased experiences, local tourism will become even more important. As a result, work should be done to develop close partnerships between the town centre and the tourism sector with a view to reducing the reliance on retail shops, whilst at the same time increasing the general footfall around the town.

Recommendations:

- 20) EFDC to consider the benefits of developing the tourist/visitor attractions in Ongar and if appropriate draw up plans to progress.**
- 21) EFDC to discuss renovation of Ongar's Motte & Bailey Castle and historic town with Historic England and if appropriate draw up plans to progress.**
- 22) Town Forum to liaise with the tourism team and pull together joint ventures and program of events.**

23) Town Forum to encourage support and participation from local retailers and businesses of any town events

3.5 Chipping Ongar Community Hub

The key to a community hub, much the same as in the “20-minute neighbourhood” is to have a full range of services and facilities within easy reach of each other. This comprises of homes, shops, businesses, green spaces, schools, medical centres, play areas etc together with function space within which community events can take place.

Ongar already has a great community spirit. It has its own town newspaper, The Ongar News which is extremely well supported, Ongar in Bloom is a voluntary group set up to improve the community with the planting, care and maintenance of planters around the town, and there are numerous groups and associations such as the Ongar Town Forum and the Ongar and District Community Association, dedicated to the development of Ongar. The Budworth Hall plays a key role within the town and facilitates the meetings of over 50 clubs and associations. In addition, the town has held May Fairs and Festival of Light celebrations which are all really well supported and attended. The establishment of a formal Community Hub would work to pull all these groups and services together, put on events and celebrations including all relevant parties (including the towns retailers and businesses) and be the catalyst to building strong and long-term community spirit, which in turn will make Ongar a town that people want to live in and are proud to be a part of. From my research, the majority of people living in Ongar love Ongar and are keen to see it grow and succeed.

My suggestion would be to have a Community Hub base in the library. It would be used to coordinate events and activities within the town centre and also be a resource for services including perhaps a Police help desk, mini job centre, tourist information and a place for locals to impart their thoughts, observations and complaints. Provision of these increased services will encourage more people into the town centre and will lead to them using other elements of the town centre at the same time.

EFDC could also review their association with Budworth Hall and see if there are any areas where they can work together to facilitate the development of the Community Hub.

It is noted from my various conversations that outside of the specific clubs and associations based in the Budworth Hall, there is a lack of facilities in Ongar for the youth – such as a Youth Club. This is something that could also be considered by the Community Hub.

Recommendations:

- 24) Set up community hub base within library and man it on agreed days/times.**
- 25) Publicise Community Hub.**
- 26) Pull together program of events and activities for the year.**
- 27) Liaise with Budworth Hall and jointly promote events and services**

3.6 Love Ongar Residents Card

As a way of communicating with and building relationships with local residents, perhaps a Love Ongar card scheme could be developed. The facility would offer residents discounts, offers and preferential rates on various products, services and facilities throughout Ongar on production of the card – which would in turn encourage residents to use their local area and town centre.

The card could also be used as a library card, to allow resident discounts at the local leisure centre and used in the towns car parks to obtain free and/or improved parking rates.

Shop local campaigns and marketing could also be formulated around the Love Ongar residents card – Love Ongar, Shop Ongar!

This idea could also be rolled out on a larger scale – i.e. Epping Forest Resident Discount Card – offering a range of discounts, special offers and promotion across the Epping Forest district.

Recommendations:

28) Agree that “Love Ongar” Resident Card is viable proposition.

29) Design programme, implement and process.

3.7 Public Facilities

If the town centre is going to meet people’s needs, the town centre should be reviewed to ensure that there are the required public facilities. These facilities would include adequate seating for all sections of the community in all areas, open, clean & functional public toilets, adequate lighting at all times across all areas of the town centre, bike racks/hoops in easily accessible places and strategically placed dog poo bins.

It was noted that the public toilets in Ongar are always available and kept extremely clean and tidy.

Recommendations:

30) Review benches and seating within town centre and ensure adequate for needs of town.

31) Review bike racks/hoops within the town centre and at other destinations and ensure adequate for the needs of the town.

32) Review dog poo bins in town centre and other areas as appropriate and ensure adequate to needs of the town.

3.8 Wi-fi and Digital Presence

The digital age and the need for connectivity is increasingly important for numerous sections of the community and as a result I would suggest a free wi-fi availability within Chipping Ongar town centre.

It should be acknowledged that people are now shopping differently and that circa 30% of retail sales are being done online (Office of National Statistics, Aug 2020). This figure is up from 21.9% at the beginning of March 2020 and the beginning of the Covid 19 lock down. Regardless of the pandemic, online sales will continue to grow, and retail experts KPMG predict the figure rising to 50% by 2025. As a result, retail businesses need to adjust their business models accordingly and develop their offer for both markets.

As a part of adding a wi-fi option to the town centre a social media presence should be developed enabling Ongar retailers and businesses to market their products and services to town centre visitors and build a link between their online and offline businesses. Mobile technologies and virtual shopping should be used to enhance the consumer town centre experience and in turn increase footfall.

Consideration should be given to bringing in a third-party contractor such as Maybe (www.maybetech.com) to develop social media/town centre/retailer collaboration.

Recommendations:

- 33) Put in place free WIFI within Chipping Ongar town centre & publicise.**
- 34) Agree way forward in respect of Social Media strategy/presence and execute accordingly.**
- 35) Arrange for assistance and support for retailers in establishing an online presence.**

4. Appearance

Although a little tatty and in need of some general love and attention as indicated in the Quick Wins above, Ongar has a picturesque High Street with an impressive range of historic listed buildings. To maintain Ongars appearance and appeal as a historic town centre shopkeepers and property owners need to be encouraged to review the appearance and maintenance of their properties and when making alterations to make them in keeping with the overall appearance of the town.

Consideration should be given by the Council as to the suitability of street signs and street furniture to the townscape of this historic town.

Recommendations:

- 36) Review signage and street furniture and where necessary replace with alternative sympathetic to the townscape.**
- 37) Review planning process and ensure that applications for alterations to high street and/or listed properties are proposing alterations in keeping with the heritage and age of the town.**

4.1 Shop Fronts

Some consideration should be given to standardising the shop fronts and making them appropriate in colour and design to the town centre. The town centre falls within the Ongar Conservation Area and many of the buildings are listed. As such local authority consent should be sought for any change in shop front or building design. These changes should be carefully considered by the Council to ensure their suitability.

There is of course no obligation for landlords or retailers to renew their shopfronts, however perhaps a scheme could be developed where the local authority does some sort of match funding to assist in the renewal and updating of shop fronts.

Recommendations:

- 38) Consult with retailers and consider options in respect of Town Centre shop fronts and making them more in keeping with the overall age and style of the town centre.**
- 39) Consider match funding or other scheme to assist in and encourage updating of town centre shop fronts.**

4.2 "A" Boards & other retail paraphernalia

Some parts of the Ongar pavement are narrower than others which can present accessibility issues, particularly for those pushing prams/pushchairs and also the elderly and disabled. In addition to narrow pavements, the town also attracts a large number of "A" boards up and down the high street and also on occasions the addition of external trading/retail displays which also clog up the pavement. In some parts of the town this isn't an issue as the pavements are fairly wide and can accommodate them. In others however it is an issue and is a cause for concern.

As a result, I feel that some form of regulation needs to be put in place to manage street side retail paraphernalia and apply enforcement action where necessary. Considerations should be given to some form of demarcation outside each store over which seating, A boards and other retail paraphernalia, if allowed, cannot overstep. This would ensure that the pavement is kept clear for pedestrians.

Recommendations:

40) Review town centre policy and regulations for trading from the front of premises/display of signage and "A" boards on the pavement

41) Review Ongar Town Centre in line with the aforementioned regulations and act as necessary

4.3 Trees and Planters

Tree line pedestrian routes and landscaped areas all contribute to civic pride and generally make a town more attractive. Ongar is fortunate to have an active voluntary Ongar in Bloom team who do a massive amount of work to keep Ongar looking attractive and maintain a large selection of flower beds, planters, fence boxes etc throughout the town. The seasonal planting is funded by Ongar Town Council, however I feel that it is important that EFDC maintain a working relationship with Ongar in Bloom to maintain the larger townscape and green spaces.

Recommendations:

42) Review current "green" townscape and work with Ongar in Bloom to improve.

1. Access

Town centres need to recognise that Co2 emissions have to be reduced and as a result there is much more emphasis on ensuring a reduced reliance on cars. To this end, town centres need to ensure their accessibility via other methods of transport and provide for these methods accordingly. In addition to reducing carbon emissions this will also encourage the use of the town centre by a wider range of the community via numerous methods of transport.

Simply stopping car access and reducing or taking away parking spaces, doesn't resolve this problem. Undoubtedly people will still want to access the town centre by car however there is a balance to be had between encouraging pedestrian and cycling access to a town centre and then gradually reducing provision for motor vehicles as other methods of travel develop and gain traction.

For generations urban areas have been designed exclusively around the car. This now has to change and town centres developed to provide attractive, walkable and cyclable physical space

5.1 Cycling

In a town the size of Ongar, all residents should be able to access the town centre, the towns various green and public spaces, leisure centre and attractions via a network of secure, safe and clearly marked cycle paths and routes.

In addition, the town should also provide for cycle racks/hoops at the various destinations to enable the bikes to be safely secured.

Recommendations:

43) Review cycling accessibility to Ongar town centre, attractions and green spaces and make arrangements to provide a network of secure, safe and clearly marked cycle paths and routes.

5.2 Trains

Although there is a railway running into Ongar, it has ceased to be operated by TfL and is now used by the Epping Ongar (Heritage) Railway (EOR). For a growing town the size of Ongar, I would suggest that there is an ever increasing need for a regular railway connection from Ongar onto Epping and then in to central London. I understand that there are a number of issues that come with this consideration, not least the provision of station parking in Ongar, however it is felt that the option should remain on the agenda and that feasibility studies are done to establish the practicality of reinstating this service.

Recommendations:

44) Review feasibility of reinstating a regular Ongar to Epping rail service.

5.2 Buses

Bus routes should be reviewed to ensure all residents have easy access to buses to bring them into and take them out of the town centre. It is suggested that residents should be within a 400 to 500 metre walking distance of a bus stop. Services should also be reliable and punctual.

It was suggested that there is little in the way of evening buses in and out of the area which was particularly an issue for younger people who would otherwise have to be picked up or get a taxi.

Recommendations:

45) Review/discuss bus routes with bus operator and amend accordingly

5.3 Parking

Although use of other methods of transport into the town centre is important, it is inevitable that a section of the community will continue to use a car for a variety of reasons.

Parking is undoubtedly a major issue in Ongar town centre. The subject has been mentioned by all stakeholders and by all consulted. The subject covers various issues:

- The free parking in the main shopping area. Due to the lack of parking enforcement, these spaces tend to be used for longer term parking. Either by mum's taking their children to the soft play area in the Crazy Kids Café, retailers, residents or anyone else who simply decides to leave their car there. Apparently parking enforcement comes to Ongar on one day per week, so people take their chances.

Likewise, there are two small parades of shops at the Ongar Bridge end of the high street which get used for longer term parking, also with very little parking enforcement taking place.

The effect of the reduced availability of these spaces is undoubtedly reduced custom for the shops, but also it forces people to either double park or park on the pavement if they have a need to make a quick shop or collect something up from a supplier.

A better option along these sections of the High Street would be to have a pay and display – with the first 30 minutes free and a maximum 1 hour stay time with no return within 3 hours.

In addition, regular parking enforcement would ensure that the regulations are adhered to.

- It has been suggested that the overall availability of parking was insufficient for the needs of the town. On my visits to Ongar I would suggest that for short term parking, this wasn't the case and that there was ample parking when also utilising the Budworth Hall and Library car parks (it should be noted however that town centre usage may be reduced as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic).

Having said this as the population grows as a result of new housing, with the regeneration and increased attractiveness of Ongar High Street and also with any tourists/visitors to the town in the summer months, the provision of parking in the town centre may well be stretched.

- Another area of contention is in connection with the parking charges. Disregarding the reduced "Covid 19" rate available at the moment, it is difficult to attract people to the town centre when they can visit supermarkets, retail parks and other larger out of town retailers without having to pay a parking charge.

My suggestion in this respect is that the parking in the library and Budworth Hall car parks is reduced to 30 mins free with normal charges applying thereafter. If a "Love Ongar" residents card was introduced, reduced charges could apply for residents on production of a chip and pin residents card.

Evidence in respect of the benefit of free parking within town centres is varied, however it would be a positive way of showing a town centre that a council was serious about improving footfall and assisting high street businesses.

- With the conversion of a number of the upstairs spaces above the shops into flats and various new builds directly behind the shops with limited parking, there is additional pressure on parking within the town centre as the majority of residents have one or more cars with nowhere affordable and/or accessible to park them. Likewise, retailers and the towns businesses have nowhere affordable to park. With this in mind, perhaps the land by Ongar Bridge, currently used for parking could be adopted by the council and then used for the permit holder parking of town centre residences and businesses.

It was also suggested that if required the grass land behind the library and Ongar Castle could be made into additional parking.

Recommendations:

- 46) Review Ongar town centre parking and consider whether additional parking is necessary and if so where it should go.**
- 47) Make the 1 hour free parking in the High Street pay and display and consider reducing to 30 minutes free.**
- 48) Increase town centre parking enforcement**
- 49) Maintain pay and display in town centre car parks and review charging to provide the first 30 minutes free of charge.**
- 50) Consider putting in place a town centre retailer/resident car park with retailer/resident parking permits available from the council.**

5.4 General Traffic

Ongar High Street is a fairly busy road and also sees its fair share of large heavy goods vehicles. With the narrow pavements and added to that numerous delivery and other drivers either double parking and/or parking on the pavement the town centre can become busy and also particularly hazardous to pedestrians, particularly those pushing prams & pushchairs, in a wheelchair or with reduced mobility and also the elderly. This I would suggest also goes some way to deterring people from visiting the town centre.

Within the main shopping area, there is a clear need for reducing the speed of the traffic. It has also been suggested that a weight restriction be put in place to deter the numbers of large HGV's, which in principle I agree with, although I am not clear as to how this would work in practice.

It was suggested that another Zebra Crossing should be installed by the pinch point. This would serve the purpose of slowing down traffic flow whilst at the same time making road crossings safer and save, particularly elderly/disabled people from having to walk to Budworth Hall where the other crossing is. If this could be combined with an indicated/signposted 20mph speed limit, I feel that the speed of traffic could be reduced dramatically.

Discussion was also had in respect of a bypass, which I understand has been discussed on numerous occasions over the years. My feeling on this is that it would undoubtedly reduce traffic flow through Ongar, however I feel that this could also be to the detriment of the town and its passing trade. Perhaps this idea could be left for ongoing and future consideration.

Recommendations:

- 51) Increase parking enforcement – prosecute for double parking/parking on the pavement**
- 52) Add additional zebra/pelican crossing at/near pinch point in High Street**
- 53) Reduce signposted speed limit to 20mph in main shopping area – from say pinch point to Budworth Hall.**

6. Consultation

6.1 Market Research

In addition to thoughts and expertise of the author, consultation for this report has been obtained from the following:

Office of RH Alex Burghart MP
Epping Forest District Council
Ongar Town Council
Ongar Town Forum
Ongar and District Community Association
Ongar Neighbourhood Plan Community Group
Epping Ongar Railway
Councillors and other prominent/influential Ongar residents
Approximately 15 High Street Retailers
Various Ongar residents

It is accepted that additional research will be required from residents, retailers and businesses to move the ideas in this report forward. It is felt however that if the initiative is going to be Community/Town Council driven then the research should be carried out more locally.

7. Discounted Ideas and Thoughts

As a result of discussions with stake holders, there are a number of ideas and considerations which I don't feel require further consideration at this stage. Some of these are:

- Developing an Ongar Bi-pass
- Removing all parking from the shopping area in the centre of the High Street and pedestrianizing it to allow more pavement space and a more continental feel where bars, restaurants and shops trade from outside their shops.
- Suspending parking and reinstating the market in the main shopping area in the middle of the high street.
- Banning HGV's from the High Street – I think it's a nice idea, however I'm not sure how practical it will be or how it will be enforced.

7. Sources of Additional Support

High Streets Task Force (www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk) – supporting communities and local government to transform their high streets.

Maybe (www.maybetech.com) – A smarter approach to social media

Action List	Priority
<i>Highway Rangers to complete "quick wins"</i>	1
<i>Discuss with and establish Town Leadership Team</i>	1
<i>Form Town Team / refocus Town Forum</i>	1
<i>Appoint Town Centre Manager</i>	1
<i>Form Community Hub in Library</i>	1
<i>Clear town centre of all rubbish and weeds</i>	1
<i>Provide for additional seating, bike racks/hoops, dog poo bins as appropriate</i>	2
<i>Talk to retailers re shop fronts, A boards, pavement trading etc</i>	1
<i>Review town market and put in place plans to re-establish and grow it</i>	1
<i>Put in place plans to review town cycle paths and implement findings</i>	2
<i>Review bus routes and timetables</i>	3
<i>Review parking charges and reduce to first 30 mins / hour free as appropriate</i>	1
<i>Review parking arrangements for businesses and Town Centre residents</i>	2
<i>Review town tourism and pull a plan together encompassing town businesses</i>	3
<i>Review town WIFI proposal and put in place findings</i>	2
<i>Develop town centre social media presence</i>	2
<i>Consider Love Ongar Residents Card – implement and publicise</i>	2
<i>Complete research on thoughts and considerations of residents and businesses – incorporate and implement where appropriate</i>	1
<i>Review new businesses required in Ongar and take steps to attract</i>	3
<i>EFDC to liaise with Ongar in Bloom and see if they can collaborate</i>	2
<i>EFDC to discuss options for Ongar with Historic England</i>	2
<i>Increase parking enforcement</i>	1
<i>Consider additional zebra/pelican crossing</i>	1
<i>Consider introduction of signed 20mph speed limit in main shopping area</i>	1

Appendix 1

Regenerating Ongar paper by Ongar Town Council – November 2020