

Sevenoaks Town Draft Recovery Plan – from impact of COVID-19. A transition to a new business environment

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Sevenoaks Town has experienced the same economic disruption due to the need to address public health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to restrict public movement to contain the virus.

In April 2020 the Sevenoaks Town Team circulated an invitation to local businesses to attend a virtual meeting to discuss a Sevenoaks Town Recovery Plan.

The recommendations for Recovery Plans are that they address four stages – see below.



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Stage 1 Crisis	The Government, Kent County Council and Sevenoaks District Council supported by the Chamber of Commerce, Sevenoaks Town Partnership and Sevenoaks Town Council are providing information to enable financial assistance where it is available.
Stage 2 Pre-Recovery Framework for Recovery	<p>We need collectively to think of ideas to encourage footfall back to the town centre and other shopping areas in the town.</p> <p>Putting in place plans and ideas ready for post-COVID-19, rather than thinking about them when we reach this stage.</p> <p>Innovation should be encouraged.</p>
Stage 3 Recovery	<p>This stage is about building capacity for recovery and transformation</p> <p>Working together on good ideas and plans to encourage people back to our high streets. Putting Stage 2 into action.</p>
Stage 4 Recovery & Transformation	<p>Establishing what the ‘new normal’ is going to be for the town centre and how businesses will work within this.</p> <p>In the short time that COVID-19 has impacted the UK businesses have shown their creativity and ability to adapt and this might need to continue in the future.</p>

All town centres are currently in crisis mode and undertaking actions with government and local government funding, where possible, to support businesses. Below are the key points to discuss and establish how Sevenoaks moves through the different phrases of Pre-Recovery, to Recovery and ultimate Transformation.

There will be many factors that are beyond the Town Team’s and local business’s control, not least being the protection of the nation’s health following public health guidelines versus impact on the national and local economy; restoring public confidence to come back into businesses, town centres, retail and hospitality venues.

The new business environment is going to look very different to what was known pre-COVID-19. The Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) had originally predicted that the high street would change radically over the next five years and are now stating that this has been condensed into five months. Many of the changes to consumer behaviour and business practice may not revert to pre-COVID-19.

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Sevenoaks' public has previously demonstrated its loyalty to supporting local facilities – the Stag Theatre and Cinema being an excellent example of this. When the Town Council re-opened the facility after its second bankruptcy the community was asked to 'Use it or Lose it!' The result is a vibrant venue attracting up to approximately 300,000 visitors per year and, as identified in an independent economic impact assessment: Total visitor spend is estimated at £9.2m per annum, this equates to approximately £7m of GVA contribution to the local economy. The Stag being able to return to its full operational mode will be one of the key factors to the recovery of the town centre's local economy.

PRE-RECOVERY PHASE

The ACTM recommends that there should be a Plan Ahead Team (PAT) which should consist of key stakeholders in the local community. Sevenoaks is fortunate in that it has this in place already with the Sevenoaks Town Partnership's Town Team, which consists of membership from the following and operates in a transparent and inclusive manner. All meeting details are published, and anyone can attend any meeting (virtually or in person).

Town Team

Representatives from:

- Sevenoaks Town Council
- Sevenoaks District Council
- Sevenoaks & District Chamber of Commerce
- Sevenoaks Rail Travellers Association
- Go-Coach
- Southeastern Trains
- Sencio
- Stag
- Knole
- Bligh's Meadow
- Sevenoaks Society
- Large Businesses
- Independent Businesses
- Round Table

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Methodology

There will be some overarching themes that will need to be considered, for example:

1. Gain a realistic view of starting position / baseline. Where are we now?
2. Develop scenarios for different versions of the future. Where could we be?
3. Determine actions and strategic moves that are robust across the scenarios. What will we do?
4. Set trigger points that drive us to act at the right time. When should we start?
5. Be aware that this is likely to be a phased recovery. Consider each starting point e.g. set out below.

4 – 8 weeks	2 – 6 months	7 – 12 months	New normal?
Business advice available Collection of data / baseline	Re-open for business Marketing and other initiatives put in place to encourage customers back into the town Government funding continues?	Key retail time – Christmas 2020 Review of data Bat & Ball Centre to open for events, conferences, training, trade events Development of Business Hub for small and downsizing businesses Develop 'Cultural Quarter' proposals	?

Ideas and information to include in the Draft Sevenoaks Town Recovery Plan

1. **Sevenoaks** would **follow national public health guidelines** and, where appropriate, national best practice as identified by the Association of Town Centre Management. Lessons will also be learned from other countries who are coming out of lockdown ahead of the UK.
2. **Public confidence** will need to be restored to encourage them back into shops and businesses.
3. Social distancing is likely to remain for some time. Could the **High Street be closed to cars e.g. as a trial for three months?** Currently there are few businesses open and

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the public can queue on the pavement. If more opened this would become congested. The space in the road would enable more social distancing and the opportunity for pop-up businesses e.g. street food for restaurants that are unable to open. Note: need to consider buses and deliveries.

4. Create an **Action Plan and review Funding Opportunities**.
5. With our narrow paths could we organise that **pedestrians only walk in one direction**, preferably facing traffic, enabling pedestrians to step into the kerb if needed.
6. **Car parking** – people will need longer to shop. Giving benefits to those who have walked into town, rather than bringing their cars. Parking initiatives for those who must travel by car.
7. Could there be a **benefit for more buses / park and ride?**
This could contribute to pedestrian safety – less traffic would make it easier to introduce one-way pavements for pedestrians. Previously it did work in Sevenoaks during the Bligh's development, using the site off Otford Road, which is still available. At the time the plan was to develop a further park and ride, using space by Morley's Roundabout to the south. Anything which could reduce vehicle use in the centre of the town would be helpful, and so maybe a joint plan with the National Trust to cut traffic using the Knole access off the High Street would be worth looking at.
8. Businesses have already started to work differently, delivering and extending opening hours as examples.
9. Need a **consistent and strong campaign to promote** Sevenoaks as a safe place to shop and do business.
10. All **businesses** regardless of sector to be encouraged to **sign up and promote the same key message**.
11. What is **Sevenoaks' USP?**
12. Remember the **target audience** for the campaign including all age groups.
13. **Stag** did attract up to 300,000 visitors per annum, which had a positive impact on the local economy. Like many leisure facilities it is at risk due to COVID-19. Consider public crowdfunding / virtual fundraising events. Support re-development of key visitor attractions – Knole and Stag.
14. **Promotion and marketing activity:** social media (including WhatsApp groups, physical marketing – shop window competition, marked trails, flags in flag holders throughout the town, overhead banners.
15. **Enhance the Customer Experience** – move forward with proposals for the **Cultural Quarter**.

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16. **Events** to encourage people back into town.

- Open-air cinemas or activities that can be held as an easier way of socially distancing.
- Food event on the Vine, or restaurants serving outside of their restaurants.
- Interactive entertainment.
- Photographic Exhibition to be held at Kaleidoscope Gallery of Sevenoaks Businesses 2020.
- Could we plan events with a moveable date to avoid adverse weather conditions?
 - Can the Fireworks, Christmas Lights Switch-On, Pantomime go ahead? If so, how can it be made safe.
 - We need to make sure that when we come out of lockdown Sevenoaks is a bright and cheerful place to come to. Could we aim for our best ever Sevenoaks in Bloom? It could have real community spirit, and perhaps people who don't have gardens in Sevenoaks might like an area to attend to. It could bring real pride into the town centre.

17. Utilise all **public open space** – potentially for different uses to previous.

18. The **market** could be a key component in attracting footfall into the centre of the town. Maybe a covered market could be the right use for the Tesco site?

19. Add a **list of businesses that are trading now** to the Town Team's weekly newsletter. Maybe a video of Andrew highlighting that the town is preparing a Recovery Plan. Comment from one member: *"When I was thinking about this, I went onto the Town Team website and found the weekly newsletter. This hasn't been advertised anywhere that I was aware of and we need to think about how we push traffic to the website, and I found it interesting and informative. I immediately circulated the link to my road WhatsApp group. We need to get that circulated so that the Town Team website is the go to website for information and perhaps a link with other parish councils websites (I live in Otford but it is relevant to people in my area too and it is people from these surrounding areas also that we want to encourage into the town)".* Perhaps businesses operating could also promote a link?

20. Could the town be **open to different groups on certain days or times**?

21. Could shops operate a **click & collect** service in their shops or **by appointment only** schemes?

22. Encourage more **local workers**. Will commuting to work become a thing of the past? Engage with as many local groups as possible.

23. Produce **Back to Business Guide**.

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24. **Business to Business** - Businesses (such as solicitors, accountants, estate agents, Stag etc.) could team up with restaurants / cafes / shops etc. so that people who come in to use the business services stay in town longer. People who used to commute may be partially working from home in future, so we may have more people around to come into town. Encourage businesses and businesspeople to use local businesses more.
25. **Sponsorship** needs to be about working together, and not just money, to get your business name up. Sports clubs have sponsorship from businesses and perhaps they should be speaking to each other as a way of encouraging business between local clubs and businesses.
26. Sevenoaks should **acknowledge the huge debt** we owe to all those people working on the front line during the crisis, often putting themselves at risk, and celebrate what they did and recognise their achievements.
27. Sevenoaks should also **celebrate the businesses and voluntary organisations** which found new ways to make life more bearable for the community.
28. Before the shutdown the number of **secondary school students** in Sevenoaks was due to increase to nearly 6,000 by 2025. This is a big element in Sevenoaks' social and economic life. Making the streets safe for them and ensuring young people can access schools will also be a priority.
29. Develop the planned Business Hub to enable businesses to start up again or downsize from business accommodation.
30. Bat & Ball Centre due to open in December 2020 enabling events, conferences, training, trade events – supporting local businesses.
31. **Next Steps**
 - Notes of Meeting and Draft Sevenoaks Town Recovery Plan circulated.
 - Review responses and incorporate where appropriate.
 - Produce Action Plan with designated tasks to different organisations or groups of organisations.

BE READY AND UNITED FOR COMING OUT OF LOCKDOWN

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The drafting of the Sevenoaks Town Recovery Plan will consider the following:

1. Starting Position

To restart Sevenoaks’ social and economic life, we need to recognise some big changes which will have happened, whenever the lockdown ends:

* In the community

- some will be much poorer, or in deeper debt through income loss they can’t recover
- a WPP survey suggests around 10% of earners have already lost all income
- many older people, in forced isolation, will be in desperate need of contact
- many on fixed or stable incomes will have been unable to spend it, so well in credit
- there’s a much bigger network of community volunteers, and neighbourhood contacts
- many more people have learned how to work from home, and may want to avoid public transport

* In business

- some will be unable to recover from a long period with no income, especially those in personal services which depend on contact, like hairdressers, beauty salons, nail bars
- some will have been able to adapt, by supplying services in new ways without contact
- there has been a step-change in the proportion of retail spending over the internet – estimated by McKinsey to be up from 25% to 35% in the last week of March 2020
- technical / professional / ICT service businesses have probably held up reasonably well

The ‘old normal’ in Sevenoaks’ urban area had over 20,000 jobs (identified for the Sevenoaks Town Council draft Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP). This had increased by over 20% in the previous four years, and was made up of the following main types of employment:

Sector	Number	4 Year Trend
Public admin, Education, Health	4,900	Growing fast
Financial & Professional services	3,300	Static
Retail	2,800	Static
Construction	2,000	Grown very fast
Business support services	1,800	Grown very fast
ICT, Media and Creative	1,600	Growing fast
Hospitality, Leisure, Recreation	1,600	Growing

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Wholesale	700	Shrinking
Manufacturing, higher tech	400	Stable
Transport	300	Grown fast

None of the numbers above include the thousands of residents with employers elsewhere who are now working from home in Sevenoaks.

Hardest hit businesses have been hospitality, leisure, recreation, most retail except food, and personal services, which were compulsorily closed. Transport has also lost most of its income. Experience in Sweden, where there have been no compulsory closures, shows that these sectors have had high levels of business failure because people regard them as far too risky to use.

Ipsos Mori Poll April 2020

Q. Imagine if the lockdown measures end in the next month, how comfortable, if at all, do you think you will feel doing each of the following in the same way as you did before the Coronavirus pandemic began?

Almost two-thirds (62%) of Britons are comfortable with the idea of meeting friends and family outside of their household, however a third remain sceptical (33%). Around half are comfortable when it comes to shopping; 51% would be at ease with shopping in a supermarket while 49% are happy to go to other shops. However, a further 43% say they will feel uncomfortable shopping in other shops. Four in 10 (39%) would feel uncomfortable shopping in supermarkets.

Despite being most willing to attend large public events and bars / restaurants, young people are least likely to be comfortable with meeting friends and family outside of their households. While two-thirds (64%) of those aged 35-75 would be happy doing so, only 57% of 18-34-year olds are at ease with this.

Half (49%) of those who are currently employed feel comfortable going back to work, a third (35%) would be nervous to do so. When parents / guardians think about sending their children back to school, more feel uncomfortable than comfortable about doing so. Almost half (48%) express unease while 41% say they would be happy to send their children back.

	Very / fairly comfortable	Not very / Not at all	Net comfortable
Meeting with friends and family outside your household	62%	33%	+29%
Shopping in supermarkets	51%	39%	+12%
Shopping in other shops	49%	43%	+6%
Going to your place of work	41%	48%	-7%
Going to bars and restaurants	29%	61%	-32%
Using public transport	21%	61%	-40%
Going to large public gatherings such as sports or music events	17%	67%	-50%

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2. Define scenarios for versions of our future

The aim is not to debate which scenarios are most likely but rather to explore what is possible, based on intelligence, where possible.

What impacts will we face e.g.

- Limited gatherings
- Travel restrictions
- Hygiene requirements
- Public confidence

The following is information provided by City Street Scapes

SAFE STREETS

The concept of safe streets is to give shoppers and key workers the confidence that their concerns are being met. It supports basic social distancing but also helps to reduce voluntary and involuntary crowding and sets out some guidelines with how to navigate the High Street.

Voluntary crowding is groups of people socialising in public places contrary to guidelines. Involuntary crowding is pinch points where people are forced into increased contact.

The recommendations follow a typical journey into a retail centre by public transport or car. This includes transport hubs, carparks and cycle hubs. This is defined as the consumer journey.

The main tools used include queuing systems, information towers, walking lanes, safe zones and safe seating.



Queuing systems work by encouraging lines of people two metres apart. Depending on the existing space these can be placed in a grid system with arrows to allow more people in a square.

Information towers and graphics are vital in both educating the public and reassuring the public about the steps that have been taken.

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Walking lanes can be positioned in the middle of a street to designate one-way lanes to keep people moving, they also help reduce loitering and voluntary crowding.

Safe zones are a vital addition to street planning. They are an area demarked with cross hatching which, similar to a box junction, encourage people to move through swiftly. They are located at the main entrances to streets, outside busy shops and near places where traditionally groups of people have met.

Safe seating is the opposite and is cordoned off areas where people can safely wait and sit. Existing seating is marked out to maintain social distancing and additional seating provided to increase the amount of seating.

CONSUMER JOURNEY, TRANSPORT HUBS

Ticket machines

Where possible customers should be encouraged to use ticketless systems. To protect customers, we advise the following measures:



Notice on ticket machine

Social distancing floor graphics to enable queuing

Yellow tape to create safe zone

Sanitiser dispenser



Transport hubs

If Network Rail and Southeastern are providing social distancing measures inside the rail and bus concourses, then it is important to concentrate on the area outside the stations.

Additional signage to entrances and exits to the stations.

1. Floor graphics to the taxi queues
2. Information towers with walking routes to town and confirming what is open
3. Safe zones for people to wait in
4. Additional seating

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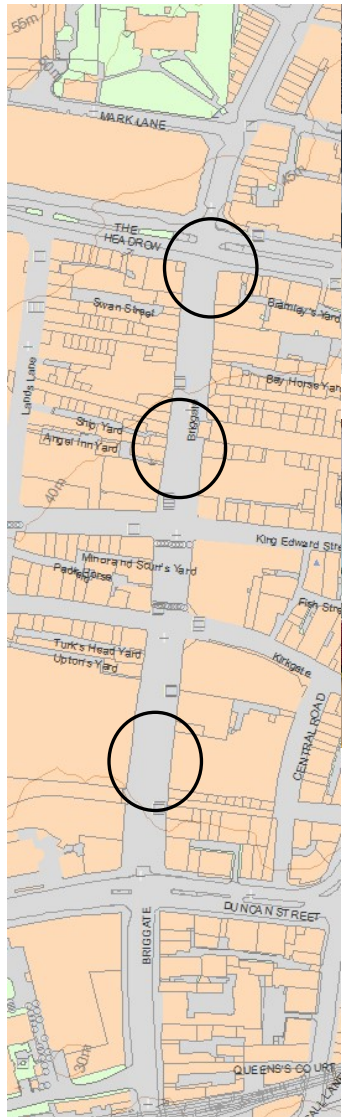
Cycle hubs - to protect cyclists, we would advise creating a 2-metre safe zone around bike racks.



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SOCIAL DISTANCING HIGH STREET

The illustrations below look at three snap-shots based on Briggate in Leeds. Each considers how different parts of the street would look with social distancing measures and what the impact on the street scene will be.



Main entrance:

- Information tower
- Sanitising station
- Street Warden
- Safe zone (do not loiter)
- Pedestrianised lanes



Street:

- Pedestrian lanes
- Taped off bike park
- Safe area outside kiosk
- Information tower



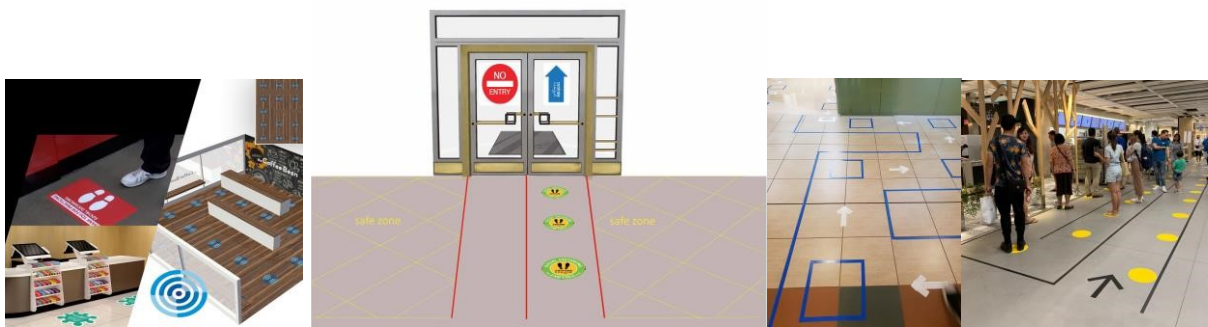
Outside shops:

- Safe zone
- Queuing graphics
- Safe seating

Social distancing objectives can be met by clearly showing where people can sit and where they need to keep moving. Signage is important to support this as well as sanitising stations and helpful street wardens.

Retailers need to limit numbers inside shops with a one in and one out system. Designating exit and entrance doors. Grid queuing systems can make best use of space.

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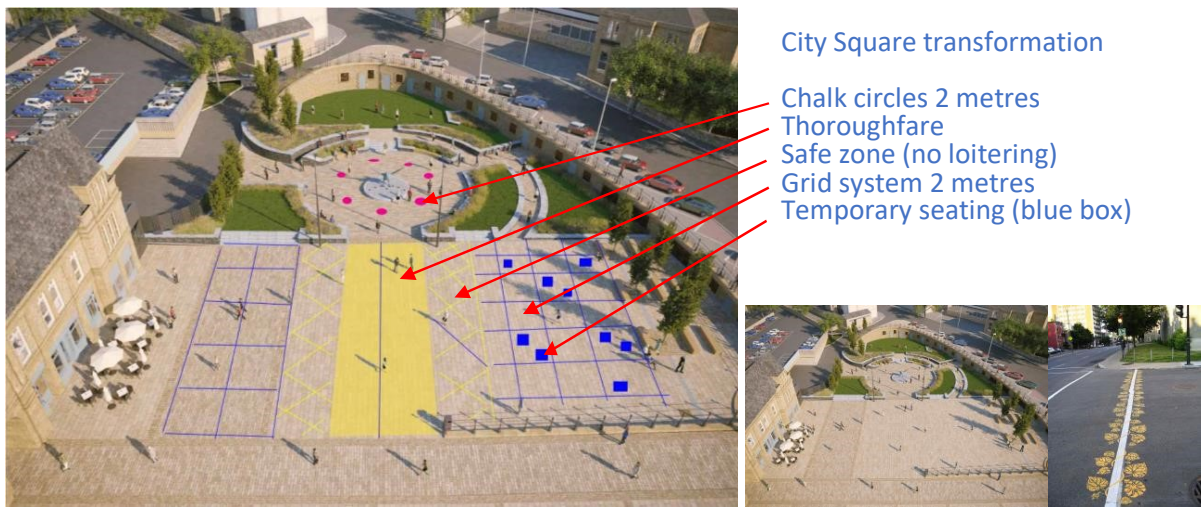


SOCIAL DISTANCING IN PUBLIC SPACES AND PARKS

Navigating public spaces can be a challenge with social distancing. A public space is designed as both a thorough fare and a meeting place. Most spaces were designed to keep this distinction fluid.

There is also a movement to use the opportunity to increase the space for people in towns and cities with more pedestrian schemes, wider pavements and cycle lanes. (citylab, wired)

It is important to clearly mark out thoroughfares, safe seating and safe zones in public squares. To enable this in larger spaces we would advocate the use of semi-permanent chalk marking. This can be effective and can be more playful.



More playful use of chalk markings and temporary paintings can re-designate spaces as well as redefine boundaries between streets and public space. Also, use of temporary grass can add green areas for safe play zones.



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Use of the grid system is an important innovation when operating outdoor markets. As per below, the system can manage a maximum amount of people allowed into a space. The illustration is based on a three-stall set up on a 16sqm grid.



Also, empty car parks with their existing grid system can be redeployed to enable social distancing. One idea being explored is the use of more drive-in experiences from film nights to music festivals and even

The use of social distancing enforcement can make areas less welcoming. Based on feedback from the WPP survey, the public would like more greenery and outdoor seating. We would recommend the following additions:

1) Street Dressing

Lamp column banners, bunting, catenary sculptures, cross-street banners, building flags, all displaying a consistent message that the High Street is open. If you have the infrastructure for lamp column banners, now is the time to use them with positive messages.



Cross Street banners can be designed by the local community.

2) Additional green areas

Temporary planters and sensory gardens, grass animals.



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Extra greenery gives the impression of a cleaner environment whilst providing more colour. Sensory gardens can help clean the air and welcome visitors back in more ways. Grass animals offer a playful addition creating opportunities for selfies and entertaining children. All surfaces can be regularly sprayed with a disinfectant and sanitisation points included.



3) Outdoor seating

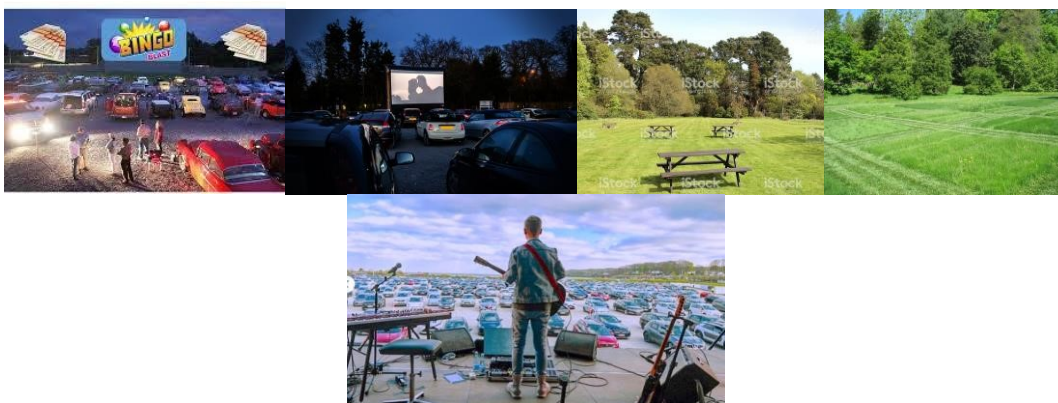
Temporary seating, green seating, reuse of existing seating.



Add additional temporary seating with social distancing. Repurpose existing seating to both offer social distancing and display positive messages. A key recommendation from the High Street Survey. Install green seating with colour coding to offer places to meet and social distance. The seats positioned two metres apart with clear coloured areas to separate groups.

4) Show support for the community

To feel safe, people need a safe environment. This can range from activities limited to staying in a car, from drive-in cinema to drive-in bingo, music festival and quiz night; but also, activities in the open with clear social distancing. Giving households their own space, either around a dedicated table or a dedicated area. This can be achieved by spacing tables or simply mowing and marking out squares with lanes in between.



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Rainbow angel wings, selfie rainbow windows



Use of empty windows and walls to install no touch selfie opportunities and to display messages from the local community.

Now is a unique opportunity to make our streets safer and more welcoming. This summer is critical. We need to be creative and resourceful with initiatives from social distancing music festivals to one-way social distancing mazes, bug and bird trails and support for more outdoor catering.

TRANSFORMATION

The 'new normal' predicts a time when many places and destinations will be open, but the public will still need reassurance. Until a vaccine has been deployed throughout the population this 'new normal' will significantly impact on the use of public spaces.

At the same time, there will be an increased demand for public spaces and opportunities to meet, socialise and play. Before the crisis the terms competitive socialising, tactical urbanism and experiences were being used to describe changing retail and place practices. This, combined with less travel and a greater appreciation of local community, will put increased pressure on place managers to make creative but safe use of place.

Pop-Up Parks were a popular installation last summer. Incorporating social distancing into a Pop-Up Park would require more space and a designation of that space. This can be achieved with smaller seating, use of picket fencing to create rooms for families to feel safe in and the provision of sanitisation stations.



In a similar way, the temporary maze can be adapted for social distancing, with a one-way route, gates that open one way only and timed entrance.

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It is highly likely that social distancing will still be prevalent this Christmas. Even though Christmas decorations can be enjoyed at a safe distance, the Christmas Light Switch On would need re-imagining and use of outdoor facilities to cater for grottos and Santa's Post Offices can help social distancing. Images below of the outdoor Santa's Post Train.



Conclusion

The lockdown will have accelerated a lot of the pre-crisis trends, giving online a massive boost, but at the same time demonstrating what a social animal we are. To square the circle will demand a more omni-channel retail world with click and collect reducing the time in shops and local restaurants offering more home delivery. We cannot put the genie back in the bottle, so the opportunities for place managers are how to protect a core of retailers whilst making their places inviting and, most importantly, safe.

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3. Establish broad direction of travel

One of the key challenges for the Recovery Plan is to determine the best response to an evolving situation, not to develop detailed plans that cannot adapt to the broad direction of travel – thematic ideas are needed, which can form a strategic response.

One notable feature of the COVID-19 crisis is a radical shift to distance business models. In a matter of days, people massively stepped up their use of technologies that enable remote learning, working, services and consumption. Will that adoption recede post-crisis, or will we move to a new business process?

4. Determine actions and strategic moves

A tried and tested approach is to work through one scenario at a time, defining the optimal set of moves we could make if we knew for sure that the scenario would pan out. Starting with our list of existing initiatives – those that were already planned i.e. events including Christmas activities, Cultural Quarter proposals – review threats and opportunities before deciding which initiatives to cull and which new ones to add.

5. Agree Trigger Points

This is simply to know when the moment to act on any given scenario has arrived, which will rely on accurate and timely data to make informed decisions.

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RECOVERY PHASE

Mission	Encourage public and business confidence for businesses to successfully operate in Sevenoaks in the context of post-COVID-19 restrictions.
Strategy	Promote the Recovery Plan. React quickly as a collaborative network.
Objectives	Measure success: footfall level, economic activity, level of investment, crime rates and other objectives agreed in the Recovery Plan.
Method	Use the existing Town Team (Sevenoaks Town Partnership) structure to progress the Recovery Plan involving all interested stakeholders. Gain a realistic starting position / baseline. Develop scenarios for multiple versions of the town’s future. Develop plan of actions for the future. Determine actions and strategic moves that are robust across the scenarios. Set trigger points for timescales for implementation.