

## CABINET - 18 JULY 2017

### City Centre Transport Improvements and Experimental Queen Street Closure

#### Report by Director for Planning and Place

#### Introduction

1. This report summarises the formal consultation undertaken on the proposed city centre transport improvements and experimental closure of Queen Street, including amendments to traffic regulation orders, bus stop clearways and provision of new zebra crossings between 25<sup>th</sup> May and 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2017.
2. **Cabinet is asked to note the consultation responses received and is recommended to approve the proposals as advertised. If it is agreed by Cabinet, the experimental closure of Queen Street will need to be referred to the Secretary of State for Transport for approval, because Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach have formally objected to the proposal.**

#### Background

3. During 2016, the county council consulted on proposals to close Queen Street to buses, taxis and private hire vehicles.
4. Officers reported to the Cabinet Member for Environment in November 2016 and Cabinet in December 2016 recommending that Queen Street be closed to buses on an experimental basis.
5. At the December meeting Cabinet resolved to “instruct officers to report to a future Cabinet meeting a proposal for an experimental closure of Queen Street to buses and taxis which addresses the concerns about conditions in St Aldate’s and High Street raised during the recent consultation and which does not rely on the bus turning facility at Worcester Street”. Cabinet also asked officers to consider prohibiting cycle access in Queen Street at all times.
6. Officers have since developed and consulted on a proposal for an experimental closure of Queen Street, as well as permanent city centre transport improvements including:
  - Measures to reduce congestion on the road and footways in St Aldate’s and the western end of High Street, primarily through more loading restrictions
  - Measures to improve various city centre streets and junctions and provide additional capacity for buses and bus passengers.
7. Having considered Cabinet’s request for cycling to be prohibited at all times, officers recommend that the existing cycle access arrangements (cycling permitted between 18:00 and 10:00 only) are retained for now, and reviewed

again as part of the monitoring of the proposed experimental closure to buses, taxis and private hire vehicles (if approved). The main reasons for this are that:

- Pedestrian flows in Queen Street are substantially higher between 10:00 and 18:00 and officers consider that the current restriction strikes an appropriate balance between accessibility for cyclists and pedestrian safety and comfort, by requiring cyclists to dismount at the busiest times of day;
- The current arrangements are in line with Cornmarket, which helps ensure compliance in both streets.

## Formal consultation on updated proposals – May/June 2017

8. Consultation on permanent city centre transport improvements, including permanent Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) proposals, and the experimental closure of Queen Street took place between 25<sup>th</sup> May and 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2017.
9. The consultation materials are at Annex 1. These consist of junction layout changes, TRO amendments, additional bus stops and layover spaces, relocation of the taxi rank on Queen Street, and some pavement widening. Additionally, bus operators produced a draft “bus stop allocations” document, which was also published for information.

### Overview of responses

10. In total, 143 responses (81 e-consultation questionnaire, 62 written) were received. A summary of the responses including officers’ comments is included at Annex 2. A file containing copies of the original responses is available in the Members’ Resource Centre.
11. In summary, the responses against the specific questions of the e-consultation were:

Proposal	Support		Object		Neither	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Experimental TRO prohibiting buses and taxis from Queen Street</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>33%</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>48%</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>19%</b>
Changes to loading bay provisions on High Street	24	29%	15	18%	43	52%
Proposed clearway provision on High Street and St Aldates	39	48%	8	10%	35	43%
Changes to Worcester Street / George Street junction	28	35%	24	30%	29	36%
Changes to taxi provision on Cornmarket	11	14%	32	40%	38	47%
Changes to Worcester Street / New Road / Park End Street junction (incl. zebra crossings)	42	47%	8	9%	39	44%

Changes to Worcester Street / George Street / Hythe Bridge Street junction	24	30%	19	23%	38	47%
Changes to St Aldates / Speedwell Street junction (incl. zebra crossings)	28	35%	25	31%	28	35%
Provision of additional bus stops and layovers on various streets	22	27%	25	31%	34	42%

12. The main themes raised during the consultation (both e-consultation and written) were associated with:

- Potential long walking distances between bus stops within the city centre following introduction of the experimental TRO;
- Impacts on bus journeys due to extra bus distance travelled leading to increased congestion and air pollution, particularly on High Street and St Aldate's;
- The general safety of pedestrians and cycling particularly at the proposed revised junction arrangements, including zebra crossings;
- The lack of, and need for, a safe and direct cross-city (east to west and vice versa) link for cyclists
- Use of Cornmarket by taxis for turning and an evening rank.

#### *Responses from main partners and stakeholders*

13. Oxford City Council fully support the experimental closure of Queen Street as it is an identified aim within the Oxford Core Strategy 2026. However, they have concerns over the proposed amendments to loading arrangements, particularly the impact on traders at the Covered Market and the need for additional enforcement for the proposed 'clearway' measure to be effective. They consider that care is required in relocating the taxi facility to Cornmarket, and in particular that the Turl Street / Market Street loop is not used for access. They also requested that a further assessment of the proposals impact on air quality is undertaken with suitable mitigation measures adopted.

14. Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach formally objected to the experimental TRO prohibiting buses on Queen Street, citing concerns about the impact on operating costs, reliability, journey times, walking distances to bus stops, pollution, and capacity for future growth. They feel the proposal is premature, inadequately justified and inconsistent with the council's policies.

15. No objections to the Queen Street experimental TRO were received from Thames Valley Police however they emphasised the need for it to be self-enforcing. Concerns were raised however with respect to the safety of pedestrians if taxis are permitted to enter, turn and wait on Cornmarket.

16. Councillor Susanna Pressel was pleased that ongoing safety concerns at the George Street/Worcester Street/Hythe Bridge Street junction were being addressed however could not support the proposal to move the taxi rank to Cornmarket and suggested an alternative on High Street near Carfax be considered. Clear demarcation of cycle lanes and more efficient enforcement of loading and waiting restrictions were also suggested.
17. The Westgate Oxford Alliance supports the proposals, including the experimental closure of Queen Street. They are keen to ensure the expanded Westgate centre benefits and integrates well with the rest of the city centre and consider that making Queen Street an inviting street, free from motor traffic, is important to this. They are also concerned about pedestrian safety in Queen Street should buses continue to use it once Westgate opens.
18. Oxford Pedestrians' Association supports fewer buses on Queen Street but not at the expense of St Aldate's. They also welcomed the proposals for zebra crossings on St Aldate's, Speedwell Street and Park End Street. They do not support the proposal for taxis to be moved to Cornmarket. They consider that the introduction of an additional bus stop on Hythe Bridge Street would add to congestion and air pollution so object to that particular proposal.
19. Oxford Civic Society supported elements of the proposals but raised a number of questions, concerns and suggestions, mostly relating to accessibility, safety and congestion.
20. Oxford Preservation Trust remain concerned about the negative impacts on the historic streets such as St Aldate's and High Street. In particular they are concerned that bus stops should not impact on the frontage of the Covered Market or Christ Church. OPT are pleased to see that the turning facility at New Road/Park End Street/Worcester Street does not form part of these proposals.
21. Cyclox made a number of requests for consideration, including raising concerns about lack of consistency with the council's longer term aspirations for cycling. They welcomed some of the proposals but made suggestions for design improvements. They also requested a trial of 24 hour cycling in Queen Street at some point during the 18 month experimental closure, and highlighted the importance of east-west cycling routes through the city centre.
22. Oxford High Street Association and ROX both object to the proposals, citing concerns about the impact on historic streets and buildings due to increased numbers of buses and stops on the High Street in particular, as well as concerns about safety, congestion and air quality in the city centre more widely. They feel that the proposals ignore the needs of businesses outside of the Westgate Shopping Centre.
23. City of Oxford Licensed Taxi Association (COLTA) offered numerous suggestions for taxi routes and ranks in and around the city centre for further consideration including a request for an additional rank on High Street nearer to Carfax.

## Officer response to consultation feedback

24. Officer responses to individual comments received on the proposals are at Annex 2. Overall responses are below.

### *Response to comments on the experimental TRO for the closure of Queen Street*

25. The purpose of experimental TROs is to test a proposal for a permanent TRO, and gather evidence on its effects before deciding on a permanent arrangement. Many comments were received on the experimental TRO (all at Annex 2), which Cabinet is asked to consider.

26. The objections from Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach to the proposed experimental closure of Queen Street are summarised in Annex 2, along with officer responses. These objections mean that the experimental TRO cannot be implemented without the approval of the Secretary of State for Transport. If Cabinet approves the experimental TRO, the matter will therefore be referred to the Department for Transport, who have indicated that it will take six to eight weeks for the Secretary of State to reach a decision.

27. Cabinet is also asked to note that approval of the experimental TRO does not in any way represent approval of a permanent change. An experimental TRO can run for up to 18 months, and comments on the experiment can be submitted to the council at any time during the first six months of the experimental period. The council must consider all those comments before the proposal can be made permanent. If bus operators object during the six month period, a public inquiry would have to be held before the proposal could be made permanent.

28. Having considered the comments received, and with reference to the statutory regime as set out in Annex 5, officers consider that the experimental TRO should proceed as advertised, subject to a review by the Secretary of State for Transport. In summary, the key reasons for this conclusion are:

- It is clearly important for the Westgate centre and the West End more broadly to integrate well with the rest of the 'traditional' city centre, and Queen Street is the principal pedestrian link between these areas;
- Officers remain concerned about the implications of continued bus access for pedestrian safety and amenity in Queen Street following a substantial increase in pedestrian numbers resulting from Westgate and other city centre developments;
- The experimental approach put forward recognises that there is a legitimate and important debate about Queen Street's future, with reasonable arguments on all sides. If the experimental closure does not proceed, the debate will not be resolved. The experiment affords the opportunity to learn a great deal about the likely positive and negative effects of a permanent closure, whilst also allowing the effects of the Westgate centre to be observed. This evidence will inform a final decision on Queen Street's future.

### *Proposed permanent changes*

29. Apart from the Queen Street element, all the other proposals consulted on are considered to be permanent changes. These works are not conditional on the approval of the experimental TRO for Queen Street and will commence as soon as possible should the recommendations of this report be accepted. Some of these changes involve traffic regulations of one kind or another (e.g. changes to parking, or new crossings) which were formally advertised for consultation. Others are road layout proposals which do not require formal consultation.
30. Many comments were made on the formally advertised proposals; individual responses to these are in Annex 2. Having considered the comments received, and with reference to the statutory regime as set out in Annex 5, officers consider that the proposals as advertised are still the most appropriate solution, for the reasons set out in the annexes. In summary:
- The proposals will address the points Cabinet instructed officers to consider in December 2016;
  - Concerns have been raised in the consultation, but none are considered to alter the fundamental rationale for the changes and there is a good level of support for many of the changes;
  - Design changes can be made to respond to some of the main concerns, without changing the proposed regulations themselves.
31. On the third point, officers will be investigating design changes (including further consultation as required) to address the concerns raised about some of the proposals. The safety audit process is also underway and may lead to design changes.

### **Financial and staff implications**

32. The approved capital programme includes for these proposals as part of the Connections to Oxford Station project. The total budget for the scheme (including costs to date) is £1.470m and it is funded using the following sources:
- County council capital £0.170m
  - LEP £1.300m
33. The timetable remains challenging and will require considerable staff resources up to end October 2017. The delivery of some measures of a less priority may remain after this date and where appropriate these will be delivered from January 2018 after the extended works embargo related to the opening of the Westgate centre. Officers are able to draw in additional resources through its contract with Skanska, and this is expected to be sufficient to deliver the required work.

## **Equality implications**

34. An impact assessment of the experimental closure of Queen Street, including analysis into walking distances between bus stops, has been undertaken and is included at Annex 3 to this report. Compared to the situation before the Westgate works started, there will be net gain of 15 new bus stops in the city centre, and many routes will serve a greater number of stops. Average walking distances between key city centre destinations and bus stops will therefore **reduce** by a very small amount compared to the previous situation.
35. Equality implications of the proposed permanent changes are discussed in Annex 4.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **36. The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to:**

- (a) consider the contents of this report, including the consultation responses received, in the context of the statutory framework as set out in Annex 5;**
- (b) approve the proposal for an experimental TRO restricting bus, taxi and private hire access to Queen Street as advertised, subject to approval by the Secretary of State for Transport;**
- (c) instruct officers to develop a monitoring framework for the experimental closure of Queen Street, in consultation with (amongst others) the bus operators, city council, and Cabinet Member for Environment;**
- (d) instruct officers to continue to develop options for city centre bus routing – including options for Queen Street – in partnership with Oxford City Council and bus operators and drawing on monitoring of the experimental closure when available;**
- (e) approve the retention of the existing cycle access arrangements in Queen Street (cycling permitted 18:00 – 10:00);**
- (f) approve the proposal for zebra crossings in St Aldate's, Speedwell Street, New Road, Park End Street and Worcester Street as advertised;**
- (g) approve the proposal for changes to loading, waiting and stopping in High Street and St Aldate's as advertised;**
- (h) approve the changes to bus stop clearways as advertised;**
- (i) note that design changes may be made to the published proposals to deal with concerns raised in the consultation and as part of the safety audit process. Certain changes may require further consultation.**

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Background papers: Document A – Draft Traffic Regulation Order(s)  
Document B – Copies of all consultation responses

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