Division(s): West Central Oxford, North Hinksey and Wytham

CABINET MEMBER FOR TRANSPORT – 24 MARCH 2011

FRIDESWIDE SQUARE DESIGN APPROACHES

Report by Deputy Director of Environment & Economy – Highways & Transport

Introduction

1. This report outlines progress on exciting and ambitious plans to transform Frideswide Square, one of Oxfordshire's most important junctions and public spaces. Various different design approaches have been considered and consulted upon. These are explained in the report and a plan of the square is attached at Annex 1.

2. The square provides a vital link between the major road routes into Oxford. It is therefore of strategic importance to Oxfordshire's road network, handling tens of thousands of journeys from inside and outside the city every day. In particular, it is one of the key bottlenecks preventing reliable journey times for residents living outside the city but who work within it.

3. Oxford rail station is one of the fastest growing stations in the country, with 35% growth in passenger numbers between 2005 and 2010. An estimated 5.2 million people pass through the station each year. Frideswide Square is the main point of arrival and departure for people using the station, and therefore has an increasingly important transport and public realm function. Its improvement is an important part of the strategic proposals for the improvement of Oxford Rail station, for east-west rail and the Evergreen 3 proposals, which bring with them much wider benefits for the Oxfordshire economy and growth areas of Bicester and Science Vale.

4. Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford City Council, working together as partners in the West End Partnership, would like to transform Frideswide Square into a successful urban space for the public to enjoy whilst also tackling the transport problems associated with the current square and the streets leading to it. The scheme is a major part of Transform Oxford, the county council's ambitious plans to transform the pedestrian experience in Oxford city centre.

5. Improvements to Frideswide Square will need to be accompanied by alterations to the streets and junctions leading to the square to maximise the scheme's benefits. Proposals for these junctions will therefore be developed in parallel with the Frideswide Square proposals as an integral part of this project. Some of these changes (for example, changes that affect traffic flows at nearby junctions) will need to be implemented before the improvements to the square, but others (for example, complementary public realm improvements) may be delivered afterwards.

Policy context

6. The West End Area Action Plan (AAP), part of Oxford City Council's Local Development Framework, sets the planning policy framework for the renaissance of Oxford's West End. Policy WE6 of the West End AAP states that "Frideswide Square and the railway station forecourt will be improved to become more attractive, welcoming and better functioning spaces." A plan of the Oxford West End renaissance area, showing the new street layout proposed for the area, is at Annex 2.

7. Oxfordshire County Council's second and current Local Transport Plan (LTP2), which will be replaced by LTP3 in April 2011, supports the renaissance of the West End and the transport improvements required to make it a success. The draft LTP3 states that "Frideswide Square will be redesigned, including significant improvements to the square's appearance and environmental quality as a key gateway to the city."

Ambitions consultation

8. In spring 2010, local organisations were consulted on their ambitions for Frideswide Square. Organisations were asked what they feel is wrong with the current layout of Frideswide Square and how they would like to see it improved. 80% of respondents were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the current layout. More details on this consultation are at Annex 3.

Scheme objectives

9. Drawing on the ambitions consultation and the broad objectives set out in the West End Area Action Plan, the following four equally important objectives for improvements to Frideswide Square have been set:

- Improve the public realm
- Promote sustainable transport
- Reduce delays in the square and on the approaches
- Simplify the layout

Design approaches

10. Four possible design approaches for Frideswide Square have been developed. Three of these design approaches contained sub-options which showed different ways of applying similar principles. The design approaches considered and a summary of the project team's assessment of them against the project objectives are at Annex 4.

11. The design approach recommended to local organisations was approach D: removal of traffic signals in favour of a scheme drawing heavily on “shared space” principles and including compact roundabouts, greatly reduced carriageway areas, courtesy crossings, and landscaping. This is an innovative approach, drawing on best practice from the UK and elsewhere. The fundamental principle behind this approach is that the design should result in slow, smoothly flowing traffic, thereby creating a safe and attractive environment for all road users.

12. Three sub-options were developed within approach D. Whilst all three options apply the same design principles, the layout of the pedestrian spaces is very different in each option. The sub-options are illustrated in Annex 4.

13. During summer 2010, local organisations were consulted on the possible design approaches. Details of the consultation, including the project team’s responses to the main concerns raised, are at Annex 3.

14. The majority of respondents, including Oxford City Council, supported the project team’s recommendation that approach D is the approach that best meets the project objectives. However, some significant questions and concerns were raised about this approach. The main concerns are addressed in Annex 3. The most popular sub-option was the “road split” option. The “central road” and “northern road” options were jointly second most popular.

15. Annexes 5, 6 and 7 contain assessments of safety, sustainability and equality impacts for the proposed design approach (approach D). Two points raised by these assessments are particularly important and are discussed below.

16. First, the equality impact assessment states that the proposed removal of signal-controlled crossings may make the square more difficult to use for some visually impaired pedestrians. The project team fully understands these concerns and has discussed this issue in detail with people with varying degrees of sight and their representatives. The team has also sought advice from the county council’s Visual Impairment Team. There is more work to do on this issue, which is likely to result in specific features for visually impaired pedestrians being incorporated into the design at the next stage of design work.

17. Second, the road safety assessment states that approach D may increase accidents in the square because of the risks to cyclists at roundabouts. Cycle accidents are particularly common at roundabouts. However, as the assessment states, the actual safety performance will be dependent on the detailed design of the proposed roundabouts and the square in general.

18. Research suggests that cyclist safety at roundabouts can be improved by using continental style roundabout geometry, which reduces traffic speeds and eliminates certain potential conflict points. The roundabouts proposed for Frideswide Square use continental geometry. Furthermore, the overall design of the square will be aimed at keeping traffic speeds low, with raised crossings, low kerbs, narrow carriageways and careful use of materials to

create a space that looks very different from a normal highway junction in the UK. The project team is confident that by continuing to work closely with local cycling groups a design can be created that will be safe.

Design approaches – conclusions

19. The next stage of design and consultation will involve more detailed design and traffic modelling work, which is expensive. The more options remain under consideration, the greater the costs. It is therefore proposed that only two of the three options within approach D should be taken forward.

20. Within approach D, the road split option emerged as the overall preference among those who responded to the consultation. However, some concerns were raised about the user-friendliness and impact on the traffic flow of the split bus stops, as well as the usability of the central pedestrian space. The project team proposes that this option should be taken forward for further design work and public consultation, but that the layout of the bus stops is revisited and that the usability of the central space is explored in more detail because the function and maintenance of this space would be critical to the success of this option.

21. The northern road and central road options were roughly equally supported in the consultation. The project team considers that the central road option has certain distinct advantages over the other two options, in particular the fact that generous open space is provided adjacent to all of the main frontages. The city council's preference is for the central road option (see Annex 3). The project team therefore proposes that the central road option is also taken forward for further design work and public consultation.

22. The project team considers the northern road option to be the weakest of the three, because it creates oddly shaped pedestrian spaces, narrows the pedestrian space next to the south-east corner of the Saïd Business School (where pedestrian flows are highest), and gives undue emphasis to Hythe Bridge Street over Park End Street.

23. Given the views of stakeholders and the project team's own assessment of the pros and cons of the three options, it is proposed that no further design work should be done on the northern road option and that it should not be presented for public consultation. However, this option would still represent a major improvement over the *existing* arrangement and in the unlikely event that both of the two preferred options (road split and central road) are found to be undeliverable for technical or cost reasons, the northern road option would be a good alternative and could be resurrected at a later stage in the project if required.

24. The project team will take into account the potential ongoing maintenance costs of both options in its consideration of which scheme to recommend for construction.

Funding strategy and next steps

25. An accurate construction cost for this scheme will not be known until more design work has been completed. The total cost is likely to be in the region of £5 million, including the works required on the streets and junctions approaching the square. Funding for construction is unlikely to be available from the county council's own capital programme for the foreseeable future. Some developer contributions are available, but even taking these into account there is a funding shortfall of at least £3 million. Officers are exploring different bidding options for the Local Sustainable Transport Fund and Regional Growth Fund for various key infrastructure projects in Oxfordshire. Frideswide Square could potentially form part of a bid for one of these funds. Strong competition from other authorities means it is vital to have well-developed proposals whose costs and benefits are well quantified. With this in mind, the proposed next steps for the year ahead are as follows:

- Further design work and consultation with local organisations and road users to improve the designs (spring/summer 2011)
- Produce more detailed designs and complete traffic modelling (spring/summer 2011)
- Public consultation on proposed designs (autumn 2011)
- Amend design following consultation (winter 2011)
- Report to Cabinet for scheme approval (spring 2012)

26. Throughout this period, starting immediately, the project team will develop and continually update a funding business case which will form the basis of any bids for government or other funding. If funding becomes available, construction could start as early as autumn 2012.

Risks and financial and staffing implications

27. A project risk assessment is at Annex 8.

28. Design, traffic modelling and consultation during 2011/12 is expected to cost approximately £300,000. This includes design work required on the streets and junctions approaching the square. Funding is available from the West End Partnership and the county council's capital programme to cover these costs. This includes internal staff costs, which will be charged to the project.

RECOMMENDATION

29. **The Cabinet Member for Transport is RECOMMENDED to agree to:**

(a) proceeding with design work and public consultation on design approach D ("road split" and "central road" only);

(b) developing a business case to support a bid for any appropriate government funding.

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Background papers:

Ambitions consultation results
Public opinion survey results
Design approaches consultation document
Design approach consultation results

These are available:

- myconsultations.oxfordshire.gov.uk/consult.ti/frideswidesquaredesignapproaches/
- in the members' resource centre
- in print, on request.

West End Area Action Plan - available at www.oxford.gov.uk/planningpolicy

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