

Division(s): All Oxford divisions

## **CABINET – 13 OCTOBER 2020**

### **EMERGENCY ACTIVE TRAVEL - TEMPORARY BUS GATES (OXFORD CITY CENTRE)**

**Report by Director for Planning & Place**

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

1. **Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to**
  - (a) **recognise the council's current commitments to deliver a wide range of transport initiatives across the county along with its ongoing focus on Oxford city;**
  - (b) **welcome the level of response received to the temporary bus gates (Oxford city centre) survey and the wider debate that this stimulated;**
  - (c) **recognise the wide range of important issues raised by those opposing, supporting, and undecided about the temporary city centre bus gates;**
  - (d) **not proceed with the temporary bus gates both in recognition of the split of local opinion and in consideration of their likely impact upon the council's wider strategic transport strategy and resources, and to use the invaluable feedback received to inform the development of the council's wider transport strategy;**
  - (e) **subject to (d) above, work with Oxford City Council and other partners to accelerate, where feasible, work on the council's wider transport strategy including the provision of bus gates as part of the Connecting Oxford programme, as well as the Zero Emission Zone, the active transport programme, and measures to improve bus journey times and encourage COVID-secure bus use.**

#### **Executive Summary**

2. Cabinet endorsed the principle of city centre bus gates as part of the Connecting Oxford project in January 2020, recognising the value of bus gates as an effective measure to reduce traffic, prioritise bus movement, and free up road space for pedestrians and cyclists. This view is supported by Oxford City Council. Work on Connecting Oxford continues, with implementation currently programmed from 2023. Extensive public and stakeholder consultation is

planned to develop and refine the Connecting Oxford proposals over the next three years.

3. The question for Cabinet is not therefore whether to support the development of city centre bus gates as part of the city's medium-term transport plan (Cabinet supported this in January) but whether to support the implementation of temporary city centre bus gates as a short term response to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Considering i) the feedback from the public, businesses, and other stakeholders; ii) the projected costs and staffing implications; and iii) the risk that the temporary bus gates jeopardise the delivery of Connecting Oxford and other strategic priorities, officers recommend that the temporary bus gates are not progressed.
5. Instead it is recommended that work is accelerated, where feasible, on Connecting Oxford (including the permanent city centre bus gate proposals), the Zero Emission Zone and the wider sustainable and active transport programme, including specific measures to enable and incentivise COVID-safe bus use. The recent experience with the temporary bus gate proposal has not altered officers' view that new bus gates remain an important part of the transport strategy for the city, but has underlined the need for those proposals to be well-considered, thoroughly consulted on, and supported by appropriate complementary transport improvements.

## **Background**

6. Connecting Oxford was launched in autumn 2019, with proposals for bus gates in Oxford city centre and the city's Eastern Arc, as well as a workplace parking levy for the Eastern Arc, and a large package of supporting transport improvements across the city. The Connecting Oxford proposals build on policies in the Oxford Transport Strategy, which is part of the Local Transport Plan adopted in 2015.
7. Over 3000 responses were received to a public and stakeholder consultation on Connecting Oxford in autumn 2019. The outcomes of this consultation were reported to Cabinet in January 2020. Cabinet resolved to "endorse the overall approach proposed as the basis for further scheme and business case development of Connecting Oxford proposals in partnership with Oxford City Council". £1.6m was allocated to the development of a detailed scheme and full business case.
8. Extensive technical work (including traffic modelling) and public and stakeholder consultation is planned over the next couple of years to develop and refine Connecting Oxford. Implementation is currently programmed for 2023.
9. The Oxford Zero Emission Zone (ZEZ) is also part of the Local Transport Plan. There have been several consultations on the ZEZ over the past two years.

10. The formal consultation on the ZEZ Red Zone (covering the heart of the city centre) started in March 2020 but was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The consultation is due to resume in autumn 2020, with implementation currently programmed for summer 2021.
11. The ZEZ Green Zone (covering the city centre) was due to be developed further during 2020 but has not been progressed because COVID-19 related transport work has taken priority. In January 2020 the published programme for the Green Zone indicated implementation in 2021/22, but this assumed the project would be developed during 2020. Unless the scheme is accelerated, implementation during 2021/22 is now unlikely.
12. In addition to Connecting Oxford and the ZEZ, the county council has an extensive programme of sustainable, active travel schemes in Oxford in the next four years, including £44.5m for the following schemes:
  - £9.1m for Botley Road (Growth Deal/National Productivity Investment Fund/Developer Funding)
  - £12m for Banbury Road (Growth Deal – subject to further Growth Board decision)
  - £12.5m for Woodstock Road (Growth Deal)
  - £10.6m for other cycling schemes in the city (Growth Deal)
  - £340k for nine new controlled parking zones across the city to remove commuter parking from residential areas, with a further 15 zones in development. (Community Infrastructure Levy – Oxford City Council)
13. The county council is spending £600,000 on Tranche 1 Emergency Active Travel measures (of which £200,000 was allocated to Oxford) and has submitted a bid for a further £4.5m of Department for Transport funding for Tranche 2. £3.25m of the Tranche 2 submission was for introducing schemes in Oxford aimed at encouraging active travel, including cycling schemes and low traffic neighbourhoods at various locations in the city.
14. In February 2020, the county council, city council and bus operators submitted a joint £50m Expression of Interest to the Department for Transport's All Electric Bus Town Fund. This funding would contribute to the electrification of Oxford's bus network. A decision on this submission remains outstanding.
15. Temporary bus gates in Oxford city centre were announced in July 2020 as part of the city and county councils' transport response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to be introduced rapidly in August 2020 as a temporary, emergency measure without public consultation. Following the initial public response to the proposals and in light of independent legal advice, an online survey was carried out during late July and early August to gather public and stakeholder views on the proposed bus gates. Over 7200 responses were received.
16. Although city centre bus gates form part of Connecting Oxford, the council emphasised from the outset that the proposed temporary bus gates were not

simply a premature implementation of part of Connecting Oxford, and that they were likely to differ in numerous ways from the solution eventually developed for Connecting Oxford. The differences may be in location, hours of operation, exemptions and method of enforcement. However, this has been a difficult message to communicate to the public and, perhaps inevitably, many people have conflated the temporary bus gates and Connecting Oxford.

17. This report summarises the outcomes of the online survey and officers' assessment of proceeding with the temporary bus gates, and explains – in the context of an already highly ambitious programme of sustainable transport projects for Oxford – why officers consider it premature to proceed with the proposed temporary bus gates.

### Online survey and email feedback

18. An online survey was available between 28 July and 9 August 2020. In total, 7,266 responses to the survey were received. This is considered to be an exceptionally large response.
19. An independent external research agency was instructed to provide short term resource to meet the reporting deadline for Cabinet, whilst importantly also providing a thorough, robust and unbiased analysis of the consultation results. A full independent report of the survey responses is at Annex 1.

#### *Headline results – online survey*

20. The majority of respondents were Oxford residents (72%) or individuals living outside of Oxford (22%); the remainder of responses is made up of organisations (businesses, universities etc - 4%), groups/organisations (1%) and councillors (<1%).
21. Table 1 shows the overall levels of support from these different respondent types. “Organisations” has been further broken down into sub-categories – business, university/college, school, and healthcare.

<b>Table 1: headline survey responses, by respondent type</b>				
<b>Respondent type (Number of responses)</b>	<b>Good idea</b>	<b>Good idea, concerned about the details</b>	<b>Bad idea</b>	<b>Need more information or Don't know</b>
<b>ALL RESPONDENTS (7262)</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Oxford resident (5227)</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>3%</b>

<b>Individual living outside Oxford (1576)</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Organisation (312)</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>10%</b>
Business (161)	9%	11%	70%	9%
University/college (53)	8%	32%	49%	11%
School (20)	0%	30%	65%	5%
Healthcare (16)	6%	50%	19%	25%

*Reasons for support/opposition – online survey*

22. Some respondents made comments to support their view. Of those who made comments, the main reasons given for supporting or opposing the proposals are listed below. The number of respondents mentioning each reason is given in brackets.
23. The main reasons respondents gave for supporting the proposals are:
- Reduce traffic (246)
  - Promote walking and cycling (232)
  - Reduce pollution (206)
  - Encourage public transport use (97)
  - Makes the city centre more attractive (60)
  - Reduce private car usage (54)
24. The main reasons given for opposing the proposals are:
- Increase congestion in other areas of Oxford (632)
  - Concerns relating to COVID-19 (552)
  - Limit access to shops (396)
  - Damage economy (360)
  - Limit access to workplace (250)
  - Increase journey/limited access to children’s schools (228)
  - Increase pollution (225)
  - Divide city (218)
  - Concerns over the access for the vulnerable (200)
25. There was significant support for certain exemptions to be applied (e.g. to healthcare professionals, businesses and residents) and for changes to the times of operation or locations of the bus gates. If the scheme were to proceed,

officers recommend that these features of the scheme are reviewed, acknowledging that this would take considerable time and resources to resolve satisfactorily and achieve a balanced outcome to ensure that the overall benefits of the scheme are not eroded. Further analysis of the survey feedback is the report at Annex 1, including analysis of social media posts.

*Email feedback*

26. The county council received around 300 emails in response to the temporary bus gate proposals – 77% from individuals, 10% from businesses, 8% from universities, schools and colleges, and 5% from others.
27. These emails have been analysed to identify and categorise the comments made. In total, 1517 comments were made in the emails received. Of these, 1462 (96%) were negative towards the proposed temporary bus gates, and 55 (4%) were positive. ‘Unsolicited’ email feedback tends to be largely negative, as those who are dissatisfied with proposals are much more likely to get in touch. These figures therefore need to be viewed alongside the (much more balanced) online survey results.
28. The main themes from the email feedback are summarised in Table 2.

<b>Table 2: main themes in email feedback, in descending order of number of mentions</b>	
<b>Positive comments</b>	<b>Negative comments</b>
Make the city centre more attractive	Economic damage
Promote walking & cycling	Reduce access to shops/services
Reduce traffic	Increase congestion in other areas of Oxford

<b>Positive comments</b>	<b>Negative comments</b>
Should be made permanent	Reduce access to work
Reduce pollution	Lack of consultation
Reduce private car use	Increase pollution
Encourage public transport use	Exemptions needed for residents/businesses
	Public transport inadequate
	COVID-19 concerns

	Divide city
	Poor cycle network
	Concerns over access for the vulnerable

*Officer response*

29. The survey generated a significant response, even though it was open for a relatively short time. Strong arguments and legitimate concerns were expressed on both sides of the argument, and the polarised response suggests the proposals would need to be amended considerably to achieve any degree of consensus (acknowledging that complete consensus is unrealistic).
30. The main reasons given for supporting the proposals align with the aims of Connecting Oxford and the city and county councils' transport policies in general. There is clearly significant support for radical intervention to reduce traffic and pollution in Oxford, and for bus gates to form part of this strategy: this was also borne out by the response to the Connecting Oxford consultation in autumn 2019.
31. However, while half of respondents supported the temporary bus gates (taking 'good idea' and 'good idea but concerned about the details' together), the reasons for that support relate mostly to medium- and long-term policy outcomes, rather than short term COVID-19-related imperatives. Fewer than 1% of those who gave a supportive response referred to COVID-19 in their comments, so it is reasonable to conclude that supporters of the bus gates want permanent change.
32. The main reasons for opposing the proposals could, to some degree at least, be addressed by i) better evidence to support the proposals, including traffic modelling; ii) amendments to the scheme to allow for essential access requirements; iii) comprehensive supporting measures, such as improved public transport, and safer cycle routes, and iv) reduced prevalence of COVID-19.
33. The councils are taking great care to secure public and stakeholder support for Connecting Oxford and the Zero Emission Zone, by tailoring the proposals to try and achieve a degree of consensus, and ensure that all points of view and practical needs have been considered in the planning of the schemes.
34. It should be possible, through on-going engagement with residents and businesses (and further technical work) to identify a solution for the bus gates as part of Connecting Oxford that delivers the medium- and long-term policy outcomes sought by the supporters whilst addressing many of the legitimate concerns of the objectors. However, this will take time and resources, and is not likely to be possible in time for bus gates to form part of the councils' short-term COVID-19 response.

## Financial and Staff Implications

### *Costs to date*

35. Costs to date are summarised in Table 3. It is important to note the officer time committed to this activity has not been backfilled, which has delayed work on other priorities such as the ZEZ and supporting the planning process, however, most of the work completed to date will be useful for Connecting Oxford, even if the temporary bus gates do not proceed.

<b>Table 3: Summary of costs to date (all 2020/21)</b>			
<b>Type</b>	<b>Spend</b>	<b>Funding</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Legal fees	£3,000	£3,000	All funded by county council from existing revenue budget – N10570
On-line Survey analysis	£10,500	£10,500	
Officer Staff Time	£30,000	£30,000	
<b>Sub-total Year to date</b>	<b>£43,500</b>	<b>£43,500</b>	

### *Future costs*

36. The cost of implementing the bus gates themselves is estimated to be approximately £10,000 per bus gate – so £20,000 for the two bus gates initially proposed. However, there are other costs which also need to be considered.
37. Directional signage would be required to ensure drivers approach the city centre via the correct route once the bus gates are in place. Approximately 120 signs would need to be amended around the city and on the ring road, including the A34. The initial broad cost estimate for this is approximately £60,000.
38. Enforcement equipment and systems are estimated to cost approximately £70,000 for the initial setup. There would be ongoing monthly costs for maintenance, technical support and scheme administration, but it is not possible to estimate these accurately at this stage.
39. Some external design, legal and technical advice would be required to develop and consult further on the proposals. Estimated cost approximately £60,000.
40. Staff costs from November 2020 to March 2021 would be expected to continue at roughly the same rate as during July and August 2020 – around £15,000 per month; £75,000 in total.
41. The staff costs after March 2021 should then reduce, probably by about 50% - so £7,500 per month until September 2021; £45,000 in total.



42. Unless existing officers were diverted from other priorities (e.g. Connecting Oxford, the Zero Emission Zone, delivering the Growth Deal, supporting the planning process, and the DfT-funded Active Travel programme linked to COVID-19), these staff costs would be in addition to 'business as usual' staff costs.
43. Future costs are summarised in Table 4.

<b>Table 4: Summary of estimated future costs (continues overleaf)</b>			
<b>Type</b>	<b>Estimated cost</b>	<b>Funding</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<b>2020/21</b>			
Implementation of two bus gates	£20,000	£30,000 CIL funding (Oxford City Council)	City council funding would be subject to their approval of the final scheme
Directional signage	£60,000	£0	See paragraph 47 for potential funding sources (none confirmed at this stage)
Enforcement systems and equipment	£70,000	£0	
Legal and technical fees	£60,000	£0	
Officer Staff Time	£75,000	£0	
<b>Sub-total Future costs 2020/21</b>	<b>£285,000</b>	<b>£30,000</b>	

<b>Table 4 (continued): Summary of estimated future costs</b>			
<b>Type</b>	<b>Estimated cost</b>	<b>Funding</b>	<b>Comment</b>
<b>2021/22</b>			
Officer Staff Time	£45,000	£0	See paragraph 47 for potential funding sources (none confirmed at this stage)
Monitoring & evaluation	£25,000	£0	
<b>Sub-total Future costs 2021/22</b>	<b>£70,000</b>	<b>£0</b>	
<b>Future costs - all years</b>			
<b>Sub-total All future costs</b>	<b>£355,000</b>	<b>£30,000 CIL funding (Oxford City Council)</b>	

44. The total estimated cost of the scheme is estimated to be approximately £398,500 - £328,500 in 2020/21 and £70,000 in 2021/22.

### *Funding*

45. The costs incurred to date have been accommodated within existing county council revenue budgets.
46. Oxford City Council has allocated £30,000 of Community Infrastructure Levy funds towards the temporary bus gates. This was identified in July when the assumption was that it would be possible to implement the bus gates as an emergency measure with minimal or no consultation.
47. No further funding has been identified at this stage. Possible funding sources could include:
- Increased city council contribution
  - Held developer contributions
  - Projected income from penalty charges at the temporary bus gates (note this source would cease if the temporary bus gates were removed shortly after introduction in response to monitoring)
  - Existing county council staffing and non-staffing revenue budgets
  - The Bus Journey Time Reliability Fund already held by the county council
48. If Cabinet decide to proceed with the temporary bus gates, suitable funding sources would need to be identified.

## **Risk management**

### *Risks associated with implementing temporary bus gates*

49. The implementation of temporary city centre bus gates would carry substantial financial, service delivery and reputational risks.
50. As set out in the previous section, the costs of the temporary bus gates including officer time could reach £398,800. It is possible that some of these costs would be recovered in the form of penalty charge notices, but since the objective of the scheme is to remove traffic, efforts would be made to reduce non-compliance (and therefore penalty charges) to the absolute minimum. It is also possible that the temporary bus gates could be removed after implementation, if monitoring suggests this is necessary. Income from penalty charges could not therefore be relied upon, and it is currently not clear how else the scheme would be funded.

51. Unless the staff time required to implement the bus gates were covered by employing additional staff, the scheme would divert staff resources from other strategic priorities, such as delivering the Growth Deal, Connecting Oxford, the Zero Emission Zone, supporting the planning process, and the DfT-funded Active Travel programme linked to COVID-19.
52. As referred to in paragraph 16, it has proved impossible to separate the proposed temporary bus gates from Connecting Oxford in the minds of the public and stakeholders. Many opponents felt the temporary bus gates were an attempt to implement Connecting Oxford prematurely, using COVID-19 as a reason. Given this reaction, proceeding with the temporary bus gates risks undermining public confidence and trust in the councils, and in particular undermining support for transformational, radical sustainable transport schemes such as Connecting Oxford and the Zero Emission Zone.

*Risks associated with not implementing temporary bus gates*

53. If the scheme does not proceed there is a risk that traffic levels in Oxford city centre will rise to previous pre-COVID levels or higher, with the result that it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve the desired outcomes for active travel, buses, and economic recovery. The county's bus network is currently being supported heavily by the government's COVID-19 Bus Services Support Grant (CBSSG). When this funding ends, the bus network (which in Oxford previously operated almost entirely commercially, without council support) may be substantially curtailed if bus use does not recover. For this reason, officers recommend that alternatives are pursued urgently if the decision is taken not to progress the bus gates further (see paragraph 60).
54. Not proceeding with the temporary bus gate proposals also carries the risk that the general principle of bus gates is perceived to have been tested with the public and stakeholders, and rejected. This can be relatively easily countered; both the autumn 2019 Connecting Oxford consultation and the recent online survey on the temporary bus gates reveal high levels of support for radical, traffic-reducing schemes in Oxford. Moreover, the concerns raised by residents, businesses and others should be possible to address (fully or partly) by refining the idea of bus gates as part of Connecting Oxford. This process will take time and resources, neither of which is available in the short term for the temporary bus gates, but is available for Connecting Oxford, following Cabinet's decision in January 2020.
55. The Tranche 2 Active Travel programme includes proposals for bus gates in East Oxford. These have not been developed in any detail yet. Their primary purpose is to support the creation of local low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) in East Oxford, not (as in the case of the city centre temporary bus gates) to deliver citywide strategic changes to the road network and travel patterns.
56. The council should apply the lessons from the city centre temporary bus gates in formulating the detail of the Tranche 2 proposals. This should include careful

consideration of the opportunities for Tranche 2 to strengthen, rather than weaken, existing schemes like Connecting Oxford.

## **COVID-19 impacts and recovery**

### *Rationale for the temporary bus gates*

57. The rationale for the bus gates as a COVID-19 recovery measure, as set out in the information published as part of the online survey, is to:
- *“Enable safe walking and cycling conditions, in line with government instructions to all transport authorities, to provide an alternative to bus travel.*
  - *Ensure buses continue to be able to move around the city efficiently as traffic levels start to return to more normal levels. This will reduce waiting times, reduce crowding on buses, and reduce the amount of time people spend on buses. In conjunction with steps being taken by bus operators, this will make bus travel as ‘COVID-safe’ as possible. This is important for economic recovery as around two-thirds of city centre shopping and leisure visitors came by bus before the start of the pandemic.*
  - *Retain some of the environmental benefits of lockdown, particularly reduced traffic levels and the resulting reduced noise and air pollution.” (Online survey page, published 28 July 2020).*
58. These objectives remain valid. The temporary bus gates were initially seen as a relatively quick, low-cost way of making progress towards these goals as an emergency measure in response to highly exceptional circumstances.
59. However, it is clear from the public reaction to the scheme that it would not be possible to implement temporary bus gates without either i) taking much more time to develop a proposal that addresses people’s concerns or ii) implementing a scheme that does not address those concerns, and therefore risks causing serious practical problems for individuals and businesses during what is already a challenging time. Either way, the scheme would be expensive and controversial to deliver, and risks diverting both council resources and public support away from Connecting Oxford and other strategic priorities, as set out in the previous section.

### *Alternatives to the bus gates*

60. If, as recommended, the temporary bus gates do not proceed, officers recommend that alternatives to achieve some of the same benefits are explored and progressed as quickly as possible, including:
- Acceleration, where feasible, of the Connecting Oxford and Zero Emission Zone programmes, in particular the ZEZ Green Zone. As well as reducing traffic and pollution, the ZEZ Green Zone would raise

significant revenue which could help fund some of the measures below, particularly the bus schemes.

- Acceleration and expansion of the council's existing £1m per annum bus journey time reliability fund, focusing on maximum impact schemes in and around Oxford such as signal timing changes, parking/loading restrictions and other traffic management schemes to speed up buses. Traffic signals should prioritise bus movements unless there are exceptional network management reasons why this cannot be done.
- Other measures to enable and incentivise COVID-safe bus use, could include:
  - i. Exploring the role for demand responsive transport
  - ii. Partnership working with bus operators to promote COVID-safe bus use through joint marketing and communications
  - iii. Extending free Park & Ride car parking
  - iv. Seeking co-benefits for buses through the Tranche 2 Emergency Active Travel Programme, if funded
  - v. Improved network co-ordination to reduce the impact of roadworks on bus journey times.
- Re-prioritisation of existing Growth Deal funding for cycling to focus improvements on cycle routes to the city centre (where reliance on bus use pre-COVID was highest). This would be guided by the Local Cycling & Walking Investment Plan (LCWIP). This would be in addition to the improvements planned under Tranche 1 and Tranche 2 of the Emergency Active Travel programme.
- Partnership working with employers to co-ordinate home working and commuting patterns as part of a managed return to city centre working when it is safe to do so, to spread commuting pressures as evenly as possible throughout the day and throughout the week.
- Similar partnership working with schools, to minimise the traffic impacts of the school run.

## **Equalities Implications**

61. The officer recommendation is not to proceed with the temporary bus gates. As such no new policy or project is being advocated in this report which requires an assessment of equality implications.

## **Next steps**

62. If Cabinet is minded to proceed with the temporary bus gates against the officer recommendation, the earliest likely implementation date (given the need for additional technical work and consultation) would be March 2021. These timescales would be significantly extended if work were undertaken to identify and implement supporting measures, significant exemptions, changes to the

times of operation, and/or the bus gate locations. Funding sources would also need to be identified and agreed.

63. If Cabinet agrees the recommendations as set out, the next step would be for officers to work with Oxford City Council and other strategic stakeholders and delivery partners to identify ways to accelerate the wider sustainable transport strategy, including the alternatives to the temporary bus gates outlined at paragraph 60.

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Annex: Consultation report: Oxford temporary bus gates survey

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October 2020