

Consultation: Results and project team responses

Ambitions consultation – spring 2010

1. To help set objectives for improving Frideswide Square, the county council carried out an “ambitions” consultation in spring 2010 with local organisations representing a broad range of interests and people. Organisations were asked what they feel is wrong with the current layout of Frideswide Square and how they would like to see it improved. A detailed summary of the ambitions consultation results is available – please see “background papers” at the end of the main report.
2. Overall, 80% of those who responded to the consultation are either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the current square. The three most common complaints about the existing square are that it creates a poor first impression of Oxford and is an unpleasant place to be; causes delays to all road users; is difficult to understand and navigate for all; and that pedestrian crossing routes are indirect.
3. Consultees’ top three priorities for improving the square are to create an attractive and welcoming square, create a simple and easy to navigate layout, and to reduce delays to all users.
4. To supplement the consultation with local organisations, 500 face-to-face street interviews were carried out with members of the public in Oxford city centre. A detailed summary of the results of these interviews is available on the county council’s website and in the members’ resource centre. This research found a significantly lower level of dissatisfaction than among local organisations – only 23% said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the current square. However, fewer than half of the respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied. 30% expressed no view either way. Dissatisfaction with the square was significantly higher among working people and over 25s, while students and under 25s were more satisfied with the square.
5. Despite this disparity between the overall satisfaction levels of local organisations and the public, the top complaints and priorities for improvements were very similar. The public’s top complaints are the complexity of the layout, delays, the quality of the environment and cycle safety. Their top priorities are to create a welcoming and attractive square and a simple, easy to navigate layout.

Design approaches consultation: Summer 2010

6. The project team presented the four design approaches to local organisations during summer and autumn 2010 and asked for their views on them.
7. Organisations and all city and county councillors were invited to attend workshop sessions in early July 2010 where the design approaches were presented and discussed. Organisations were then given until the end of September 2010 to consider the approaches in detail and submit comments. The full consultation material is available – please see “background papers” at the end of the main report.
8. The project team recommended in the consultation that the only approach that should be taken further is approach D (the removal of all the traffic signals in the square in favour of a completely new and greatly simplified layout based on compact roundabouts and smoothly flowing traffic) because the project team concluded that approach D would best meet the project objectives.

Headline results

9. Fifty-five responses to the design approaches consultation were received. These were from a mixture of local organisations and councillors invited to participate and individuals who responded without a specific invitation. All major local organisations responded, and the total response rate is in line with the team’s expectations for a consultation of this type.
10. Some organisations responded to the consultation questions directly (42 in total), whilst others (13 in total) submitted responses that addressed the consultation topics more generally and did not therefore directly answer the consultation questions. In an effort to include both types of response in a numeric analysis, a judgement has been made as to how the respondents who did not answer the consultation questions directly *might* have answered them, given the overall content of their response. Acknowledging that this is a subjective process, figures both including and excluding these general responses are quoted below. Copies of all responses received are available in the members’ resource centre.

Respondents who answered the questionnaire directly

11. 57% strongly agreed or tended to agree that a scheme for Frideswide Square based on approach D is the best way to meet the scheme objectives. 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 12% either did not know or did not state an opinion either way.
12. Within approach D, 33% preferred the road split option, with the northern road and central road options approximately equal (21% and 19% respectively). 26% said they disliked all three options.

All respondents, including those who did not answer the questionnaire directly

13. 55% strongly agreed or tended to agree that a scheme for Frideswide Square based on approach D is the best way to meet the scheme objectives. 29% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 16% either did not know, did not state a clear opinion either way.
14. Within approach D, 27% preferred the road split option, with the northern road and central road options equal (16% for both). 27% said they disliked all three options. 14% did not state a clear opinion either way.
15. A detailed report of all the consultation responses is available – see “background papers” at the end of the main report.

Main concerns raised and project team responses

16. Although approach D was broadly supported, some questions and concerns were raised about it. The project team has met the organisations who raised the most significant concerns and is continuing to work with these organisations to try to resolve their concerns. The most common concerns, along with brief responses from the project team, are set out below.

Concern: lack of formal signal controlled crossings will not be safe or comfortable for pedestrians – particularly people with disabilities

17. The project team understands the anxiety surrounding the proposed removal of formal signal controlled crossings and has discussed this matter many times with people with sensory and mobility impairments. The team is confident that courtesy crossings will be easy to use for a wide range of people, including people with mobility and sensory impairments, though there is a lot of work to do at the detailed design stage to ensure that this is the case. The team is working particularly closely with people with very little or no sight to address concerns raised by these users of the square.

Concern: layout will not be safe or comfortable for cyclists

18. Approach D is designed to reduce traffic speeds to create safe and comfortable conditions for cyclists on the carriageway. The roundabouts proposed will be of continental design to promote slow traffic speeds and minimise risks to cyclists. The project team believes the proposed approach will represent a major improvement for cyclists of all abilities over the existing layout. Several design meetings have already been held with cycling groups to discuss ways to make the design as cycle-friendly as possible: this work is ongoing.

Concern: alternative approaches (particularly approach C) have not been properly considered

19. Alternative approaches have been considered in sufficient detail to establish whether or not they have potential to meet the scheme objectives. The project team has had to find a balance between adequate consideration of options and abortive cost. For example, proper traffic modelling of a local traffic diversion as proposed in approach C would be expensive and given the project team's fundamental reservations about the proposal and its incompatibility with the West End renaissance, the team concluded it would be wasteful to commission traffic modelling work on this particular option.
20. It should also be noted that approach D provides minimal carriageway space and its simplicity means it is flexible enough to adapt to changing traffic patterns in future. If traffic through the square were substantially reduced (as proposed in approach C) at some point in the future, an approach D design would remain entirely appropriate and would need little, if any, alteration.

Concern: bus stop and interchange facilities are inadequate

21. Concerns have been expressed that the bus stops proposed in approach D will not be sufficient to handle future or even current bus passengers and buses. The road split option (in which the bus stops on each side of the road are separated into two smaller bays) prompted concerns that separating the bus stops would make them less user-friendly and more likely to block traffic flow.
22. The total length of bus stop space proposed in approach D is very similar to the current provision, and there may be scope to increase this a little further as part of detailed design work.
23. In the current layout, overloading of the bus stops (which does happen fairly regularly) does not immediately affect the operation of the junction because the bus area is separate from the traffic area. Approach D removes this separation, so to reduce pressure on these stops and prevent buses blocking the traffic flow, the project team proposes that any bus that stops in the station forecourt will *not* also stop in Frideswide Square. To ensure bus-to-bus interchange opportunities are not lost, the project team is developing proposals for new bus stops in Park End Street for use by all passing services.
24. The arrangement of the stops in the road split option will be reviewed. This is likely to involve combining the separate stops into a single bay as in the central road option.

Concern: large areas of public space will be under-used and difficult to manage

25. Approach D creates substantial additional public space in Frideswide Square. This extra space needs to be designed and managed well to ensure it remains attractive and useful. Frideswide Square is expected to get busier in future, with expansion of the railway station and development of buildings on the eastern and southern edges. There will therefore be an increasing level of pedestrian activity in the square which will help animate the space and make it feel lively and safe. Landscaping will be designed to encourage people to stop in the square. Street cafés, exhibitions, markets and other similar attractions will be encouraged to make the square an attractive destination in its own right as well as a through route and busy transport interchange. All those with responsibility for the long-term maintenance of the square have been and will continue to be consulted on its design.

Concern: reducing traffic delays will attract more motor traffic to the city centre and make congestion and pollution worse overall

26. Traffic modelling suggests that approach D will reduce delays to all users of the square, including motor traffic, and that a slow but continuous flow of traffic is achievable. There is a risk that this will attract more traffic to the city centre overall, thus eroding the benefits of the scheme over time. To help prevent this, the scheme will include network management features that allow traffic capacity to be carefully controlled and give strategic priority to buses. For example, the traffic signals on Botley Road at Binsey Lane will be used to regulate the inbound flow of traffic ensure Botley Road east of Binsey Lane flows as freely as possible. This will allow buses leaving the eastbound bus lane to join *flowing* traffic at Binsey Lane, rather than joining a queue as they presently do. A similar system is also proposed for St Giles. This system ensures that certain strategically important parts of the road network are protected from congestion and gives buses journey time and reliability benefits, thus helping to improve the attractiveness of bus travel relative to car travel.
27. However, these network management features alone are not likely to be sufficient to prevent long-term traffic growth in the context of housing and economic growth in the city and county. The county council's draft 20-year area strategy for Oxford as part of the council's third Local Transport Plan therefore includes proposals for Park & Ride expansion, more bus priority measures, improvements to walking and cycling networks, and investigation of demand management such as workplace parking charges.

Concern: the narrowing of the roads proposed in approach D will lead to traffic congestion and will not cope with current or future traffic flows

28. Traffic modelling completed so far suggests approach D will reduce delays to all users of the square. This means congestion will be reduced, not worsened, and the ability of the square to cope with future traffic flows will be improved. However it is not in any event the intention to allow traffic to grow, as explained in the paragraphs above.

Concern: the proposals do nothing to improve surrounding streets, including the problems under the Botley Road railway bridge

29. Approach D will allow the carriageways leading into the square to be narrowed from three lanes to two. This is because roundabout approaches do not require separate lanes for traffic turning in different directions. This will allow the pavements to be widened on most of the main approach roads, including Hythe Bridge Street. Botley Road is of course constrained by the railway bridge, but the project team is exploring some options that would improve matters by narrowing the road to the minimum width for two-way traffic flow.

Oxford City Council's response

30. Oxford City Council has had continuous involvement in the planning and design of this project and is promoting and funding the project jointly with the county council through the West End Partnership. The city council was nevertheless also consulted as a stakeholder and a response was received from the Head of City Development following consultation with the relevant City Executive Board member.
31. The city council highlighted the historic significance of the square as confluence of two ancient routes out of the city and the role of the surrounding buildings in defining the character and role of the space. The city council considers that approach D is the only approach that meets the project objectives and the relevant planning policies in the West End Area Action Plan.
32. The city council's preferred option within approach D is the central road option, because it creates a focal point at the Royal Oxford Hotel, preserves the significance of both Park End Street and Hythe Bridge, and provides open pedestrian space in front of all key groups of buildings.
33. The city council considers that the space has developed informally and should not therefore be designed in an over-formal way that compromises this character. Its preference is for simple design and materials, allowing the buildings around the square to provide the focus for activity and interest.
34. The project team welcomes the city council's supportive response; its recommendations will inform ongoing design work.