

CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT – 24 NOVEMBER 2016

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS TO TRAFFIC AND ACCESS RESTRICTIONS – QUEEN STREET, OXFORD

Report by Acting Director for Environment & Economy

Introduction

1. This report summarises the formal consultation undertaken on the proposed amendments to traffic regulation orders, bus stop clearways and provision of new zebra crossings in association with Queen Street, Oxford. The consultation took place between 15 September and 14 October 2016.

Background

2. Queen Street is a key pedestrian link in the heart of Oxford city centre. It is also part of a wider east-west cross city-centre link which extends to Oxford station.
3. An intention to close Queen Street to buses has been included in the city and county councils' policies for many years, and currently form part of the county council's Local Transport Plan and the city council's Core Strategy and West End Area Action Plan.
4. Six bus stops were relocated away from Queen Street in 2009, and public realm improvement works were carried out as part of this scheme (Delegated Decisions Cabinet Member for Transport, April 2009).
5. The current proposals constitute Phase 1 of the county council's 'Connections to Oxford Station' project. In summer 2016 the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) submitted a bid for this project (along with many other projects across Oxfordshire) to the Department for Transport's Local Growth Fund Round 3 (LGF3). This wider project aims to improve the various transport routes between Oxford station and the city centre.
6. An announcement of the successful LGF3 project is expected in the Chancellor's Autumn Statement.
7. The construction of the enlarged and refurbished Westgate Centre is well underway, with completion expected in autumn 2017. The new centre will add 50% to the total retail area of the city centre. New bus stops are to be provided as part of the development along the length of Castle Street and Norfolk Street, and the western end of Speedwell Street, providing bus stops close to the Westgate Centre and also serving other destinations in the western and southern parts of the city centre.
8. It is anticipated that the city's commercial bus operators will respond to the opening of the Westgate Centre with changes to some of their routes and

stops to ensure serve the Westgate Centre is well served by bus, whether Queen Street is closed or not.

9. Improvements to Queen Street – as the main shopping street between the new Westgate Centre and the rest of the city centre, will help to integrate the Westgate Centre with the rest of the city centre, as well as increase pedestrian safety and comfort in Queen Street itself.
10. Currently Queen Street is closed to cars, but utilised by buses, taxis, cyclists and deliveries at certain times of day. Before Queen St was closed to facilitate the Westgate redevelopment, it carried pedestrian flows of up to 47,000 pedestrians a day. The number of buses using Queen Street is up to 750 per day, which equates to approximately 55 an hour.
11. With the opening of Westgate and the projected increase in footfall within the centre from 5 million a year to 16 million a year, pedestrian flows on Queen Street are expected to increase substantially. Other future development in the West End will further increase pedestrian flows.

Scheme Proposals

12. To enable the proposed removal of buses from Queen Street, an exercise was undertaken in consultation with the main bus operators to reallocate services to bus stops around the adjacent road network. The following improvements were identified as necessary to support the closure:
 - Additional bus stops and bus layover points on High Street, St Aldates, Butterwyke Place and New Road.
 - A bus turnaround facility to the west of Queen Street at the junction of New Road/Worcester Street/Park End Street . To accommodate this facility, some land at the Worcester Street pay and display car park would need to be acquired from Nuffield College.
 - Improvements to the public realm along the length of Queen Street from Bonn Square to Carfax including the corner of St Aldates and High Street.
13. The proposals require amendments to existing traffic regulation orders to accommodate the changes to prohibit buses from Queen Street and adjust loading and disabled parking arrangements. Two public consultations were carried out during 2016 on the proposals.

Informal Consultation

14. An informal consultation on the initial proposals was undertaken between 06 May and 06 June 2016. This resulted in a total of 136 responses being received. In answer to the main question of the proposal to pedestrianise

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Queen Street 38% (51) supported, 30% (41) objected and 32% (44) neither supported nor objected. Specific concerns on the proposals included;

- Increased congestion and pollution on St Aldates and High Street
- The need to provide adequate separation of pedestrians and cyclists
- Concerns over cyclists safety at the proposed turnaround and on St Aldates
- Increased bus congestion and journey times due to reallocation of bus stops and
- Excessive walking distances between revised bus stops.

15. This led to some amendments being made prior to commencing formal consultation, including:

- A proposal for an experimental order to permit cycling, 24 hours a day 7 days a week, along Queen Street in both directions
- Access by taxis from Carfax, after 9pm and turning at a mid-point to feed the existing taxi rank by Carfax Tower.

Formal Consultation

16. Formal consultation including related Traffic Regulation Orders was undertaken between 15th September and 14th October 2016 incorporating revised proposals outlined above. The proposals as consulted on are shown in Annex 1.

17. In total, 213 responses were received to the seven specific questions on the proposals. The questions are shown in Annex 2 to this report and a summary of the responses including officers' comments is included at Annex 3. A file containing copies of responses is available within the Members' Resource Centre.

18. In summarising the responses against the specific questions;

- Permanent prohibition of buses from Queen Street – 60% (128) support, 23% (49) object, 17% (36) neither.
- Reduce length of High Street loading bay, replace with bus stop – 38% (82) support, 10% (22) object, 52% (109) neither.
- Amendment to St Aldates/Abingdon Road bus gate – 38% (82) support, 13% (28) object, 49% (103) neither.
- Reduction in length of New Road disabled bay – 21% (44) support, 9% (19) object, 70% (150) neither.
- Permit 24 hour cycling on Queen Street (experimental) – 67% (143) support, 26% (55) object, 7% (15) neither.

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- Permit taxis to remain on Queen Street at reduced hours (experimental) – 16% (33) support, 44% (94) object, 40% (86) neither.
 - Replace signal crossings at New Road / Worcester Street junction with zebra crossings – 43% (90) support, 16% (35) object, 41% (88) neither.
19. The main themes raised during the consultation were associated with:
- Position and safety of the turnaround facility including its impact on the future development of the adjacent land
 - The need for buses to remain using Queen Street if the turnaround is not progressed for bus efficiency and economical reasons
 - Increased congestion and pollution on St Aldates and High Street
 - Safety concerns over how pedestrians and cyclists will share the space on Queen Street and the need for it to be sufficiently marked
 - Use of Queen Street by taxis.
20. No objections to the proposals were received from Thames Valley Police whilst support to the experimental 24/7 cycling through Queen Street came from Cycling UK, Cyclox, Bike Safe and the University of Oxford while Westgate Oxford Alliance supported its pedestrianisation.
21. Some key stakeholders provided mixed responses which supported some of the proposals whilst objecting to others. These included;
- Oxford City Council would support the pedestrianisation of Queen Street as it is an identified aim within the Oxford Core Strategy 2026. However, they object to the proposed extension to the permitting of cycling through Queen Street due to the potential conflicts between cyclists and pedestrians plus that it may result in a similar proposal in the future for Cornmarket. They also object to the proposed taxi arrangement due to the reduction in rank time and suggest that loading arrangements on High Street and St Aldates should be considered as part of the project.
 - Oxford Pedestrians' Association supports fewer buses on Queen Street but not at the expense of more buses in the already too congested, and polluted, St Aldates.
22. Objections were received from a number of key stakeholders. In summary;
- The main bus operators objected to the prohibiting of through buses on Queen Street due to concerns about the impact on their operations and patronage

- Oxford Preservation Trust, Brasenose College, Christchurch College, Rescue Oxford and Oxford High Street Association objected due to concerns about the negative impacts on St Aldates and High Street
- Nuffield College objected to the proposal of siting the bus turnaround facility on part of their land and raised concerns about the impact of displaced buses
- Bus Users UK objected to the removal of buses from Queen Street due to concerns about increased walking distances to bus stops and negative impacts on St Aldates. Objects to the increase in cyclist use of Queen Street and zebra crossings on the grounds that disabled users need signal controlled crossings.
- City of Oxford Licensed Taxi Association (COLTA) offered numerous suggestions for taxi routes and ranks in and around the city centre for further consideration.

Outcome of Formal Consultation

23. Officers consider there are two key implications arising from the consultation:
- the original proposals cannot now be implemented without the need for at least one (and possibly two) public inquiries for the traffic regulation order and/or the compulsory land purchase for the turnaround;
 - due to the considerable concern about the impact of displaced buses from Queen Street, particularly on the special historic environment of St Aldate's and High Street the scheme needs to incorporate consequential impacts of the closure on the surrounding streets.
24. Given the above, officers conclude that the original proposals need further consideration, but are clear that there is a need for changes prior to the Opening of Westgate. The opening of the new Westgate centre will transform the nature and status of Oxford as a destination for shopping and leisure and will represent the biggest change to Oxford city centre's travel patterns since the original OTS in 1999. The effects of this, particularly on Queen Street, are difficult to quantify, which suggests the council should take a flexible approach and be prepared to alter its position once travel patterns settle down after the opening of the Westgate centre.
25. Officers consider that due to the uncertainty of both direct and consequential impacts of the closure of queen street, that a more informed understanding is required before a permanently solution implemented. This should be achieved through a trial. It is considered there are two possible options –: leave Queen Street open to buses in some form (potentially with a reduced bus flow), monitor the situation and close Queen Street if necessary; or close Queen Street to buses; monitor and re-open if appropriate.

26. Officers consider the second option to be the more appropriate option because the greatest uncertainty is how crowded Queen Street will be once Westgate opens. Whilst closing Queen Street will have some negatives (most notably increased bus flows in surrounding streets) there are conceivable ways of mitigating these effects.
27. A trial of leaving Queen St open is not recommended because it could result in an unsafe situation and risks the authority having to rapidly arrange an 'emergency closure' with all the disruption that goes with it. Road safety and the safety of pedestrians in such an environment should be of paramount importance and as it is impossible to accurately predict how significant the increase in use of Queen Street will be, officers recommending erring on the side of removing buses in case there simply is not enough road space at peak times to safely manage demand.
28. However, given the concerns raised in the consultation, this experimental closure should be conditional on identifying a deliverable package of improvements which:
- Reduce congestion on the road and footways in St Aldate's and the western end of High Street, primarily through more loading restrictions
 - Reduce congestion and bus journey times on the routes to which buses are displaced (including the possible removal of the traffic signals at the Speedwell Street/Aldates and New Road/Worcester Street/Park End Street junctions, which has been shown in the past to significantly improve journey times).
29. These improvements will be beneficial whether or not the experimental closure is made permanent.
30. Given the proposed experimental approach to the removal of buses it is recommended that no further consideration is given to changes to cycle access until the question of bus access has been fully resolved.

Financial and Staff Implications

31. 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 £1.970m and it is funded using the following sources:
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|-----------------------------|---------|
| • County council capital | £0.170m |
| • LEP | £1.300m |
| • City council contribution | £0.500m |
32. If approved, the alternative approach set out above will affect the works required for the project and therefore the costs. Discussions will be needed with the city council and LEP to agree any changes to the use of their contributions.

33. The timetable is challenging and will require considerable staff resources between September 2016 and autumn 2017. 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. Since the proposals are now likely to change, equality implications will be assessed and reported at a future Cabinet Member Decisions meeting when the final proposals have been assessed.

Westgate-related TROs: taxis access

35. At the Cabinet Member Decisions (Environment) meeting on 21st July 2016, the “Westgate Centre” Traffic Regulation Orders were approved as advertised. In addition, it was agreed to give further consideration to allowing access for licenced hackney carriages in the area through the development.
36. Further submissions from COLTA and Oxford City Council were received in September 2016, which are summarised below.

COLTA

37. COLTA confirmed their position by email which was sent on 6th September 2016. Their objection centres on the rerouting of taxis via Oxpens Road and Longwall Street and concern that this will be more onerous and congested, and as a result, will lead to a poorer taxi service and complaints from customers. COLTA argue that they are an important part of the transport offer, and so should be given the same benefits as buses, for example. In their email COLTA put forward the following proposals:
- The City Council to amend its original planning permission conditions to allow unrestricted access ONLY to Oxford Licensed Hackney carriages through the link route of Speedwell Street, Abbey Place and Norfolk Street, 24 hours a day.
 - To put in place provisions that ONLY Oxford Licensed Hackney Carriages are permitted access through this link route (as we are Public Hire Vehicles) as was discussed with the possibility of putting in place a vehicle registration recognition system.
 - The County Council to undertake another environmental/emissions assessment of the area so that we may progress with our proposal.

Oxford City Council

38. Oxford City Council wrote to COLTA by email on 20th September 2016, to respond to the above proposals put forward by COLTA and to confirm the city

council's updated position. The letter confirms that officers at the city council are not able to make a case for the reformulation of the original Traffic Regulation Order. The city council set out both legal and environmental reasons for this, summarised as follows:

- Taxi usage could only be on a comprehensive basis i.e. that all hackneys and private hire vehicles regardless of their licensing status would have to enjoy equal rights of access. As a result, this is likely to imply a very substantial increase in the volume of vehicles using the section of road that is covered by the restriction; and
- The Environmental Impact Assessment which accompanied the planning application concluded that there would be a Moderate Adverse impact on the air quality along the route. If there were to be an extension of the use of the route to include all taxis, the impact on air quality would be very significant, and likely to result in an unacceptable level of pollution.

39. The city council also makes the point that the original planning application for Westgate, including the submitted Environmental Impact Assessment, assumed the Norfolk Street and Castle Street link was a bus only route and if taxis were allowed a new planning application from the developers would need to be submitted (including a new Environmental Impact Assessment) and the route potentially redesigned. They noted that this would have a significant impact to both the construction programme and cost of works that are currently taking place.
40. The city council also point out that the Westgate Alliance met with COLTA representatives in early 2014, and the West Area Planning Committee subsequently granted outline planning permission for the Westgate development including the bus only route following representations from COLTA dated 4th March 2014 which expressed '*support in its fullest entirety and objectives*' for the scheme, and withdrew their initial objections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 41 **The Cabinet Member for Environment is RECOMMENDED:**
- (a) **not to approve the proposals as advertised;**
 - (b) **instruct officers to report to a future Cabinet Member Decisions meeting a proposal for an experimental closure of Queen Street to buses and taxis which addresses the concerns about conditions in St Aldates and High Street raised during the recent consultation and which does not rely on the bus turning facility at Worcester Street; and**
 - (c) **to note the City Council's and COLTA's latest correspondence in relation to the decision made at Cabinet Member Decisions on 21 July 2016 regarding changes to TROs for Castle Street, Norfolk**

Street and Speedwell Street as part of the Westgate centre development and confirm that this does not alter the decision made.

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Director for Environment & Economy

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

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