

CABINET – 16 JULY 2019

BUS ACCESS TO QUEEN STREET – PROPOSED CONTINUED USE

Report by Strategic Director for Communities

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to allow up to 30 buses an hour to continue to use Queen Street and therefore agree that in updating the Oxford Transport Strategy as part of developing the Council's new Local Transport & Connectivity Plan (LTP5), the county council's policy is proposed to be changed so that, subject to the outcome of the LTP update process, it will not be actively pursuing the full pedestrianisation of Queen Street.

Executive Summary

2. In the light of the monitoring of the operation of Queen Street since the reopening of the Westgate, it is not recommended to progress a scheme to remove any more buses from Queen Street due to the:
 - challenges in delivering suitable alternative bus routeing and associated likely negative impacts on bus operation, passenger experience and the environment of other streets
 - lack of any recorded accidents in Queen Street and
 - very low likelihood that the remaining buses on Queen Street prevent Westgate visitors from continuing their journeys into the rest of the city centre
3. The situation in Queen Street should continue to be monitored so that any clear changes in the levels of pedestrian safety are identified and action taken if necessary – the council's position in relation to the removal of buses can of course be revisited at any time.

Background

4. It has been a long-held aspiration of the county and city councils to fully pedestrianise Queen Street during the day. The Oxford Transport Strategy, as part of LTP4, assumes that Queen Street will be closed to buses from 2020.
5. During the planning of the recently redeveloped Westgate Centre, the applicant made the case for full pedestrianisation of Queen Street. It was predicted that visitor numbers to the Westgate would increase from 5 million to 16 million each year and that as a result, pedestrian movements in Queen

Street would increase to a level where it would be unsafe for them to share the space with buses.

6. On 24 November 2016 officers recommended to the Cabinet Member for Environment that a scheme be developed to remove buses from Queen Street. The Cabinet Member referred the decision to Cabinet recommending that buses remain in Queen Street because of the challenges facing continued successful bus operation in the city centre if full pedestrianisation was pursued.
7. On 20 December 2016 Cabinet decided that due to concerns about public safety a scheme should be developed to fully remove buses from Queen Street on an experimental basis.
8. Following the development of a scheme to remove buses from Queen Street and a consultation on that scheme, on 18 July 2017, Cabinet approved the experimental removal of buses from the street. The proposal needed to be referred to the Secretary of State for Transport because Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach had formally objected to the proposal.
9. In the autumn of 2017, the DfT advised that removal of buses could not be considered until monitoring had been carried out with the new Westgate Centre open and with buses and pedestrians still sharing the street. On 12 October 2017 the Cabinet Member for Environment therefore approved an amended experimental order for Queen Street which allowed buses to remain but removed taxis and private hire vehicles (PHVs) at all times.
10. At the same time, the main bus operators voluntarily agreed to reduce the number of buses using the street from approximately 55 an hour to approximately 30 an hour.

Justification for removing buses from Queen Street

11. The main reason for the proposed removal of buses from Queen Street prior to the opening of the redeveloped Westgate Centre was because the anticipated very significant increase in footfall in the street would make things unsafe for pedestrians if buses remained.
12. It was also suggested that removing buses from Queen Street would allow better integration of the Westgate Centre with the rest of the city centre; it was felt that the presence of buses could prevent visitors from continuing into the rest of the city centre limiting the positive benefits of the increased Westgate footfall on the wider city centre economy.

Challenges of removing buses from Queen Street

13. Removing all buses from Queen Street presents a number of challenges (these remain the same as when the County Council Cabinet approved an experimental TRO to remove buses, taxis and private Hire Vehicles):

- Additional mileage for buses to turn around if they are to continue to serve the Westgate Centre, leading to
 - additional time and cost to operators (and passengers)
 - potentially reduced bus service frequencies
 - reduced bus service reliability
 - poorer air quality in affected streets
- These effects would be exacerbated further if turning involves using roads where there is general traffic.
- Reduced access to the city centre and limited capacity for efficient turn around facilities for buses avoiding additional mileage as above
- Further pressure on already congested city centre streets, most notably St Aldate's - the buses that use Queen Street will need to use St Aldate's at least to pass through (northbound) and in some cases also to stop to pick up passengers.

Currently, there is an approximate two-way flow of 156 buses an hour in St Aldate's during the day (8am to 6pm). This is made up of approximately 92 an hour southbound and 64 an hour northbound. Taking buses out of Queen Street would be likely to add approximately 30 buses an hour in a northbound direction i.e. increase of approximately 19% in the two-way total flow to 186 and 47% in the northbound flow to 94.

What does monitoring show about the impact of the Westgate re-opening?

Pedestrian flow

14. The change in pedestrian flows in Queen Street in the first full calendar year since the centre reopening (2018) are set out in the table below. This is a comparison with flows in Queen Street in 2012 which was the busiest year for pedestrian flow before the Westgate was closed for redevelopment (the Springboard camera system has continuously collected data since 2011).

	Weekday average (24 hour total)	Weekday peak period (12pm to 2pm) average	Saturday average (24 hour total)	Saturday peak period (2pm to 4pm) average
2012	33,914	7,486	41,735	9,038
2018	38,631	7,362	47,613	10,083
Difference	+4,717	-124	+5,878	+1,045
%age difference	+14%	-1.7%	+14%	+12%

15. Whilst average daily total pedestrian flows in Queen Street have increased by 14% in both weekdays and at weekends, the average increase in the peak period during the week has decreased. And at weekends the average peak period flow has increased less than the overall daily increase – 12%. Whilst the developer never put a precise figure on the level of increase in footfall in Queen Street that would result from the new Westgate Centre, the actual increases in the number of pedestrians using the street during the peak hours are certainly much less than were anticipated when the development was being planned. Overall, the number of visitors to the Westgate in the first year after its reopening increased from 5m to just under 20m i.e. around 300%.

Accidents

16. Since the reopening of the Westgate Centre, there have been no reports of injury accidents involving buses or pedestrians in Queen Street. Shortly after the reopening of the Westgate, there were a small number of reports to the county council about safety concerns relating to pedestrians having to share the street with buses. In opinion surveys carried out in a number of city centre streets by the county council on two separate occasions in 2018 (a June Saturday and a December Saturday), overall, 74% of the 198 people questioned in Queen Street said they felt safe from traffic.

Bus numbers and speeds

17. When the Westgate Centre opened in October 2017, the number of buses using the street every hour decreased from approximately 55 to approximately 30 (-45%).
18. Bus speed surveys carried out on two separate occasions in 2018 (a weekday in June and a Saturday in August) show that on both days, 91% of buses travelling through Bonn Square did so at less than 10mph. Through the rest of

Queen Street (from St Ebbe's Street to Carfax) 91% of buses travelled at less than 10mph on the June survey day and 88% on the August survey day. On the June survey day, a total of only 15 buses travelled through Bonn Square at 10mph or higher between 10am and 6pm (the hours when loading and cycling is not allowed).

Integration of Westgate with the rest of the city centre

19. There is little, if any, evidence of the reduced number of buses in Bonn Square impacting negatively on the integration of the Westgate Centre with the rest of the city centre. Footfall in Cornmarket Street is less than it was compared to before the Westgate reopened (weekday average total flow is 7.5% less in 2018 compared to 2012; Saturday average total flow is 10.5% less in 2018 compared to 2012). However, it is very hard to see how the bus flow in Queen Street has had anything other than a very minor influence on this. On average, there is only one bus passing through every other minute and the significant majority of those are doing so slowly (9mph or less). This means that every other minute a bus is visible (from the junction of New Road to the junction of St Ebbe's Street) for around 15 seconds to pedestrians emerging from the Westgate Centre. In the public opinion surveys the county council carried out in 2018, 88% of people in Queen Street interviewed during opinion surveys in 2018 said they felt Queen Street was easy to cross. As stated earlier, 74% said they felt safe from traffic in Queen Street.

Financial and Staff Implications

20. The council's capital programme includes £1.47m for improvements to the city centre transport network including enhancements of the public realm in Queen Street if it were to be fully pedestrianised. £1.3m of this funding is from the Local Growth Fund approved by the OxLEP. If full pedestrianisation were not to go ahead, the Local Growth Fund contribution would be reduced by £500k. This reflects the fact that public realm enhancements in Queen Street would only have been needed if full pedestrianisation was implemented. Neither would such extensive works be needed to bus stop and turning infrastructure elsewhere in the city centre.
21. The remaining £800k contribution from the Local Growth Fund and £170k of S106 developer funding will be used for improvements to the George Street/Hythe Bridge Street and Park End Street/New Road junctions as set out in the report to the Cabinet Member for Environment Decisions meeting on 31 May this year.
22. Ongoing monitoring of the operation of Queen Street under the current arrangements including up to 30 buses per hour can be carried out using existing staff resources.

Equalities Implications

23. An SCIA of the proposal to fully remove buses from Queen Street was considered by Cabinet on 18 July 2017. By not pursuing a scheme to remove buses from the street, the negative impacts raised by the SCIA will not need

to be addressed. Furthermore, when the SCIA was undertaken, there were 55 buses an hour using the street compared to the 30 per hour now. As set out in this report, the reduction in the number of buses alongside the removal of taxis and Private Hire vehicles during the day has already delivered benefits for people with the protected characteristics.

Conclusion

24. Whilst the Westgate Centre has exceeded expectations in attracting large numbers of new visitors, in 2018, the intensity of pedestrian flow in Queen Street in the busiest periods decreased slightly during the week and increased by only 12% at the weekend. This coincided with an approximately 45% reduction in the number of buses travelling in the street and a 100% reduction in the number of taxis and Private Hire Vehicles during the day.
25. In the light of this, it is not recommended to progress a scheme to remove any more buses from Queen Street due to the:
 - challenges in delivering suitable alternative bus routeing and associated likely negative impacts on bus operation, passenger experience and the environment of other streets
 - lack of any recorded accidents in Queen Street and
 - very low likelihood that the remaining buses in Queen Street prevent Westgate visitors from continuing their journeys into the rest of the city centre
26. It is, however, recommended that the situation in Queen Street continues to be monitored so that any clear changes in the levels of pedestrian safety are identified and action taken if necessary – the council's position in relation to the removal of buses can of course be revisited at any time.
27. When the most recent iteration of the Oxford Transport Strategy was included in the council's fourth Local Transport Plan, it assumed that Queen Street would be fully pedestrianised. As such the recommendation of this report to no longer pursue this outcome would represent a change in council policy. If the Cabinet agree the recommendation of this report, the review of LTP4 and production of the LTP5 will seek to further formalise the council's current position on Queen Street.

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Background papers:

Cabinet Member for Environment Decisions meeting report – 24 November 2016

Cabinet report - 20 December 2016

Cabinet report – 18 July 2017

Cabinet Member for Environment Decisions meeting report - 12 October 2017

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