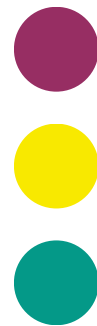




An Assembly Perspective on the Proposal for Temporary Oxford Congestion Charge

Prepared for

Oxfordshire County Council



Summer 2025

Executive Summary

On 15 July 2025, 16 members of Oxfordshire’s Citizens’ Assembly on Travel and Transport reconvened to explore a proposed temporary congestion charge for Oxford. The workshop formed part of the County Council’s wider consultation on the charge, aimed at reducing traffic during the delay of the planned traffic filters trial due to the Botley Road closure

The session offered a chance to assess how the proposal aligns with the Assembly’s priorities including reducing car use, supporting public transport, ensuring fairness, and maintaining transparency. Through structured deliberation, participants considered how the charge might work in practice and what conditions would make it effective.

Participants broadly supported the proposal’s aims but raised concerns about its ability to change behaviour. Many questioned whether a £5 daily charge would be enough to deter car use, especially given the similar cost of public transport. Several suggested a higher fee (£10–£15) and called for visible reinvestment in alternatives – particularly free Park & Ride shuttles and standardised, affordable bus fares.

Concerns about fairness were prominent, especially for low-income workers and residents with limited alternatives. Suggested mitigations included income-based discounts, differentiated charges, and clearer communication around exemptions.

Transparency was seen as vital to public trust, both in clearly explaining the charge’s purpose and in showing how revenue would be used to support behaviour change.

Participants also designed campaign materials to help communicate the charge or promote wider behaviour change.

While not a replacement for wider consultation, this report presents a deliberative perspective from a group of reasonably informed residents, offering nuanced reflections to help the Council interpret feedback and refine its approach.



Introduction

On 15 June 2025, 16 members of Oxfordshire's Citizens' Assembly on Travel and Transport reconvened for a follow-up workshop. The session had two aims: first, to continue involving Assembly members as their recommendations are taken forward; and second, to explore a proposed temporary congestion charge for Oxford and include Assembly perspectives in the early stages of public consultation.

This report presents the findings from the workshop's exploration of the proposed temporary Oxford congestion charge - how participants assessed the proposal's alignment with the Assembly's recommendations and priorities, what outcomes they hoped and feared it might bring, and how they believed it should be communicated to the public.

Background

In March 2025, the Citizens' Assembly on Travel and Transport delivered 20 recommendations to enable Oxfordshire's health, economy, and environment to thrive by 2050. On 17 June, Cabinet approved a six-week public consultation on a proposed temporary congestion charge in Oxford, designed to reduce traffic while Botley Road is closed and the traffic filters trial is delayed. Although announced after the Assembly concluded, the proposal shares the same objectives as the traffic filters, a scheme Assembly members discussed in depth, making the workshop a timely opportunity to assess its alignment with their recommendations and priorities.

The Citizens' Assembly offers a unique deliberative perspective grounded in evidence, shared learning, and structured dialogue. While not a substitute for wider public engagement, this input can help the Council interpret broader consultation responses.

Of the 34 original Assembly members, 16 returned, retaining the demographic diversity achieved through stratified sortition (see Appendix I).

Workshop Format

Participants received a presentation from a council officer outlining the context, rationale, and details of the proposed temporary congestion charge. They heard the following key points:

- The scheme aims to address worsening congestion in Oxford, particularly following the closure of Botley Road, and is closely modelled on the planned traffic filters trial.
- The charge would operate at £5 per day for cars without a permit, with a range of exemptions and permit allowances in place; members were also shown how permits would work across different areas.
- The projected impact includes a 15–20% reduction in city centre traffic.
- Potential uses for income raised could include cheaper Park and Ride, more frequent bus services, and improved cycling infrastructure.

Participants also viewed a 10-minute video compiled from Cabinet's pre-launch of the public consultation on the 17 July 2025. The video was curated to present a broad and diverse range of public perspectives, including a variety of supportive and opposing views on the proposal. A Q&A session with a council officer gave participants the chance to clarify details before entering their deliberative discussions (see Appendix II for questions).

Activities

The workshop then comprised two core activities:

- **Activity 1:** In small, facilitated groups, participants deliberated on how the proposal aligned with their previous recommendations and priorities. They also reflected on what they hoped would, and wouldn't, happen as a result of the proposal.
- **Activity 2:** Participants designed bold, creative campaign materials to either communicate the proposed temporary Oxford congestion charge or promote broader behaviour change in Oxfordshire.

Structure of this Report

The findings are presented in three sections:

- **Section 1** presents deliberative findings from independently facilitated small-group discussions, exploring how well the proposed temporary Oxford congestion charge aligns with the Assembly's recommendations and priorities.
- **Section 2** summarises participants' reflections on the potential outcomes of the scheme - what they hoped it would achieve and what they feared might go wrong.
- **Section 3** describes a creative communications task in which participants designed campaign messages to either explain the charge or promote broader behaviour change in Oxfordshire.

Section One: Findings from deliberative discussions on the temporary Oxford congestion charge proposal

The first activity asked participants to consider how the proposed temporary Oxford congestion charge aligns with the values and recommendations developed during the original Citizens' Assembly. Working in small, facilitated groups, they discussed three core questions, beginning with:

Q1: “How does this proposal sit alongside our recommendations and shared priorities?”

Before the workshop, participants reviewed the Council's information page and completed the public consultation survey. The session then shifted from individual opinion to collective deliberation, drawing on the group's shared knowledge and the Assembly's earlier findings.

To support discussion, each group referred to two key Assembly outputs from Session 3:

- A ranked list of priority road users
- A ranked set of trip purposes for car journeys

This section summarises the group discussions, offering a deliberative perspective on how the proposal was interpreted and evaluated by reasonably informed residents familiar with the complexities of transport policy.

Assembly Reflections on the Proposed Charge

Many questioned whether a £5 daily charge would meaningfully change behaviour, particularly when driving remains as affordable as using the bus or Park & Ride. Several suggested that a higher charge (**£10–£15**) would be more likely to influence travel choices. Participants also stressed that pricing must be paired with visible investment in alternatives, proposing measures such as free Park & Ride shuttles and standardised fares to improve affordability and convenience.

Fairness was also explored, particularly regarding the risk of disproportionate impacts on low-income workers, carers, and residents with limited transport options. Proposed mitigations included differentiated charges, income-based discounts, and clearer communication around exemptions.

Finally, participants emphasised the importance of **transparency**, both in clearly explaining the charge's purpose and in showing how revenue would be reinvested to improve transport options and support behaviour change.

Three themes emerged consistently:

1. **Strategic pricing and viable alternatives:** Getting the price and incentives right, in line with Assembly calls for 'sticks and carrots'.
2. **Fairness and equity:** Avoiding disproportionate burdens and ensuring mitigations are in place.
3. **Transparency and public trust:** Communicating clearly about the charge's purpose, timeline, and impacts.

The next sections explore each of these themes in turn, drawing on participant reflections and linking them to the original Assembly recommendations where relevant.

1 Strategic pricing and Viable Alternatives

A central question for participants was whether the proposed charge would **meaningfully shift travel behaviour**, an ambition at the heart of the Assembly's recommendations. Many questioned whether a £5 daily charge would deter car use, or simply be absorbed by drivers as a routine fee:

"We want to stop people driving into the city, but £5 is not enough of a stick to stop them."

"It's not effective – not expensive enough. People will still drive through."

This led some participants to question the purpose of the charge, whether it was designed to change behaviour or primarily to raise revenue:

"Is it £5 just to generate money? If it were more, I might not pay it."

"Knee-jerk reaction - Feel it is just to make money - There are people of which the cost won't have any significance for."

"The money should not be the consideration - the benefit should be the priority. If it makes a lot of money, hasn't the system failed? The focus should be promoting behavioural change."

Some suggested a higher charge would be more effective. **£10–£15** was cited by participants as being more likely to deter car use:

“£10 would have a greater chance of making a difference.”

A key pinch point here was the **comparative cost between buses and Park & Ride**. Participants noted that, for some users, driving and paying the charge could be cheaper or more convenient than using public transport:

“My bus ticket was £5 – so there’s no advantage, but an increase may put people off.”

“Family of four, likely to pay £5 and Westgate parking... it feels like the congestion charge is not enough as £5 charge is possibly cheaper than Park & Ride.”

These reflections suggest that, to align with the Assembly’s priority of reducing car use, **the charge must be set at a level that actively incentivises behaviour change**, rather than becoming a cost that drivers are willing to absorb.

Is £5 enough?

Many participants felt that a £5 daily charge would be routinely absorbed by drivers, rather than acting as a meaningful deterrent - particularly when compared to the cost of buses or Park & Ride. Some suggested that a higher charge, in the region of £10 to £15, would be more likely to influence behaviour.

Alternatives: Buses and Park & Ride

Participants welcomed the strategic objective of the congestion charge: to reduce congestion and make the buses faster and more reliable:

“It’s a vicious cycle – late buses make people revert to cars.”

However, many emphasised that for public transport to become a genuinely viable alternative, it must be **simpler, more affordable**, and **more convenient** - particularly buses and Park & Ride. To this end, participants proposed the following short-term incentives:

“Need viable alternatives – not enough carrots.”

“Free or reduced bus fare to balance the charge.”

“£2 cap, or free Park & Ride bus.”



Key idea: Use the revenue generated from the congestion charge to improve public transport - either by making Park & Ride shuttle buses free or by standardising ticketing and pricing across services (e.g. a £2 fare cap). This will further incentivise use and support behaviour change.

This idea is closely aligned with the Assembly's most strongly supported recommendations:



LINK TO ASSEMBLY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Recommendation 1 (97%):** Increase frequency of buses from park and ride and incentivise use by making them free (This should commence within 12 months) - to reduce congestion and emissions in Central Oxfordshire
- **Recommendation 2 (94%):** Implement standardised bus ticketing across all of the bus companies in the county - Increasing overall bus use

Overall, participants questioned whether a £5 daily charge would be enough to meaningfully deter car use, particularly when driving remains as cheap, or cheaper, than public transport options such as buses and Park & Ride. Some suggested that a higher charge (£10–£15) would be more likely to influence behaviour. Participants also proposed using revenue from the charge to fund further incentives, including free Park & Ride shuttle services and standardised bus ticketing and pricing.

2 Fairness and Equity

Discussions about pricing and alternatives often raised concerns about fairness and equity.

Participants highlighted how the charge could disproportionately affect those on lower incomes or with essential travel needs. They stressed the importance of avoiding unintended consequences based on income, travel needs, or where they live in Oxfordshire.

The following groups were identified as potentially being disproportionately affected:

- **People with essential travel needs**, such as attending hospital appointments (participants welcomed the availability of permits)
- **Low-income workers**, including retail and service sector staff who rely on driving into Oxford for work
- **Residents living outside Oxford**, who may have fewer viable public transport options but still depend on access to the city for employment or services
- **Local businesses**, which may be affected by changes in footfall

“It will hit people who don't have a choice.”

“Dangerous to people who travel in to work in Oxford – for example, someone working in a shop.”

“People might not come to Oxford, impacting local businesses.”

There was concern the charge could become a “privileged policy”, easily absorbed by wealthier individuals, while others are forced to alter routes or limit their travel:

“For some people, the cost won't matter.”

Enforcement and Fairness

Some worried the charge would be inconsistently enforced, undermining both fairness and impact:

“Enforcement is a huge problem – not enforced.”

Without effective enforcement, those who comply may feel unfairly penalised, while others bypass the system, widening the very inequalities the Assembly sought to address.

Carers were also identified as a group needing clear guidance. Although permits are available, participants stressed the importance of proactive communication to avoid confusion or stress for those under pressure.

Participant Proposals to Improve Fairness

To make the scheme fairer, participants proposed a number of possible adjustments:

- **Differentiated charges based on vehicle size or type**
- **Income-sensitive options**, such as reduced rates for workers travelling into Oxford for employment
- **Permit adjustments**, such as offering more permits to residents outside Oxford who may lack public transport alternatives
- **Proactive communication**, especially targeted outreach to carers and others who might need to understand their status and how to register

“Two prices? £5 for smaller cars and £10 for longer ones.”

“The Council should ring carer organisations”

These suggestions reflect a consistent message: disincentive-based policies must be designed with a clear understanding of their unequal impacts and paired with practical mitigations. This aligns closely with several Assembly recommendations that sought to ensure inclusivity, fairness, and targeted exemptions.

3 Transparency and Public Trust

Though a smaller theme, participants repeatedly stressed the importance of clear communication and transparency. They felt the charge would only gain support if its purpose and relationship to other traffic measures, such as the temporary replacement of filters, were clearly explained:

“Has it been communicated well enough to people to explain why it is a temporary measure?”

Some worried about misinformation and its impact on public perception:

“People believe in news which doesn’t tell the truth – who are against [the charge].”

Participants also spoke about the importance of being transparent not only about the purpose of the charge, but also about how any revenue is used. There was a strong feeling that money should not be the primary focus; rather, the charge should be judged by its ability to promote positive change in travel behaviours.

“The legal aspect must be followed with transparency as to how the money has been used and what the benefits are.”

“The focus should be promoting behavioural change.”



LINK TO RECOMMENDATIONS

These reflections closely align with Recommendation 5 (94%) - ‘Invest in educating and informing the public about transport and active travel options and their benefits. To sell the vision of a healthier, more connected travel network and increase public buy in for effective implementation. People need to be inspired by the benefits and opportunities of active travel and public transport.

Conclusion

Participants saw the proposed temporary Oxford congestion charge as a potential step toward the Assembly’s broader ambitions. They welcomed its objectives of reducing congestion and making buses faster and more reliable. However, they questioned whether a £5 daily fee would be enough to meaningfully shift behaviour, with many suggesting that a higher charge (£10–£15) would be more effective, especially when driving remains as affordable as public transport. A key idea to further incentivise behaviour change was to reinvest revenue raised from the charge in the Assembly’s most strongly supported recommendations, such as free Park & Ride shuttles and standardised fares, to make public transport even more attractive and increase reductions in car use. Fairness was considered, with suggestions including income-based discounts, differentiated charges, and clearer guidance for carers and those with limited transport options. Participants also stressed the importance of transparency, both in explaining the purpose of the charge and in showing how revenue would be reinvested to improve transport and support behaviour change.

Section Two: Participant Hopes and Concerns About the Proposal's Impacts

As part of the same discussion, participants reflected on what they hoped the proposal would achieve and the risks they were most concerned about. Together, these reflections offer a forward-looking view of how the proposal could work in practice, and what should be avoided to retain public support and alignment with the Assembly's vision.

Q2: What would the Assembly want to see happen as a result of the proposal?

- The charge leads to a genuine reduction in unnecessary car trips, not just a financial penalty people absorb.
- It promotes behaviour change, encouraging more people to use public transport, walk, or cycle.
- The scheme is well integrated with improvements to buses and Park & Ride, making the alternatives more viable and attractive.
- Public transport becomes more affordable, reliable, and accessible, especially from areas outside Oxford.
- People feel fairly treated, regardless of income, where they live, or their travel needs.
- Clear support, exemptions and early communication measures are in place for groups with limited alternatives, such as carers or low-income workers.
- The charge is communicated clearly, so the public understands it's temporary and linked to wider transport goals.
- There is transparent reporting on how the revenue is spent and what benefits are being delivered.
- The charge helps to ease congestion, making city access quicker and improving air quality.
- Local businesses are not adversely affected, and people continue to access the city in sustainable ways.
- The charge is seen as part of a broader strategy, rather than a one-off or revenue-raising measure.
- Enforcement is applied consistently, so the system feels fair to everyone.

Q3: What does the Assembly hope doesn't happen as a result of the proposal?

- The charge is absorbed as a routine cost by wealthier drivers, with no real reduction in car use.
- It becomes a flat fee rather than a behaviour change tool, failing to shift travel habits.
- People perceive it as a money-making scheme, leading to mistrust and resistance.
- The charge disproportionately impacts low-income residents, carers, or those with essential travel needs, such as to hospital appointments.
- People outside Oxford suffer unfairly, due to limited access to viable alternatives to cars
- Exemptions and permits are poorly communicated, leaving vulnerable groups confused or excluded.
- The policy leads to displacement of traffic to other areas rather than reducing it.
- People switch to charge-exempt vehicles rather than changing how they travel.
- Local businesses lose footfall as fewer people choose to travel into the city.
- Enforcement is inconsistent, meaning those who follow the rules are penalised while others avoid the charge.
- Lack of transparency fuels distrust in the council's motives or use of funds.
- The charge is seen as permanent, despite being introduced as a temporary measure.

Section Three: Communicating Change – Campaign Concepts from Participants

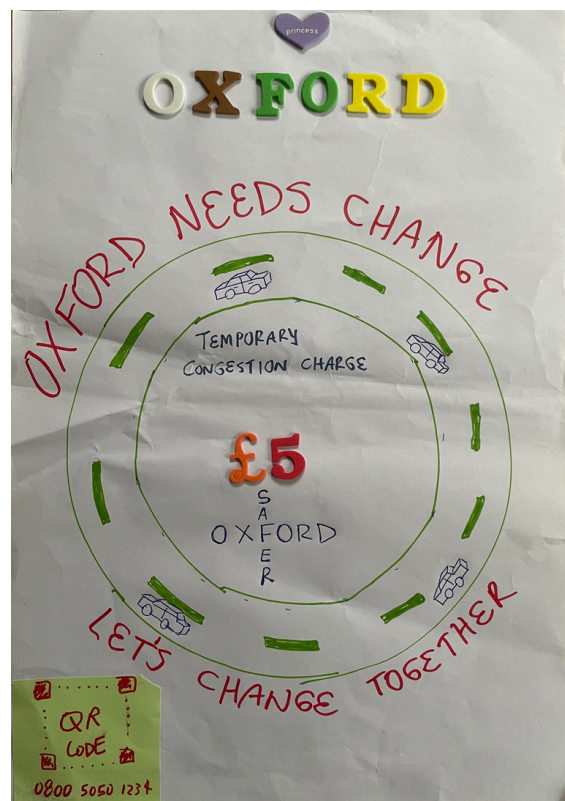
In the final part of the workshop, participants were invited to step into the Council's shoes and design bold, engaging campaign materials to explain key transport policies and encourage behaviour change. Working in groups, they created mock-ups for posters, social media posts, or headlines aimed at different audiences:

- Two groups focused on communicating the **temporary Oxford congestion charge**
- Two explored wider campaigns to **inspire behaviour change**

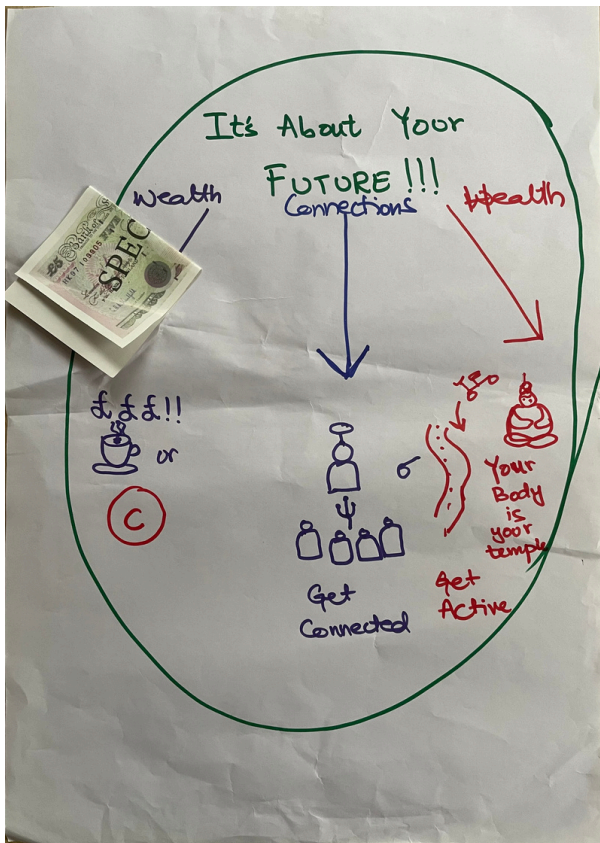
Temporary Oxford Congestion Charge Campaigns

Idea 1: A clean, clear visual campaign designed to reassure and inform residents about the temporary charge. Transparency and accessibility were emphasised:

- A simple image (e.g. Oxford ring road or a green globe with “£5”) - putting cost and temporariness front and centre.
- A **QR code** linking to further details, alongside a telephone option for those less digitally engaged.
- A message of **collective change**: positioning the charge as something the community does *together*.



Idea 2: Targeted at young professionals in their 20s, this campaign played to the values of this demographic:

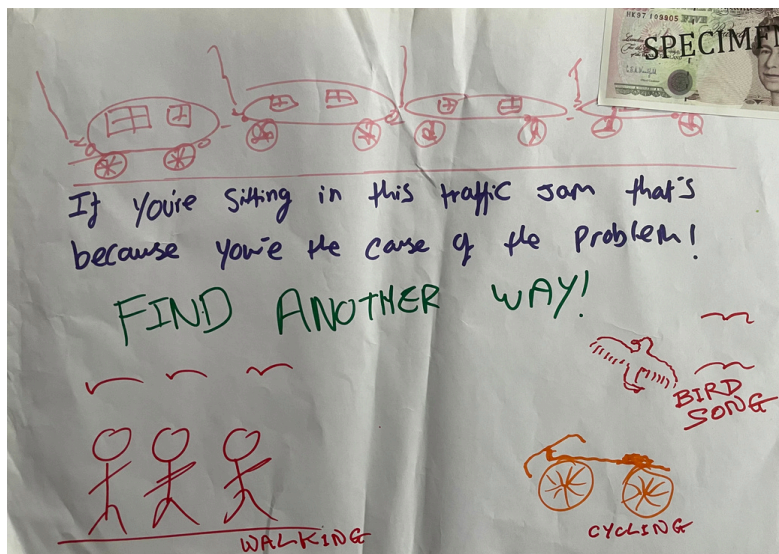


- **Wealth:** Saving money (e.g. “Iced coffee or your congestion charge?”)
- **Connections:** expanding your network: encouraging people to join active travel groups or commute with peers/colleagues.
- **Health:** benefits and wellbeing (“Your body is your temple”)

Behaviour Change Campaigns

Idea 3: A provocative visual advert showing the everyday reality of traffic on Cowley Road, fumes, frustration, swearing, followed by a bold caption:

“If you’re sitting in this traffic jam, you are the cause of the problem.”



They explored impactful messaging to promote alternatives, including:

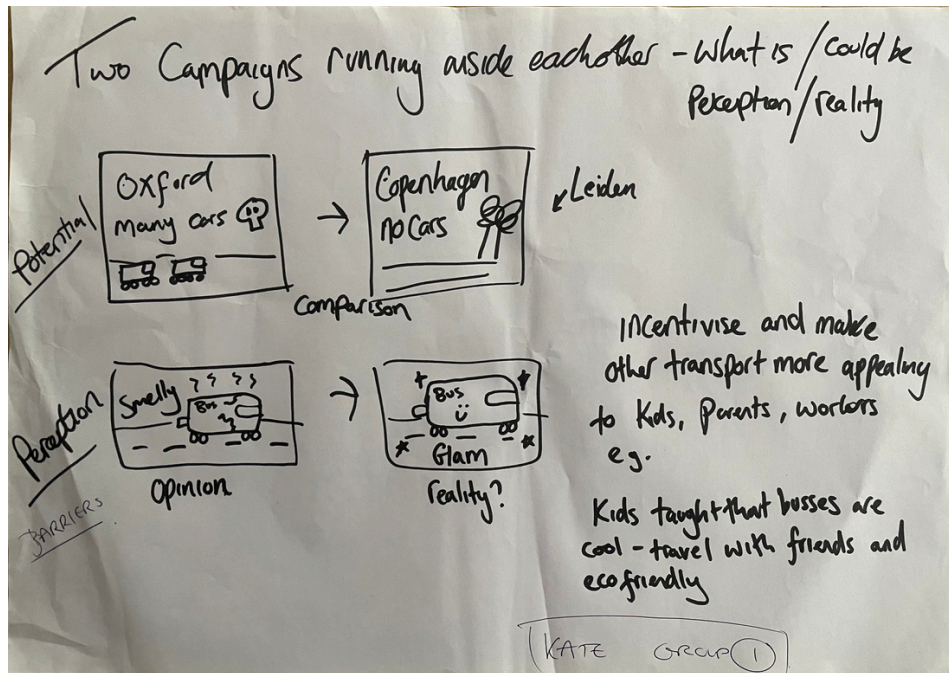
“Leave the car at home”,

“You could listen to birdsong or sit in a traffic jam”,

“Less stress – take the bus”

Idea 4: A side-by-side comparison approach, designed to show two contrasting futures for Oxford:

- One of where no change is made - congested, polluted, inaccessible.
- One of where behaviour shifts - calmer, greener, cleaner.



They stressed the need to:

- Tailor messaging to different age groups (under 25s, over 60s, families).
- Address real and perceived barriers (e.g. cost, safety, dirty or unreliable buses).
- Use aspirational imagery, inspired by successful European cities.



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Appendix I

The table below compares the demographic breakdown of participants in the original Citizens' Assembly (n=34) and those who attended the follow-up workshop (n=16). While the workshop involved fewer people, the group retained a broad demographic spread.

Characteristic	Assembly Count (34)	Assembly (%)	Workshop Count (16)	Workshop %
Gender				
Female	17	50	8	50
Male	16	47	8	50
Non Binary or Other	1	3	0	0
Age				
16-24	5	15	2	13
25-34	5	15	3	19
35-44	5	15	4	25
45-54	6	18	1	6
55-64	6	18	3	19
65+	7	21	3	19

Characteristic	Assembly Count (34)	Assembly (%)	Workshop Count (16)	Workshop %
Ethnicity				
Asian or Asian British	2	6	1	6
Black or Black African or Caribbean	0	0	0	0
Mixed or Multiple Ethnicities	0	0	0	0
White British	26	76	12	75
Other Ethnic Group (aggregated to protect individual identities where numbers were 1)	5	15	3	19
Disability				
Yes, limited a lot or a little	5	15	2	13
No	29	85	14	88
Education				
No qualification, Level 1 & Level 2	12	35	5	31
Level 3, Apprenticeship, Other	7	21	4	25

Characteristic	Assembly Count (34)	Assembly (%)	Workshop Count (16)	Workshop %
Level 4 and above	15	44	7	44
Views on Climate Change				
Not at all concerned	1	3	1	6
Not very concerned	5	15	3	19
Fairly concerned	14	41	5	31
Very concerned	14	41	7	44
Other	0	0	0	0
Do they have children?				
No	24	71	11	69
Yes	10	29	5	31
Driving Frequency				
Five days a week or more	8	24	5	31
Two to four days a week	11	32	5	31
Once a week or less	11	32	5	31

Characteristic	Assembly Count (34)	Assembly (%)	Workshop Count (16)	Workshop %
Not driven in the last four weeks, or never	4	12	1	6
Geography				
Cherwell	5	15	4	25
Oxford	10	29	3	13
South Oxfordshire	7	21	1	6
Vale of White Horse	9	26	6	38
West Oxfordshire	3	9	2	13
Urban/Market Town/Rural				
Urban	22	65	11	69
Market Town	6	18	1	6
Rural	6	18	4	25

Appendix II

Questions Raised During the Q&A with the Council Officer

Following a presentation from a council officer outlining the context, rationale, and details of the proposed temporary Oxford congestion charge, participants viewed a curated 10-minute video featuring a range of public perspectives from the Cabinet's pre-launch of the public consultation (17 July 2025). The video included a diversity of views, both supportive and critical of the proposal, to reflect the breadth of public opinion.

Afterwards, participants took part in a Q&A session with the council officer before beginning their deliberative discussions on the proposal. The following questions were raised and answered:

- What is the benchmark needed for consultation?
- How long is “temporary”?
- How was the £5 charge decided?
- Is there a financial relationship between the buses and this charge?
- Why are private cars to schools exempt? (Raised due to a misunderstanding; the participant noted this could reflect wider public confusion and called for clearer communication.)
- Why are HGVs exempt?
- What happens if you forget to pay – are there fines?
- Are permits allocated per residence or per car?
- In the central area, is it 50 permits per household or per person?
- What will the funds raised be spent on?
- How will enforcement work for those not following the rules (e.g. mopeds, delivery drivers, illegal bikes)?