

Oxford City Centre: Movement & Public Realm Strategy

Comments by Oxford Civic Society

Summary

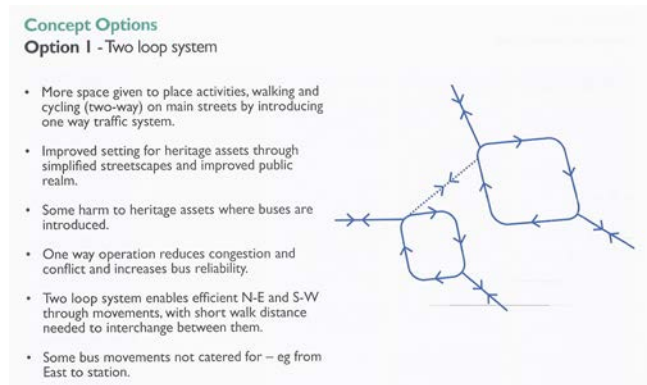
- **All the options involve one-way bus loops, in some cases using roads which are currently bus-free.**
- **Cycling would remain two-way on all roads.**
- **The study does not cover the effects on different types of bus service: local, regional and long-distance.**
- **The two-loop option would remove all east-west bus movements through the city centre.**
- **The single-loop option would either route buses down Holywell Street or involve much longer journeys via South Parks Road.**
- **A much more thorough consultation is needed, with all relevant background data (inclusivity, movement, public realm, safety, public health and economy) and in a form which allows proper discussion and debate.**

OCS Response

1. On 9 January the City and County Council published the results of a Study jointly commissioned from consultants Phil Jones Associates and Integrated Transport Planning to develop a transport and public realm strategy for Oxford City Centre. The study is intended to inform the City Council's Local Plan to 2036 (currently in preparation) as well as the County Council's work on developing the Oxford Transport Strategy. In the face of projected increases in population and traffic the study assumed the parallel introduction of additional demand management measures affecting traffic volumes in the vicinity of the centre, whether in the form of further traffic restriction points (like the bus-gate in High Street), workplace parking or congestion charging measures. The principle of these additional measures is supported by the Civic Society, though they involve challenges. The study concentrates on bus movements within the city. It does not consider the potential for modal shift, such as from bus to bicycle, nor the use of alternative means of transport, such as trams.
2. Present arrangements reflect long-standing policies to limit general traffic into and through the centre and to promote the use of modes other than the private car. Conditions for pedestrians have been greatly enhanced by the exclusion of almost all vehicles from several streets – notably Cornmarket and Queen Street – and from new surface treatments. Bus passengers and cyclists have benefited from the removal of general traffic along a route encircling the centre including George Street, Castle Street, St Aldates and High Street. However, despite this absence of general traffic, conditions in the 'inner' parts of St Aldates and High Street in particular remain congested and unpleasant for all users. Accommodating queues of passengers waiting at bus stops on footways barely wide enough for ordinary pedestrians has proved especially difficult.
3. While setting out general principles to guide the future management and development of the city centre the consultants' attention has been focussed on exploring options for rebalancing the distribution of bus services within the central streets. This has the twin aims of improve operating conditions for permitted traffic and enhancing the public realm by making more space available for pedestrians and cyclists within the overall highway limits. A key feature of all the

options is the conversion of streets currently occupied by two-way bus movements into one-way with services re-organised on a 'loop' basis, often running additionally on lengths of road where no bus services operate at present. Cycling would remain two-way on all roads. The study does not consider the different possible impacts on different types of bus service: intra-city, inter-town and inter-city and airport buses.

4. Two main options are presented. The first involves introduction of a 'two-loop' system with bus services terminating either in a loop centred on Castle Street and Oxpens in the west or in one centred on High Street and Broad Street or South Parks Road in the east. The provision of "layover" space for terminating services is not covered, an issue which has recently been highlighted by the reduction of bus numbers in Queen Street. The environmental 'prize' of this option is the removal of all but service vehicles from St Aldates (which could then be redesigned as a 'pedestrian priority street'). The environmental loss is the reintroduction of bus services – and possibly stopping places – in Cornmarket, in effect recreating the sort of conditions which used to obtain in Queen Street and which it has been the Councils' policy to eliminate!



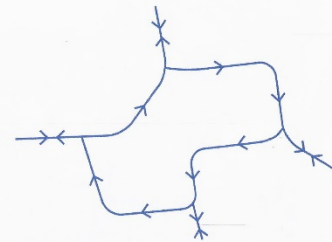
5. The use of loops will mean that bus stops along them will need to accommodate passengers both leaving and joining buses, suggesting a need for more pavement space around stops, and longer dwell times, which could add to congestion and journey times. One-way loops could mean longer walking distances to bus stops compared to the present situation, where buses run in both directions along most roads.
6. Whatever view may be taken of the net environmental outcome of this two-loop option its overriding shortcoming is the severance of all bus and coach movements along the east west axis across the city centre. To varying degrees almost all services from the eastern half of the city (80+ buses an hour) currently extend beyond High Street (Carfax) – whether to the Westgate, the Rail Station or Seacourt Park and Ride for example. The consequence of terminating them earlier means that passengers to these destinations will either face a longer final walk and/or incur the delay and inconvenience of changing between separate services available from the eastern and western loops. Passengers without travelcards may also incur additional cost, though this might be covered by issuing time-limited tickets, e.g. valid on any bus for 90 minutes, as in some other cities.
7. This result conflicts with the consultants' own declared aims for 'maintaining good bus access to key locations in the city centre' and 'minimising the need to interchange'. The scale of potential inconvenience to passengers (and loss of attractiveness to the bus network generally) would therefore seem to render this option a non-starter.

8. The second main option involves the creation of a single one-way loop around the whole of the city centre using the existing route (Castle Street, St Aldates and High Street) in the south – but with potentially fewer bus movements (and hence narrower carriageways) than at present. On the northern side of the centre use would be made of Worcester Street/Beaumont Street in the west and Longwall Street in the east (with present general traffic levels reduced in both cases) with these linked by running services either along Broad Street and Holywell Street or St Giles and South Parks Road (inner or outer variants).

Concept Options

Option 2 - One way system (around the city)

- More space given to place activities, walking and cycling (two-way) on congested main streets by introducing one way traffic system.
- Improved setting for heritage assets through simplified streetscapes and improved public realm.
- Creates coherent network of pedestrian priority streets across the entire city centre core.
- Some harm to heritage assets where buses are introduced.
- One way operation reduces congestion and conflict and increases bus reliability.
- One loop system takes people directly to their destinations and enables through movements in all directions but creates some longer journey times for some bus users.
- Potential to retain two-way buses N-W and S-W provides greater connectivity and flexibility



9. The practicability of the inner variant must be seriously questioned. It involves adding greatly to the number of buses in the Magdalen Street area and the George Street junction which is one of the current problem spots. Even if the introduction of buses into Broad Street were considered a reasonable trade off for lessening the number of buses in High Street the same could barely be said for the very different circumstances of Holywell Street. It is questionable whether the use of this street by large buses and coaches (along with two-way cycling) could be considered safe and physically practicable even if such intrusion into a very special historic environment were thought acceptable. [There is currently an access restriction in Holywell Street on buses longer than 26 feet – presumably for good reason!]
10. The outer variant of the single loop option involves a very large amount of additional bus mileage especially for buses terminating in the centre. From the operators' point of view there is little to be gained by way of new patronage from such a diversion which would move the 'centre of gravity' of bus accessibility northwards at the very time when commercially (with the opening of the Westgate) movement is in the opposite direction! Bus passengers too would be subject to much longer journeys – at least in one direction around the loop. Someone travelling on a terminating service from East Oxford to, say the Town Hall or the Westgate, might be able to travel there directly (as now) only to find that their 'return' journey (from the same stop) would necessitate a detour via Worcester Street, St Giles and the University Science Area! As with the severance impact of the 'two-loop' option the number of people who would be adversely affected by the outer variant of the single loop option, the scale of the impact and its repercussions for the attractiveness of the bus network generally would seem to render it a non-starter (whatever environmental improvements might be secured in the process).
11. The concept of one-way loops for buses, offered by the consultants, might offer potential environmental gains. However the practical application of this concept to the very constrained circumstances of Central Oxford and the large numbers of buses serving it does not enable these to be realised without unacceptable adverse effects on bus passengers and bus operators whose interests are critical to the future functioning of the city.
12. With more data made available on the operational performance of the options (bus mileage, passenger journey time, connectivity, walking distance from stops to key destinations etc.) the evaluation of the options could be deepened.

Even so, as the options push buses out from the central core and their most direct routes it is likely that the evaluation would be almost universally negative. Background data on the impact of a congestion charge or other forms of enhanced demand management would also enable deeper evaluation of the options presented at the January 9th meeting.

13. It is understood that the consultants will report again in February with, presumably an analysis of the options and the recommendation of a preferred option – although this follow-up by the consultants has not been authoritatively confirmed. The Civic Society therefore believes that the follow-up arrangements need to be clarified and a much more thorough consultation on whatever is presented in February also needs to be confirmed. The further consultation should include all relevant background data and these materials should be available in advance of a consultation meeting. Consultation meetings held should be of a sufficient length and in a format appropriate to the complexity and importance of the topic. The break-out group approach with no discussion of the findings of each group, as used in consultation meetings to date, is inadequate.
14. It is hoped that feedback from the January 9th consultation will encourage the consultants to be more mindful of the need to provide sufficient information for assessments to be possible of the inclusivity, movement, public realm, safety and public health and economy criteria. It is recommended that indicators for each of these criteria are provided with base data for performance targets and performance targets for each criteria suggested. It is also suggested that the consultants consider 'future-proofing' their options by providing information about how the options provide a basis for the introduction of innovative transport technologies.
15. The huge prize which this plan attempts to achieve is to create segregated two-way cycle routes and widened pavements across most of the city centre streets. We give credit to the consultants' plan for trying to achieve this, but the cost in loss of connectivity, inconvenience to bus users and the severance of East-West routes is too high.

Oxford Civic Society Transport Group
1 February 2018