**BUS FUTURES IN OXFORD CITY CENTRE**

There is a road user hierarchy reasonably based on vulnerability. At the higher end of this hierarchy are walkers and cyclists, those using wheelchairs and mobility scooters, then public transport and taxis. Emergency, delivery vehicles and construction industry vehicles form part of this hierarchy as do blue badge holders. Able-bodied car drivers, especially when driving alone, form the bottom of this hierarchy. This brief report focuses on the future of buses in an Oxford of later decades which desperately needs pedestrianisation, and separated and colour-marked cycle tracks.

Over the next 20 years, Oxford needs a City Centre which is future-proofed for worsening effects of Climate Change. To achieve this, we need a very much enlarged pedestrianised area, with colour-marked cycle routes and a lot of trees for shade, and fountains in some locations to help with summer cooling. The benefits to the residents of Oxford, to tourism and the businesses throughout the area pedestrianised are obvious. Resistance from bus companies, taxi driver organisations and elsewhere can only be sustained by a failure to recognise how a far more peaceful, shady and fully pedestrianised City Centre will attract far, far more people than the current Centre which is congested with vehicle movements, forcing those on foot and on bikes to co-exist with far too many vehicles, making the City Centre a very unattractive place to visit. The comparative opinions of people who visit other cities – Norwich-Stratford Upon Avon – York, with far, far better pedestrianisation should be compared with those of visitors to Oxford. What might appear to be disbenefits to both residents and visitors will disappear in a more attractive City Centre. A good beginning is the proposed 6 traffic filters on major roads, and we have already proposed additional traffic filters on the Abingdon Road and the Botley Road (see: our briefing *Saving Oxford from Traffic,* 2nd edition,at: <https://www.catg.org.uk/reports/> ) This briefing did not attempt to spell out what City Centre bus services would be like in a 20 year improved City Centre, so this short briefing will outline what we think could and should be done.

Buses are one of the exempt categories of vehicles which may pass through traffic filters. They are a long-term feature for Oxford but currently form part of the over-burden of vehicles in the City Centre. Allowing a lot of bus movements on Queen Street, and at either end of the Cornmarket, plus taxis, is fundamentally bad planning. Pedestrianisation and priority colour marked routes for cyclists can change this.

We propose:

The coach station should be moved to the Becket Street car park – which should become a bus & coach station close to the rail station. This would allow pedestrianisation of George Street when the coach station there is closed, as part of steps to pedestrianize the George Street-Park End Street access to the rail station. The intention is to provide a far, far better walking route to and from the rail station. If the new Becket Street, coach and bus station proves in time to have capacity issues then some bus services should terminate further out along the Botley Road access including the possible use of the Seacourt Park and Ride. Bus access to the rail station would be possible via Hythe Bridge Street. Achieving this would mean:

Access for buses and other vehicles from the Woodstock Road westwards should be via the current service road on the west side of St.Giles, giving access to Beaumont Street, and hence Hythe Bridge Street via Worcester Street. This would involve reductions in car parking on the west side of St.Giles. Buses heading in the opposite direction (northwards) would use Walton Street before rejoining Woodstock Road or Banbury Road. Investigation and consultation would be required.

Continuing access for Gloucester Green market traders would be needed into George Street at each end of their working shifts. Queen Street, New Inn Hall Street, Little Clarendon Street and Magdalen Street should all be pedestrianised, with only cargo bike access for deliveries, coloured cycle tracks, and rising bollards or ANPR operable by the Emergency services when necessary.

Other roads to be pedestrianised:

St.Giles should have radically reduced car parking to disabled bays only, with enlarged pavements wherever possible. Cycle tracks should be colour-marked and widened. Buses should have a turnaround space with bus stops at the northern end of St.Giles, which is where the pedestrianised area should start, other than in the vehicle movement area for southward movements only towards Beaumont Street on the western side of St.Giles. The new St.Giles should become a Plaza, denoting a variety of uses of the space. This should be subject to consultation, but the following seem reasonable:

Taxi bay and coach drop off area at the Randolph on Beaumont Street, displacing other car parking as deemed necessary. Beaumont Street could be road accessed for buses and taxis, and other agreed exempt vehicle categories, only from the rail station via Hythe Bridge Street or from the north using Walton Street’s side roads into the Woodstock Road. Coach parking should be allocated space in a number of car parks and lay-bys with standard bus service pick up arrangements. If necessary, Park and Ride sites could offer a transfer to the existing P&R buses subject to capacity assessments.

Disabled bays near the Randolph similar to the point above, and north of the bus turning zone – in the neighbouring areas of the Banbury and Woodstock Road. Extension of the shop mobility scheme to allow the mobility impaired access to electric wheelchairs when needed, subject to pre-booking.

New Road should be pedestrianised, but bus access to Hollybush Row, and on from there to the south side of the Westgate should remain but the possibility of excluding cars should be examined. All of these areas should have coloured and segregated cycle tracks. Further expansion of the pedestrianised area should be considered for future years. It should be borne in mind that this fits in with adaptation to Climate Change for Oxford by combatting the ‘urban heat island effect’ where additional trees for shade, fountains, awnings and lower-level plantings can all help to reduce temperatures as well as making the walking and cycling environment better for all types of users. We note with concern the failure of the City Council to develop a comprehensive Adaptation to Climate Change policy as many other local authorities already have done. See our report about the transport and green spaces aspects of this under Reports at [www.catg.org.uk](http://www.catg.org.uk)

Access for buses across the Magdalen Bridge should not be going into the High Street, except to terminate and turn around in its widest part. The rest of the High Street should be pedestrianised with cycle tracks. Buses could also terminate before the Magdalen Bridge in East Oxford to control flows, or do routes in which buses westwards out of St.Clements, Cowley Road or Iffley Road and turn around to go back into East Oxford via a different one of these roads.

Bus service passengers were still under 85% of pre-Covid use in October 2022. The County intends traffic filters to speed up bus journeys to encourage use.[[1]](#footnote-1) Bus fares have had a temporary cut to £2 which appears to be increasing use already.[[2]](#footnote-2) But this is only temporary, The High Street and St.Aldates – is near capacity for bus use.[[3]](#footnote-3) In practice, it is better to pedestrianize these areas and radically reduce buses entering the central area of the City. This is better for footfall and therefore increasing retail spending, and far better for accommodating tourists and guided walking tours.

Access to the rail station, currently being renovated, will be possible from the south and east:

Via Abingdon Road, Speedwell Street, Oxpens Road, Hollybush Row and Hythe Bridge Street

From the west by walking from the Becket Street bus and coach station or by taxi/bus into the station from the Botley Road

From the north through Walton Street into Hythe Bridge Street and then to the rail station.

Individual private cars will not be able to access the rail station. This is essential to ensure easy movement of pedestrians, cyclists, buses and taxis in this area.

We support free buses for all in England. This process could include private shuttles to allow workers to get to larger employment centres directly. A review of research suggests this can cut car commuting to such sites by as much as 37%, making it one of the most effective ways to reduce car movements, whilst potentially reducing costs to zero for the commuter.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Free buses: The Street Voice initiative, a Citizens Jury from Headington assisted by the University of Oxford, recommended free bus travel for ‘..as many groups as possible’, in a report to Oxford City Council of September 2022.[[5]](#footnote-5) This was part of an extensive range of useful recommendations which need not be repeated here. A detailed argument in favour of free buses is available, demonstrating that by 2021 they already existed in 96 locations. In terms of cost, free buses for England would require additional financial support (2018) of about £1.8bn each year and an additional £1.2bn if London is included.[[6]](#footnote-6) Roughly £3.6m a year has been obtained from bus fares so a probable figure for fares free buses in England would be about £6bn a year, or a very small proportion of the budget for new trunk roads – a budget which should be dispersed to free buses, active travel and road repair, for example. The additional investment should cover obtaining a fully-electric bus fleet over time, better incidence of bus service and far better rural coverage than at present.

Lower shopping levels by car than expected by car drivers, and particularly the regular anti-LTN correspondents of the *Oxford Mail*, are reflected at the Templars Square shopping area too. A thorough, recent survey of Templars Square in Cowley revealed over 70% of its users did not drive there: 50% walked; over 11% cycled; over 9% used a bus.[[7]](#footnote-7) This suggests a lower traffic City may well be possible with further improvements in these encouraging figures.

Factors stimulating greater bus use seem to include: bus traffic light priority; cashless transactions to speed up loading; free buses for children; simplified ticketing; seats at bus shelters for as many bus stops as practical according to pavement conditions.[[8]](#footnote-8) In addition, using ANPR and barriers to reduce car journeys wherever possible will help.

Low Carbon Oxford North has surveyed residents in the North Oxford area about buses.[[9]](#footnote-9) Apart from specific bus service improvement suggestions, this survey report notes a need for access to buses at no more than 400m from each home, particularly for elderly users.[[10]](#footnote-10) The survey notes how the Pick Me Up bus service did attract 38,000 users in its period of operation, but that it was not financially viable as external funding was not found.[[11]](#footnote-11) This demonstrates the desirability of free buses for all, which could include reappraisal of this type of service if ways of encouraging more use can be found.

Contrary to belief by some that most shopping journeys are made by car, trips into Summertown in North Oxford, from a sample of 276 responses, showed:

71 walking

65 cycling

44 by bus

71 by car

In response to questioning, there was identifiable enthusiasm for better bus services.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Concluding comments:

Detailed consultation will be needed to establish new colour marked and segregated cycle routes in the whole area; new locations for taxi pick up and drop off outside the pedestrianised area; where reductions in on street parking are needed; a zone of cargo and ecargo bike deliveries ONLY covering as much of the new pedestrianised area as possible; locations for selected species of trees to improve shade and appearance of this whole area need consideration and how these will be maintained; where long-term empty shopfronts, e.g. a pedestrianised and cycle tracks only Park End Street, should become high density very low cost homes for people working throughout the central area in particular. Other matters will no doubt need specific consultations.

We note that consideration should be given to how more bus and taxi movements should occur using ring roads to reduce pressure on roads near the Centre. Empty return journeys to depot(s) (buses) and to ranks (taxis) should use ring roads far more often.

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1. Oxfordshire County Council, *Oxford Trial Traffic Filters,* October2022, p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23237376.stagecoach-reveals-popularity-new-2-fares-oxfordshire/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://nic.org.uk/app/uploads//Running-out-of-Road-June-2018.pdf> p.16 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kimberley Nicholas – *12 best ways to get cars out of cities - ranked by new research,* 2022: <https://theconversation.com/12-best-ways-to-get-cars-out-of-cities-ranked-by-new-research-180642> p.4 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://ipa75a.n3cdn1.secureserver.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Street-Voice-Citizens-Jury-Report-for-Overview-and-Scrutiny-Committee-OCC.pdf> p.19 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John Whitelegg – *Free fare public transport and climate change,* June 2021, 2nd edition; see also: Becca Massey-Chase – *Local Public Transport should be free:* <https://tribunemag.co.uk/2021/07/local-public-transport-should-be-free/> & <https://integratedtransport.org.uk/the-time-is-right-for-free-fare-public-transport> & <https://www.uitp.org/publications/full-free-fare-public-transport-objectives-and-alternatives/> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A recent survey concerning Templars Square re-development may be found in full at: <https://futuretemplarssquare.co.uk/what-you-told-us/> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This draws upon LCON, 2021, p.6 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Low Carbon Oxford North – Build back better with buses, bus survey September 2021 final report. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. LCON, 2021, p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. LCON, 2021, p.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. LCON, 2021, p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)