

Frideswide Square – Cyclox response to Initial Presentation of options (July 2010)

Cyclox is the Cycling Campaign for Oxford. We are a voluntary organisation that seeks to represent the views of the full range of cyclists in Oxford, within the context of a sustainable transport strategy. Our committee has several decades and thousands of miles of experience looking at cycling and transport matters, including extensive knowledge of continental best practice. The options for Frideswide Square have been subject to discussion over the course of the summer and were examined at a Cyclox open meeting on 28/9/10. We have also met with County officers twice – on 17/9/10, and subsequently on 29/9/10 for a more detailed discussion on the traffic modelling.

1. Option D has attractions but also raises serious issues: If the efficiency for traffic movement is so greatly increased by removing signal controls and having ‘slow moving mixed traffic’, the implementation of effective bus gate & traffic controls to avoid increasing traffic, must be stated clearly.
2. Option C (Becket St diversion) still has potential and should be examined further, given the risks with Option D. In particular, the traffic modelling of Option C does not yet stand up to scrutiny.
3. Option D could be made reasonably cycle-friendly, but this has not been planned or worked up successfully so far

Option D – Concerns

We are concerned that Option D is not pedestrian-friendly. The low traffic speeds and narrow roads would make things better for able-bodied adult pedestrians, probably reducing their delay and increasing their comfort slightly. It may also be that traffic is persuaded to defer to more-hesitant pedestrians, and may even reduce the delay they experience. But children and more-hesitant pedestrians are likely to find Option D more stressful, which we do not believe is a good outcome.

However, our main concern with Option D is that it will increase traffic. We understand from officers that the traffic modelling indicates that there would be a substantial increase in junction capacity. If traffic volumes remained at current levels, delays and queue lengths would be substantially reduced (particularly in the morning peak). Unfortunately there is almost certainly suppressed demand for car travel, so traffic will increase to fill the space available, and will cause knock-on effects elsewhere in the city, such that the situation will be as bad or (if it worsens the situation for the alternatives) even worse than before.

The presentation says that traffic lights at Binsey Lane and St Giles “could be used to ensure benefits for buses are maximised”. This does not recognise the risk of a substantial increase in traffic, nor explain how it will be managed. Unless traffic-constraint is an explicit goal, we

have to conclude that traffic would be allowed to substantially increase in off-peak conditions, and marginally increase in the morning peak (and, officers indicate, also in the evening peak, if you could find a way of easing the bottleneck at Seacourt). The only way for Oxford to grow and thrive is if we manage to find alternatives to private motor traffic, not encourage more of it.

Bus gates could – in theory – be used to give a degree of bus priority and car constraint. This needs to be more than hinted at – it needs to be a core and explicit part of the approach if Option D is to be acceptable. Some of the options for holding back traffic (particularly in the evening peak and off-peak) are equally viable with the current layout – and not used. In the morning peak, even under Option D, it isn't clear that the rest of the system is capable of supporting much by way of queue management (no upstream queuing capacity, and limited downstream spare junction capacity).

Option D is only acceptable if bus gating is implemented first, to demonstrate that it is technically and politically feasible. Even then, if this partial bus gating were to go ahead as a separate scheme, the incremental benefits of Option D, taking into account the substantial traffic-increase risks, do not seem substantial enough to justify the very considerable cost that would be involved.

Option C – Potential

County Officers have made it clear that Option C was given only cursory examination and was ruled out because it was “inappropriate” even though it delivers the greatest potential for environmental enhancement for the Square and the best conditions for pedestrians, cyclists and for buses. If it is regarded as “inappropriate”, in their subjective scoring scheme, it should have been clearly stated in the presentation. What is meant by “inappropriate?” The objections may well be legitimate, but stakeholders can hardly be adequately consulted if the objections are not made explicit nor based on a reasonable amount of research.

Nevertheless, officers did make a quick in-house study of traffic capacity and identified a 29% shortfall in peak conditions. This exercise used a layout and signal phasing that varied from the design we had suggested, and appears to be sub-optimal. We are reasonably certain that further examination would reveal a less substantial capacity shortfall, possibly even an improvement on the current junction. If this is then combined with the likelihood of modal transfer that is inherent in the Option C design, we believe Option C remains a viable approach.

Officers were unable to advise where the capacity shortfall arises, but the most likely capacity constraint is the Osney Lane junction. The assessment did allow for two lanes of traffic approaching from the west and south, but didn't use them to avoid conflicting moves at the junction, which would cause quite a problem for traffic from the north. There was also a separate pedestrian phase, which isn't required if the filter lanes are used as we suggested.

In the modelling the Park End Street junction may also have caused problems, since it was modelled as a four-way signalled junction with a separate pedestrian phase. We proposed a novel design, with fixed-cycle Pelican crossings instead of full traffic lights: this would be high-capacity, probably be the best option for pedestrians, and be simple. Other options for that junction including a roundabout similar to Option D would deliver adequate capacity.

It is clear that the County traffic assessment for Option C does not yet stand up to scrutiny, and we suggest that more work is required before excluding it as an option.

Option D – Cycle-Friendliness

It is difficult making roundabouts friendly for the variety of cyclists, and the illustrative designs for Option D do not work for cyclists.

Discussions with officers have identified that some queuing at the roundabouts remains likely, even if bus gates are used. Officers hope that cyclists will merge into the traffic, and take their turn in the queue. This would work for some cyclists if traffic queues are short and moving at just the right speed, but as we know from the existing junction, a large proportion of cyclists will seek to manoeuvre their way through the queue, some to the right, some to the left, and other cyclists are put off by the perceived need to manoeuvre. Some cyclists use the footway under the railway bridge, despite the narrowness and kerb; many more would use the footway if the kerb was removed. The layout needs to work for a reasonable variety of cyclists, in the range of queuing conditions, if it is to be regarded as cycle-friendly.

We agree that it is better if we can persuade most cyclists to use the roundabouts amidst the traffic, rather than sharing space with pedestrians. The main problem is the group of (typically young male) “opportunistic” cyclists, which DfT research has identified as likely to flout social norms, such as failing to take one’s turn at a junction, or cycling fast in pedestrian spaces. We feel that persuading most cyclists to stay on the road is best achieved by providing a cycle lane up to the roundabout, in the same manner as the approach to The Plain from St Clements. The tight entry to the roundabout will tend to push cyclists out into the normal traffic lane, if there’s a gap in the traffic, or the cyclist will create a gap for themselves, either in front of the first car, or immediately behind it (depending partly on the attitude of the cyclist, and partly on the apparent likelihood of the first car moving).

To make this work, the traffic lane has to be narrow, to slow the cars, and the cycle lane has to be narrow too, to encourage the cyclist to merge. The cycle lane could take a number of forms, perhaps with textured separation in the run-up to the roundabout, and painted separation on the immediate approach. As far as possible, the motorist should perceive it as “not-road”, and the cyclist should perceive it as part of the road.

This will minimise the main risk of opportunist cyclists cutting onto the pavement, but also encourage the broader band of adult cyclists to attempt the roundabout (which we agree should be pretty safe, if designed to continental-geometry principles).

Between the roundabouts, cycle lanes probably aren't necessary. However a narrow offside cycle lane might be sensible, to encourage cyclists away from buses pulling out.

However, some cyclists will always prefer to avoid the roundabouts, and – as long as they cycle slowly – we think this should be allowed and catered for. If the approach to the roundabouts is designed well, usage should be confined to a reasonable volume of slow cyclists. We think this will be best managed by providing a low-speed junction off the approach cycle lanes, probably taking the form of courtesy pedestrian crossings, and then providing a subtly-defined path through the square, perhaps only indicated by the occasional small cycle logo, or by a clear pathway marked with a subtle difference in colour or paving. Cyclox members have expertise in this matter and we offer our services.

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