



Transform Oxford – a Response



44% of people who use central Oxford travel there by bus – if changes are not planned and handled properly they may simply not come into Oxford at all. To enjoy an enhanced pedestrian experience, they first have to get there!

Last October, Oxfordshire County Council launched its plans to transform the transport and pedestrian experience of central Oxford. The city's two main bus companies – Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach in Oxfordshire - have looked at these plans very carefully and to coincide with the County Council's launch of the official consultation into the first stage of their plans, here we outline our response, and give our vision for the future.

The Issues

The centre of Oxford is of great historic and economic importance. The large number of beautiful historic buildings and the medieval grid pattern of the streets are renowned the world over. Indeed, it was the desire to preserve the central area that resulted in the introduction of the Balanced Transport Plan by the city and county councils in 1973.

It is essential that some form of mass transport is used to move people in and out of central Oxford. There is no funding for alternative modes such as trams, and if there was widespread use of private cars this would worsen the situation dramatically. The only option is bus services.

Today, some 44% of people using the city centre get there by bus.¹ These people bring economic activity to the city. What happens to bus services, therefore, is closely matched to how the city operates and whether it prospers. Any changes to bus services must be thought through with this in mind: in future years, the redeveloped Westgate Centre and the regenerated West End will rely on good bus services to get more people into the city centre. If the Transform Oxford changes are not properly planned and implemented there is a danger that there will be fewer people coming to Oxford, not more.

The County Council Proposals

We share many of the objectives of Oxfordshire County Council's Transform Oxford vision. We believe that the expansion of the pedestrianised central area will bring overall benefits, provided that the correct balance is struck to ensure accessibility and continued economic stability.

We believe, however, that there should be a definite and agreed final plan for the way public transport needs to work in Oxford. Once we have that, then we can start work on this immediately. We do not believe that an urban public transport system can be incrementally introduced without a clear set of objectives and practical steps to achieve this.

Local Transport Act 2008

Since the publication of the county council's Transform Oxford proposals in October 2008, a new piece of legislation has been passed which gives local authorities more powers to work with bus operators to achieve improvements in bus services.

¹ *Oxfordshire County Council cordon surveys*

The Local Transport Act, 2008, allows local authorities to form a new type of “Quality Partnership” (QP) with bus operators so that it is now possible for operators to combine their timetables and to offer full joint ticketing. This document relies heavily on these new powers to refresh the public transport network in and around Oxford, and to achieve many of the objectives of Transform Oxford.

Our Vision

This document is a medium-term vision for public transport in Oxford, the separate measures which will make this up, and a practical method of achieving this whilst maintaining the fine balance of improving the pedestrian experience whilst also maintaining accessibility and economic benefits.

The measures can be broken down into:

- Queen Street
- George Street
- Magdalen Street
- Reduction of Bus Numbers

Queen Street

Previous local authority traffic management schemes have concentrated bus traffic into fewer streets, and Queen Street is probably the most extreme example of this. It offers bus stops in a location which is convenient to many people but its restricted width means that it is not a pleasant environment in which to shop. Indeed, it is not a very good place to be running buses.

We believe that the issue with Queen Street is not about the number of buses using it, or whether or not they stop, but that buses run through there at all. Therefore, we believe a priority should be the complete pedestrianisation of Queen Street at the earliest opportunity.

It is the detail of this pedestrianisation, however, which is the challenge. The buses using Queen Street carry a lot of people and cannot simply be wished away. To simply decant into St Aldate’s some or all of the 82 buses per hour which use Queen Street would serve only to increase the traffic level in St Aldate’s by that number. For that reason, we believe that the county’s Stage 1 proposals cannot work. They will overload and congest neighbouring streets. The key to pedestrianising Queen Street is to reduce the number of buses in the central area.

Using the powers of the new Local Transport Act, bus operators can reduce overall bus numbers by coordinating timetables on competitive services and by introducing inter-available ticketing. This reduction will result in a sharing of bus

stops between operators and therefore fewer stops will be required. In addition, the impact on St Aldate's from Queen Street pedestrianisation will be reduced.

George Street

Like Queen Street, George Street was made part of the "Bus Priority Route" when Cornmarket was closed to buses in 1999. Over the last ten years, as the character of the street has changed, so it has become more difficult to run buses through it.

If alterations are made to the George Street/Worcester Street/Hythe Bridge Street junction, to allow buses and coaches leaving Gloucester Green Coach Station to exit from there, then longer distance services could by-pass George Street, and use Beaumont Street instead.

Appropriate traffic management measures would, however, have to be considered, given traffic flows from Frideswide Square to the St Giles area and congestion at the Beaumont Street/Worcester Street junction.

Services from the west, such as the S1 from Carterton and Witney, presently terminate in George Street. Subject to suitable alternative stopping arrangements for these services, there is no reason why the pedestrianisation of George Street could not be achieved.

Some services, however, such as the Park & Ride 300 would have to be cut in half so that it did not run through the city centre and would terminate instead at Magdalen Street.

Magdalen Street

The pedestrianisation of George Street (see above) would also bring improvements to Magdalen Street, as longer distance services (to Witney, Bicester, Chipping Norton etc) would cease to use Magdalen Street East and West, although there would have to be a new stop at the foot of St Giles to compensate.

In addition, using the new powers of the Local Transport Act, the competitive services by Oxford Bus and Stagecoach to Kidlington would be coordinated so that they could operate from a single bus stop. This would allow all drop offs and pick ups to be achieved along the shop frontages at Magdalen Street West, so that the current drop-off area at Magdalen Street East would not be used.

We recognise that the county council wishes to see both Magdalen Street East and West pedestrianised and to replace this with bus stops in St Giles. We believe that this will meet with strong opposition.

Reduction in Overall Bus Numbers

The Local Transport Act 2008 gives new powers to bus operators and local authorities to coordinate timetables and ticketing through the mechanism of a Quality Partnership. This is a legally binding agreement whereby bus operators and local authorities can work together for the benefit of the travelling public, without falling foul of the competition regulator. This removes a lot of the barriers which have frustrated bus users and bus operators for the last 20 years.

For example, whereas now on a particular route two operators may each offer a 10 minute service, with a bus from each operator departing within 1-2 minutes, there can in future be a coordinated timetable, with in this case a regular, 5 minute service.

This is particularly important in the Transform Oxford situation, where there will have to be a reduction in bus numbers if the expanded pedestrianisation is to be achieved. Taking the example above, if the two separate 10 minute services were combined into a single 7-8 minute service, then the general public would benefit (through a more frequent and coordinated service) and the central area would benefit (through having eight buses per hour rather than twelve).

We believe that by putting such coordinated services into place on the main corridors in Oxford City, there would be a reduction of bus numbers in High Street of up to 25%, and the pedestrianisation of Queen Street could be achieved without additional pressure being placed on St Aldate's.

The Way Forward

Like everyone else, we want to see the pedestrianised area in central Oxford expanded. The county council has stated that it wants to attract more people to visit the central area, but there needs to be an easy and effective way of getting there. Currently, nearly half the people coming into Oxford centre do so by bus and there is a danger that if they are impeded or discouraged from doing so then fewer rather than more people will visit.

We do not believe that the proposal to operate only shuttle buses along High Street, St Aldate's, Speedwell Street, Norfolk Street, New Road, Park End Street and Frideswide Square will work. There is no space at The Plain for the number of bus stops and waiting areas which would be necessary, and we believe that to make passengers change buses unnecessarily in mid-journey would reduce significantly the attractiveness of bus services and so there would be a severe negative impact on the viability of central Oxford. We believe that a coordination of timetables on competitive services would bring a recognisable and acceptable reduction in bus numbers in High Street.

Our proposal is that the county council join with the two major bus companies in a Quality Partnership, which would achieve the aims set out above. This would mean fewer buses overall in the city centre, a pedestrianised Queen Street and George Street, and bring improvements to High Street and Magdalen Street East and West. Bus passengers would also benefit from inter-operator ticketing and co-ordinated timetables. This can only happen if the county council joins with us in a Partnership.

The bus companies are prepared to put in planning work now so that an outline partnership can be signed before summer 2009, and the entire package can be in place during 2010.

Summary

This paper outlines the measures which Oxford Bus and Stagecoach believe will give Oxford an improved public transport system whilst extending the pedestrianised area of the centre to include Queen Street and George Street. It will also bring benefits to Magdalen Street East and West, and to the High Street.

These measures are, by necessity, inter-connected and are dependent on a reduction overall of the numbers of buses in the central area (whilst maintaining and enhancing the attractiveness of the new combined services) and a new inter-available ticketing scheme being developed. Both these measures require Oxfordshire County Council to join with us in a Statutory Quality Bus Partnership.

Both Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach give a commitment to implement this package of measures during 2010, if the partnership is agreed before June 2009.



Carfax in 1969 – traffic has always been a challenge in central Oxford.