

THE FUTURE OF OXFORD STREET – PART I

The meeting with the Council

On 27 November the Board of the Society received a presentation from Westminster City Council on the proposed removal of vehicles from Oxford Street. The full presentation is available on the Society's website.

They key points are:-

Of itself the closure of Oxford Street won't reduce pollution. What pollution there is will be moved to the residential streets north and south of Oxford Street. Over the last year the Government has taken on the pollution issue and pollution from vehicles has already been significantly reduced and will be reduced yet further by a reduction in bus services and people changing mode to the underground. So the closure is neither necessary nor particularly helpful from a pollution perspective.

There has already been a significant reduction in the east west bus traffic on Oxford Street. It was 188 busses per hour at its peak (which did cause congestion), is now 75 busses per hour (which seems to be working) and the proposal is for 18 busses per hour along Wigmore Street (which, in our view, won't be enough).

Currently, stopping traffic on Oxford Street is separated from other vehicles that move more quickly on the routes to the north and south of Oxford Street. As evidence we know that Oxford Street has 10,000 vehicles per day whereas Wigmore Street carries 20,000 vehicles per day. Closing Oxford Street will move all of the slower traffic on to what were previously the faster routes. Further, the proposal includes a number of new pedestrian crossings on the northern east west route (13 in total) so, best guess, is that this route will be gridlocked. The congested traffic will adversely affect the residents in Marylebone and Fitzrovia who are, predictably, up in arms about it. It is unlikely to help with Soho's traffic problems either.

TFL are very keen on everyone moving to the underground and believe that this solves everything. Residents from Hyde Park, Paddington and beyond are not so happy. There are many people that can't take the underground e.g. people with strollers, the elderly and the disabled and also people who don't want to pay for the tube rather than the bus. These people won't be able to access Oxford Street at all. We think its important that a city works for all its residents - this proposal will exclude a significant group of them.

The closure is now proposed to be 24 hours. There is no plan on how to manage the newly created large open spaces at night. WCC and

TFL have finally realised its a problem but neither have a solution nor any funding to pay for any solution they may eventually come up with. We think it will end up being colonised by the frontages for late night drinking.

As many buses will now stop at either end of Oxford Street and turn round, Marble Arch will become a bus depot as will Cavendish Square.



Diagram from Transport For London's *Oxford Street Transformation* presentation.

Bus passengers will have to change busses to get across London, sometimes more than once.

Although grateful for the presentation our Board was underwhelmed by the proposals with one board member asking in exasperation why WCC are doing this. No convincing answer was forthcoming.

We have contacted two of our councillors for a view. Councillor Jonathan Glanz, Member for West One Ward said as follows:-

"This is not a Westminster scheme but is being imposed on the West End by the Mayor and TfL. We accept there is room for improvement in Oxford Street, particularly in relation to air-quality and traffic fatalities but are also very concerned that it could make things worse. We do not believe that the Mayor has sufficiently addressed the issues of displacement of traffic, particularly servicing traffic, and pollution into nearby streets to the north and south of Oxford Street, nor properly addressed the issues of disabled access, north-south connectivity and counter terrorist security requirements. We have major concerns about long-term management of the pedestrianised space, especially if it were to be traffic free for 24 hours a day. We do not wish to see it become a haven for buskers, beggars, pickpockets etc, and without proper management and enforcement (for which the Mayor and TfL have yet to offer financial support) it could easily do so. Simply relocating polluting vehicles into parallel and side streets, hoping to share the limited roadside space with taxis, presumably pedicabs, and servicing, whilst providing adequate disabled access, is a challenge which we do not feel the current proposals properly address. We are continuing to engage with the Mayor and TfL

to ensure that these problems are addressed rather than allowing them to impose a scheme which takes no cognizance of the adverse effect on local businesses and residents whilst they strive to pursue the Labour Mayor's Manifesto commitment to deliver pedestrianisation."

Paul Dimoldenburg for Queen's Park Ward provided the following:-

"The opening of the Elizabeth Line at the end of 2018 will bring millions of new visitors to Oxford Street to shop, to work and to visit. The current state of Oxford Street with narrow, broken and cracked pavements, increasing pollution, a very high pedestrian accident record and an unattractive environment is not acceptable. Doing nothing is, therefore, not an option.

But this certainly does not mean that local residents and businesses should simply accept what the Council and TfL propose without questioning it

thoroughly and very carefully. Residents are those who will be most affected by the changes and so residents need to be put first. Residents' concerns about displaced traffic and increased pollution on residential streets must be answered. No ifs, not buts. The Council and TfL must show that these concerns are being addressed and ensure that the plans do not lead to the disruption, congestion, pollution and daily inconvenience that many residents fear.

It is for that reason that we have met TfL to insist that residents' questions are answered. We will keep asking these questions until we get answers.

We have called for a street-by-street plan of the changes so that residents and businesses can see how they will be affected. We want a big reduction in traffic, including buses. We want to see a dedicated transport service for the disabled and elderly so that they, too, can enjoy the new Oxford Street. And we want to see a plan for Wigmore Street and Henrietta Place which shows how buses can be accommodated without causing problems.

Our priority is to make the transformation of Oxford Street work for everyone - for residents, for businesses, for shoppers and for visitors. We also want more public toilets and more use of quieter, electric delivery vehicles. As ever, the 'devil is in the detail' and we look forward to seeing a practical and common sense plan that works. Until then, we will keep fighting to get the best deal for local residents and businesses."

You have until 17 December to comment on the proposals. If you care about London, the West End and Soho, we strongly suggest you do so.

TFL CONSULTATION – THE TRANSFORMATION OF OXFORD STREET – PART 2

How will pedestrianisation of Oxford Street affect Soho?

Both main candidates to be London Mayor promised to pedestrianise Oxford Street. A popular move perhaps with Londoners as a whole and Sadiq Kahn certainly wants to deliver. You can argue that Oxford Street needs an upgrade because it struggles to be a pleasant place when shoppers are out in force. For locals north and south of the street is where does all the displaced traffic go – through our areas probably!

TfL and WCC say they recognise that such displacement is unacceptable and that they want to look at things on an area basis and try to reduce overall traffic. Whilst TfL can reduce the number of buses and they already have by 40% there are still taxis, private hire vehicles (PHVs) and freight. To really reduce traffic so that there is no overall increase is difficult and will take time. This part of the process should in the opinion of the Soho Society have started first so that any displaced traffic will not have an adverse impact. Things like delivery service plans, kerbside management and freight and waste consolidation are all key, as would be some limit on PHVs which have rocketed

from 50,000 to 120,000 in recent years with the advent of Uber and the like, constantly circling the streets waiting for their next fare. But the Mayor wants to forge ahead by the time Crossrail opens next December.

Worst of all from the perspective of residents the scheme has morphed from a proposal to pedestrianise during the busy shopping hours to a proposal to close the street every day at all times.

At present after 7.00pm when other traffic is allowed to use the streets as many as 500 vehicles an hour from Notting Hill and points west head in along Oxford Street to the West End with the heaviest traffic around midnight. There seems no justifiable reason for diverting this much traffic through our residential areas. The reasoning seems to be that with recent terrorist attacks using vehicles the street has to be ‘made safe’ and that in doing so it would be ‘unsafe’ to let traffic back in at night. Besides the obvious question of where do you stop in trying to make all the busy streets ‘safe’ there are the other issues. How do you deliver stock and maintain the shops and buildings if they can’t be accessed? Will

the side streets become ever noisier with clanking lorry tail gates and rattling metal roll cages? Won’t 2km of pedestrianised street become a magnet for buskers, beggars and anti-social behaviour? Why would a council that clearly hasn’t got enough enforcement capacity to streets clear of such activity now want to take on an even bigger management task and cost?

For Soho the impacts are uncertain because there are no west to east routes through Soho so there is no obvious alternative route that traffic will take through the area. Much of it will probably take routes to the north of Oxford Street itself as will the few remaining bus routes which is really bad news for Marylebone and Fitzrovia and we support their concerns.

This article was penned before our meeting with WCC on the 27 November (see opposite) which did nothing to allay our fears.

If you have views on all this and want to express your views go to www.tfl.gov.uk/oxford-street where TfL are running a consultation. But act quickly as it is only open until 17th December.

THE SOHO SOCIETY AND ST ANNE'S CHURCH SILVER SUNDAY TEA DANCE

For the fourth year in a row we had a full house at our Silver Sunday tea dance that was held on 1 October in St Anne’s Community Hall. The Mayor of Westminster and Councillor Christabel Flight attended the event with both joining our guests on the dance floor and thoroughly getting into the spirit of this wonderful afternoon.

We would like to offer our thanks to the band led by Anthony Winter, the Bees Knees dancers and all our guests who attended the tea dance. We would also like to thank all our volunteers and all of the staff from both St Anne’s Church and The Soho Society.

Guests enjoyed the many wonderful cakes that were generously donated by many Soho bakeries and patisseries including Maison Bertaux, The Two Shuks (@thetwoshuks) and Choccywoccydoodah along with donations from many other friends in Soho.

This event was made possible with a grant from Westminster Amalgamated Charities to whom we would like to offer our thanks.

Photography: Richard Piercy

