

Pedestrianisation of Oxford Street West

Response to consultation from Bloomsbury Residents Action Group (BRAG)

Summary response

BRAG thinks that the reasons being put forward for pedestrianising Oxford Street West are not well founded and do not justify this change with its its probable detrimental impact.

BRAG would like to express particular concerns with regard to:

- Residents in surrounding streets
- Pollution
- People with impaired mobility
- Ordinary shoppers, be they local or tourists

Impact on residents in surrounding streets

Your documents states:

'The closure of Oxford Street West to traffic and the improvements to the surrounding district which we described earlier would mean that some traffic would take a different route to get to its destination. This would mean that some roads would be likely to see an increase in traffic because of these proposals...'

This makes it clear that clearing Oxford Street West of traffic will certainly be at the expense of surrounding streets, which will become more congested and polluted.

Speaking from experience, BRAG would maintain that there is a risk that the authorities will underplay the impact on residents, and prioritise this high profile prestige project regardless of the detriment on central London local residents, who are finding it increasingly difficult to get their voices heard by local councils. There are substantial residential communities close to Oxford Street whose quality of life is likely to be negatively impacted by the displacement of traffic on to residential streets – many of which are narrow with tall buildings and so prone to concentrating and exacerbating noise and pollution from traffic.

As well as those communities living closest, those living a little further away will also feel the impact of this change, since London traffic is complex, with ripple effects of road blockages being felt at some distance.

The need for this change is not made clearly, except in rather generalised vacuous terms such as *'world-class and inspiring public spaces'*. The document states:

'Doing nothing to transform the Oxford Street district would mean that traffic and pedestrian congestion on Oxford Street and in the surrounding area would worsen.'

But this is not backed up with facts. The Elizabeth Line will indeed provide better access for pedestrians to Oxford Street but this does not mean it would cause pedestrian congestion. It may just be that it provides an alternative route for people who would otherwise have arrived by tube or bus; indeed shoppers who might previously have to

come Oxford Street might soon be put off by there being no bus or taxi transport along the street.

And with regard to vehicles, there is no reason given why there should be more traffic in Oxford Street if the restrictions remain as now, and so no reason to anticipate that traffic congestion will worsen.

So BRAG would maintain that there is not a sound justification for this huge change which is likely to impact negatively on the quality of life in surrounding residents.

Pollution

The document states:

With our scheme in place, air quality in the Oxford Street West area would further improve, and harmful emissions would reduce in many areas. These areas where we expect that there would be an improvement include Wigmore Street, Cavendish Square and Portland Place. However there are some locations where traffic flow may increase such as Piccadilly, Hyde Park and Upper Brook Street, with some possible impacts on air quality.

It is disingenuous to claim that a project will reduce pollution if it is simply displacing pollution; there is a tendency for such claims, especially if the change means shifting pollution from a new prestige project area on to local residential streets, as could be the case with this proposed change.

As a parallel example, the recent Public Inquiry in Camden demonstrated just this false improvement syndrome: Camden Council was claiming improved air quality because it had removed traffic from one street, where is measured air quality. It failed to measure pollution on the streets which had taken the brunt of the displaced traffic but had to admit, in the Inquiry, that improved air quality in the one flagship street had been at the expense of worsened air quality in many surrounding residential streets.

The planning for Oxford Street West bears all the same hallmarks and it can only be concluded that pollution will be worse for local residents – who will live with it 24/7, unlike shoppers who visit Oxford Street for two or three hours.

Within the foreseeable future, the only vehicles currently allowed on Oxford Street – taxis – will be much cleaner, and councils themselves control the type of buses allowed. So pollution on Oxford Street, with its current traffic flow, will soon be much reduced.

The document states a wish to:

'Protect residents living in the wider area from the existing pressures of traffic and pollution.'

But does not explain convincingly how it will do this.

People with impaired mobility

The document recognises that the change will make access worse for people with impaired mobility.

Reference is made to the possibility of a hopper bus along Oxford Street. We maintain that this is essential if this change is made.

Shoppers

It is not only people with impaired mobility but other shoppers – carrying heavy bags, maybe with small children – who also need transport along Oxford Street, if it is to remain a viable option and an attractive destination for shoppers.

The hopper service should be available to all.

If the use of the hopper is restricted, a practical question would be, how will you define mobility problems sufficient for the hopper? Would a sprained ankle count? Would an illness which makes you breathless and so unable to walk count? Would having two small children with you count? Would being pregnant count? Would having an autistic adult son count? Would people have to show proof of being registered disabled? – in which case many of those in need would be excluded.

There are many ordinary people with particular problems and needs which mean that shopping on Oxford Street would be very much more difficult and less attractive, if this change happens, without a hopper available to all.

The document declares an intention to create an environment '*in which businesses could thrive and grow*'. Making access to transport more difficult will not do this.

The document also declares an intention to '*Begin to establish Oxford Street as a place for people rather than traffic...*'. This is a transport planning concept often used without proper thought as to what it means. To enable people to get around – especially those with particular difficulties – people often need transport. Of course we should be looking for increasingly low emission transport – which London is rightly working towards. But the fact is that not everyone can walk the length of Oxford Street carrying heavy parcels, and a well-ordered, civilised society should take account of this and provide transport.

It is not a matter of people or transport; but rather that people need transport.

Cyclists

One further point is that your document states:

'...cyclists will be asked to dismount...'

Will this be enforced and if so how?

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<https://consultations.tfl.gov.uk/roads/oxford-street/>