



## Pedestrianisation of Oxford Street: pledges, trade and trade-offs

Major changes to the capital's most famous shopping street look to be on their way, though how closely they match Sadiq Khan's manifesto promise remains to be seen

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Sadiq Khan is not the first London mayor to pledge to transform Oxford Street from a clogged, smogged motor highway lined with shops into a clean, green avenue of retail walking therapy, but he just might be the last. That is because he just might do it - or, at least, provide the political drive to help others to take big strides in that direction.

If it happens it will be, in part, because Khan will have brought the same energy and know-how to bear on the problems threatening one of the most famous shopping streets in the world that characterised his capture of City Hall. It will also be because wider circumstances have rendered continuing inaction unacceptable.

From December 2018, Crossrail will begin disgorging many more millions of visitors a year onto Oxford Street's already over-crowded pavements from new stations at Bond Street and Tottenham Court Road. Concerns about air quality in the area have deepened and competition from the Westfield malls in Stratford and Shepherds Bush are further

concentrating minds.

Last week's meeting of the London Assembly transport committee, its first since Mayor Khan's election, heard from a varied panel of important participants in the process of bringing about a more hospitable Oxford Street. The proceedings underlined that this is not simply a matter of putting up a few no entry signs and planting some trees. Conversion to a far more pedestrian-friendly environment raises large questions, not only about Oxford Street itself but many neighbouring ones too, affecting residents and traders in the West End as whole. The panel explored some of these. For example:

### **Where will the buses go?**

Oxford Street is primarily the responsibility of Westminster City Council. Its deputy leader Robert Davies identified the "major problem" of where the very large number of buses - he put the figure at 168 an hour - that currently trundle down the street would be diverted too. Pointing out that there are large residential areas in the vicinity, he said you can't just send the buses down, say, Wigmore Street instead because that would create a new congestion problem.

Davies's fellow Westminster councillor Heather Acton confirmed that a 40% reduction in the quantity of buses is being worked on in conjunction with Transport for London (TfL). To underline the complexity of this task, she said that when Oxford Street has in the past been closed for Very Important Pedestrians Days (VIP days), this has had "a serious knock-on effect around the rest of the area, and that's to the detriment of residents and businesses". She spoke of "anecdotal evidence" that "trade falls dramatically on Marylebone High Street and in the Portman Estate area, because there's gridlock" if Oxford Street is closed to all traffic.

This issue was acknowledged by Alex Williams, TfL's managing director for planning. "If you do something radical on Oxford Street it has implications for the whole of Central London," he said. "We need to have a much broader assessment of how the bus network works." TfL plans to begin consulting on a 20%-40% reduction of buses in the autumn, followed by "a phased delivery".

### **What do the retailers want?**

Sir Peter Rogers is chairman of the New West End Company (NWE), which represents retail and other businesses in the Monopoly board green set of Oxford Street, Regent Street and Bond Street. He's also a former Westminster chief executive and was an adviser to Boris Johnson when he was mayor. After saying that "the current state of Oxford Street is unacceptable," Sir Peter warned that "pedestrianisation is extremely difficult". He said that retailers "do want traffic-free zones in certain areas at certain times of the day" but that "how we get there is going to be complex".

NWE favours "a series of progressive steps" beginning with a 20% year-on-year reduction - rather than displacement - of Oxford Street buses, each informed by assessments of their economic impacts. "Everything we do needs to be balanced against accessibility for people who use the street, whether it's workers, whether it's visitors or whether it's just people who want to wander through the streets," Sir Peter stressed: "We can't damage accessibility to an £8bn retail environment."

He favours testing “a regular programme of event-free traffic-free days” with a view to identifying “traffic-free zones” that might work for Oxford Street’s shops in the long term. The problem with VIP days linked to special events was that they attracted large numbers of people who weren’t buying things, he explained. They even put regular shoppers off. A lot of Oxford Street business were already worried about rising business rates, Sir Peter warned: “They don’t want initiatives which further damage their revenue. So it needs to be carefully thought through.”

### **What about the cabbies?**

Alex Williams said the number of black cabs in Oxford Street had increased as buses have been thinned out in recent years. Richard Massett, chairman of the London Taxi Drivers’ Association, said that cabbies take “thousands of people” to and from Oxford Street every day and that “mainly it’s less able people” who need their help. This underlined that pedestrianisation would not necessarily be welcomed by all.

Robert Davies pointed out that heavily-laden shoppers would sooner not have to walk two or three streets before being able to hail a cab or catch a bus. Massett agreed. But he also said he would be working with Westminster to prevent back cabs simply filling up the space created by lessening the numbers of buses. Tom Platt of Living Streets felt there was no need for cabbies to cruising along Oxford Street looking for hires. Davies favours more good taxi ranks on the side streets, helping to shift the directional emphasis from an east-west axis to a north-south.

### **What about the workers?**

Newly-elected Labour AM Florence Eshalomi wondered what the implications of restricting buses serving Oxford Street might be for those who work in its famous stores. She used to be one, travelling in from Brixton to Marks and Spencer on route 159 or route 2. “A number of those staff members are on low incomes,” she pointed out and wondered if there had been any discussion about how those workers might be affected.

Sir Peter Rogers underlined to her that considerations about access to Oxford Street being affected by traffic reduction did encompass effects on staff: “Clearly we need to do more to make sure that our workers are unaffected, and that’s why we [NWEC] are against total pedestrianisation of the entire street. It simply creates problems of accessibility for all groups.”

### **What happens next?**

The West End Partnership (WEP) brings together all the major interest groups concerned with improving Oxford Street: TfL, NWEC, Westminster, Camden Council, local residents, property owners, the Met and more. Mayor Khan’s deputy mayor for transport Val Shawcross is to replace her predecessor Isabel Dedring on its board.

WEP has been working on various schemes as part of its long-term vision for the West End, and these will be put before all those it represents later this year with preferred options put out to a wider consultation in early 2017. TfL, though part of WEP, has its own separate and earlier bus service consultation to proceed with. It will be interesting to see how the outcomes of all this fit with Mayor Khan’s manifesto pledge to:

*Work with Westminster Council, local businesses, Transport for London and taxis to*

*pedestrianise Oxford Street. I will start by bringing back car-free days and possibly weekends before moving towards full pedestrianisation. Our eventual ambition should be to turn one of the world's most polluted streets into one of the world's finest public spaces - a tree-lined avenue from Tottenham Court Road to Marble Arch.*

Platt wondered how WEP's efforts so far would work with the new mayoral mandate, with its backing for "full pedestrianisation". Sir Peter Rogers said: "I think it's important to differentiate between a political statement in a manifesto and what's sensible. Political manifestos give a direction. Beyond that there's implementation." The WEP, after all, has been looking at the problem for two-and-a-half years. Robert Davies had remarked earlier: "It's all a trade-off at the end of the day." Watch this space.

*A webcast of the full transport committee meeting can be viewed [here](#).*

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