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Oxford Street – a feet only street?

This response has been prepared by the relevant committee of the London Forum of Civic & Amenity Societies. The London Forum is an umbrella group of over 100 societies in London and comments on matters of wider concern within London. We would be pleased to participate in the work of the Assembly's Transport Committee on this subject and to seek for the committee opinions of our members on any options for improvement in Oxford Street.

The Forum supports the promotion of walking as the most sustainable means of transport for able bodied people making journeys of half a mile to a mile, depending on circumstances. All journeys involve a degree of walking. We support measures which promote walking provided that is not in areas which have poor air quality or are subject to safety hazards from vehicular traffic.

Oxford Street is under severe pressure from the numbers of people visiting it. That pressure can be expected to increase greatly as the result the opening of Crossrail stations at Bond Street and Tottenham Court Road. Although vehicles other than buses and taxis are no longer permitted, conflict between pedestrians and vehicles remains a serious concern. Collisions occur more frequently in Oxford Street than in London generally, albeit numbers have been falling slowly. Pedestrianisation would bring about a massive improvement in conditions for shoppers and other pedestrians using Oxford Street. There would also be a significant reduction in noise levels. Not least, it would bring about a very large reduction in the exposure of people in Oxford Street to air pollution. It is conceivable that a similar result could be achieved by other means, such as designating Oxford Street as 'a clean bus corridor' and very tough limits on emissions from taxis, but that has yet to be demonstrated.

Any improvement in conditions in Oxford Street might have to be weighed against worsened conditions elsewhere, including possibly increases in air pollution in surrounding areas to which traffic would have been displaced. Moreover the fact that buses have been involved in accidents involving pedestrians in Oxford Street is not in itself a reason for banning buses from Oxford Street; a solution might be found in the form of traffic calming and other safety measures.

Any improvement in conditions in Oxford Street would also have to be weighed against the disadvantages of reductions in accessibility if further bans or restrictions are placed on vehicular traffic. In particular Oxford Street is currently a major thoroughfare for buses. Buses provide the means of transport for more of our members in London than any other. Even in the Central Zone, where tube stations are plentiful, many journeys are more easily made by bus. For those with impaired mobility from a variety of causes, it may be the only option. People taking bulky shopping home from a major retail street may arrive by tube but need to return by bus. If click and collect services and home delivery continue to grow in popularity, however, this would reduce the extent to which people will need to carry bulky shopping home with them.

In short the Forum supports pedestrianisation provided that bus links can be maintained and the disbenefits of intensive bus operation are addressed and not simply transferred to other equally inappropriate thoroughfares.

Research is needed to clarify:

how many people travel to Oxford Street by bus for shopping and other purposes

how many people who visit Oxford Street for shopping and other purposes use bus to return to their original starting point

how many people use bus to transfer from one section of Oxford Street to another section

how many people travel through Oxford Street by bus on journeys beginning and ending elsewhere

Separate estimates will be needed for different days of the week and different times of day.

The opening of Crossrail in 2018-19 will create scope to reduce bus services along Oxford Street. This must not simply take the form of reductions in frequencies. The aim should be to achieve a restructuring of the bus route network based on detailed analysis of current and future demands.

Several through routes previously operated from two garages were curtailed at Oxford Circus when London's buses were privatised nearly thirty years ago. This has added unnecessarily to the number of vehicles in the Oxford Street area. The introduction of a "one hour" bus fare removes the financial penalty of changing buses but not the inconvenience. A west London congestion zone would lessen delays experienced on longer bus routes, as well as generating income to meet the cost of safer walking routes.

One benefit of the curtailment of long routes was the introduction of a bus link from King's Cross to Victoria via Euston. This is of particular value to visitors to our city who are travelling across London, often with heavy luggage. Any change to Oxford Street would have to accommodate the re-routing of this bus service.

Every day 15,000 passengers are estimated to be picked up, set down, or carried along Oxford Street by taxi. It has been observed that taxis cause bus delays by stopping on bus stand areas and performing U-turns which sometimes cannot be completed quickly. Taxis could more easily be removed from Oxford Street, apart from north-south crossing points which are close enough to each other.

A pedestrianisation scheme will need to facilitate travel by cycle to and from and between the different sections of Oxford Street. At the same time it will need to minimise conflict between pedestrians and cyclists.

The expansion of freight consolidation programmes and facilities should be prioritised to reduce the need for journeys by service vehicles and the timing of those journeys must be carefully regulated.

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