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Date

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Oxford City Centre Movement and Public Realm Study

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to advise on the draft Oxford City Centre Movement and Public Realm Study on 7th December 2017. The main objectives of this session were firstly to better understand the existing analysis of transport, movement and connectivity and to review the options for routes and street typologies developed for the strategy.

Summary

It is evident that a significant amount of analysis has been prepared to inform this strategy since the design team's appointment which is positive. However, at this stage the strategy appears to be overly transport-led, reacting primarily to the need to accommodate bus routes and cyclists more effectively and safely on city streets. This approach risks the implementation of interventions that result in a narrow set of objectives rather than objectives relating to place making and the future vision for Oxford as a city. A more holistic process is required to future modelling, urban design and planning that is underpinned by clear policies and objectives rather than just for transport in a "predict and provide" approach. Ultimately this requires a greater emphasis on public realm, culture and behaviour change and a wider strategic vision for Oxford's physical and economic growth.

There are clearly challenges to sustainable movement in Oxford, given the constrained street plan, existing levels of traffic congestion and the further expected growth in its population and visitor numbers. Accommodating high levels of buses (public and private) and of cyclists is a challenge born from the successful shift away from the private car. However, there remains opportunity to significantly enhance connections, set a new benchmark of excellence in design and transport and steer future growth in a positive way – by encouraging and promoting a continued modal shift to cycling and walking in the new strategy.

We think that a strategic vision is needed to underpin the strategy that strikes a balance between enhancing movement and connectivity and delivering public realm improvements and giving quality of place-making more priority, whilst also taking into account the surrounding heritage environment. Social sustainability could feature more strongly, prioritising everyday life for all members of the community and the needs of the local population first before tourist visitors. An analysis of the culture of behaviour (as examples – the different behaviour of cyclists and tourists)

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and how cultural/behavioural change could be influenced through a process of design and education is required as part of this process.

Vision and objectives

The strategy could be more ambitious in its placemaking role and clearly define the quality of 'place' it is seeking to create in the future, this will help to create a clear vision for how the strategy will work with and influence Oxford's development - to achieve short term and long term objectives. As part of this strategy, social sustainability and peoples' health and well-being could feature more strongly, as an example a stronger walk and ride culture could form part of this overall vision. This should also take into account the local economy, educational facilities, potential growth and infrastructure. The value and cost of tourism for Oxford should be considered including how further growth can be managed and accommodated sustainably or even if further growth in visitors is desirable at all. For example, designations such as a UNESCO world heritage site may generate even more visitors than at present. We would advise learning from the experience of other cities where tourist visitors are dominant, such as Venice, as precedents.

In order to facilitate a modal shift to cycling/walking, education will be of paramount importance to encourage step change in attitudes towards movement and transport, this could include schemes such as training on cycle proficiency and maintenance, walking initiatives for schools, cycle check ups and community bike schemes.

Public realm and character

It is evident significant work has been undertaken to understand movement and connectivity within Oxford and a number of potential policies and interventions identified. However, we think the new strategy should be more public realm driven and set clear priorities in this respect. Creating a viable, meaningful vision that is rooted in the characteristics of existing places would be aided by using and expanding upon local character studies and briefs for different areas.

It would be beneficial for the local authority to carry out a townscape and public realm study to gain a qualitative understanding of individual streets. The city centre benefits from a charming series of streets and places that should enable a culture of walking and exploring. One of the public realm challenges is the lack of large civic spaces (such as a public square) that provide opportunities for community interaction, Broad Street is an obvious focal point which experiences a high footfall and could potentially fulfil this role. We recommend producing a series of public realm briefs for each street (particularly key streets such as Broad Street and Holywell Street) to ensure interventions are delivered in an integrated but contextual way.

Movement and connectivity

The significant levels of traffic congestion within Oxford and its environs, constrain the ability to provide an attractive and functional network of walking and cycling routes within and around the city, eroding the sense of quality and place. We think that the new strategy could be more ambitious and challenge the established movement patterns as well as explore smarter ways of controlling parking and servicing.

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Oxford is a world class city with a unique history and heritage that attracts a significant number of tourist visitors each year. Whilst this benefits the local economy this also creates congestion issues – from both tourist buses and pedestrians, resulting in certain streets experiencing a very high footfall. As part of the development of this strategy, we think it is important to question whether these tourist flows could be better managed. For example, certain types of transport (such as large tourist buses) could be better regulated within the city. Signage and way finding could enable better use of under-used routes to distribute the flow of visitors around the city. A campaign to try to disperse tourists more widely around the city could help to reduce pedestrian hotspots. Greater coordination and management of bus companies could also play a role in managing the tension between buses, other modes of transport and public realm quality.

It will be important to future proof the Oxford City Centre Movement and Public Realm Strategy and ensure it is adaptable to change. Car ownership, driving habits and parking demands are likely change in the long term with technological changes (such as the use of car sharing and the introduction of autonomous and electric vehicles for example). We recommend that thought is given to the future car parking requirements as well as charging points for electric vehicles. We are supportive of the creation of zero emission zones and recommend considering other interventions such as the speed, size and typology of vehicles allowed in the city in the future.

We are supportive of the use of zones de rencontre, with pedestrians being given ultimate priority but think it should be introduced more widely across the whole city not just small pockets, albeit shared spaces may not be appropriate in every area. The speed of movement should be a clear design driver within this strategy for all modes of transport and should inform public realm interventions such as traffic calming measures and surfacing. The design of routes will be particularly important, as an example cycle paths with markings might encourage higher speeds amongst cyclists who might assume they have ultimate priority. This could be discouraged by removing markings from cycle routes (in some instances) to create shared routes for different users where people are cognisant of the presence and needs of others. In order to implement improvements in infrastructure for cyclists, the different cultures and speeds of cyclists should be considered in the design of new routes and options. We would advise considering how to influence cyclist's behaviour as they travel through different types of space - such as shifting surfacing materials.

On street cycle parking is a necessary part of encouraging people to cycle more but also adds to on street clutter. Off street parking for new developments could be delivered through planning policy but we would equally advise exploring more innovative solutions for public cycle parking.

Deliverability

We think more analysis and testing of the proposed options is required to progress the strategy and these options should be overlaid with Oxford's high quality, 'special places' to understand how movement/connectivity initiatives and public realm interventions could work together.

We also recommend more analysis is undertaken on the following:

- Scenario planning to understand the changing context, current obstacles to sustainable growth and the type of place Oxford will be in 10-20 years.



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- Reassess the parking requirements in the wider area – use of car park, turnover, short term/long term, revenue and whether these car parks could be consolidated/reorganised. Explore walk/cycle and ride facilities or park, ride and walk to help reduce traffic in the town centre and create a better pedestrian environment.
- Monitor and clarify visitor numbers and clarify how these flows and any future growth in numbers could be managed efficiently

It will be important to understand the enforcement and regulation of any interventions, but we would advise not overburdening people with rules – which may not be immediately understood by visitors from abroad. Shared spaces without lines could remove any sense of entitlement over space and might prompt users (drivers, cyclists and pedestrians) to be more cognisant of the presence and needs of other users.

Thank you for consulting us and please keep us informed of the progress of the scheme. If there is any point that requires clarification, please contact us.

Yours sincerely,

A. Osborne

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Review process

Following a site visit, (and) discussions with the design team and local authority and a pre-application review, the scheme was reviewed on 7 December 2017 by Mike Hayes (Chair), Ben Hamilton-Baillie, Dan Jones, Jessica Byrne Daniel and Kathryn Davies. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.

Confidentiality

Since the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application, the advice contained in this letter is offered in confidence, on condition that we are kept informed of the progress of the project, including when it becomes the subject of a planning application. We reserve the right to make our views known should the views contained in this letter be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). If you do not require our views to be kept confidential, please write to dc.cabe@designcouncil.org.uk.

cc (by email only)

Attendees

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