Oxford's Proposed Traffic Filters

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Everyone has an opinion about traffic. Most people would agree that they would like to have less noise, less congestion, cleaner air and more streets where people feel safe to walk or cycle with more areas to stop and socialise. More recently, there is widespread recognition that current levels of car use need to be reduced in response to climate change, while the pollution caused by traffic is seriously damaging health. But we also want to be able to move around freely. So how can we best balance these potentially conflicting aspirations?

For much of the 20th century car ownership grew steadily and the broad approach was to try to provide more space for vehicles. In urban settings, some areas were remodelled to achieve this, often by demolishing buildings, while in others, pedestrians were increasingly marginalised. Trips by public transport fell and services were cut. This trapped those without ready access to their own car (including school age children and less well-off or older adults) while increasing car dependency for others. Handing towns over to the car however, proved self-defeating as traffic levels continued to grow and any relief from congestion was shortlived.

Over the last 30 years or so, there has been a change in thinking. Much of the population of northern Europe now enjoy towns and cities with excellent public transport networks, with successful town centres and the public realm enhanced by widespread pedestrianisation. In the UK we have been much slower to adopt this approach. However, in many places, including London and historic cities like Oxford and York, a degree of restraint on traffic movement has become accepted, often reflecting the limited routes available and the undesirability of demolishing buildings to accommodate more vehicles.

Despite the measures already introduced in Oxford, it is still subject to considerable congestion. This reduces its attractiveness both to those attempting to drive and to those wanting to enjoy it on foot once they are there. The majority of people come in to central Oxford by bus rather than car; however they increasingly find their journeys delayed by congestion which in turn is leading to services being cut and fares rising faster than inflation.

So how can we move forward from here, improving conditions and increasing accessibility for the majority? It can be done. People appreciate how much more easily traffic flows during school holidays, so we know that reducing traffic flows permanently would make a huge difference. The Covid-19 pandemic also showed how much people can adapt their behaviour and patterns of travel.

Both City & County Councils realise that radical action needs to be taken if Oxford is going to retain its role as a thriving regional centre and that doing nothing will mean a continuing worsening of conditions.

Reducing congestion on Oxford's roads will enable bus services to operate more reliably and frequently, and allow lower fares. This would enhance accessibility for most people while also encouraging more people to walk and cycle. It would improve air quality and enable significant enhancements to the public realm, creating more attractive spaces such as in St Giles or Broad St being laid out for people rather than parked or queuing cars.

The main change that is currently being proposed is the introduction of some traffic filters which during the daytime – or in some locations just at peak hours – would limit where private vehicles can go. Widespread exemptions are proposed, including for goods vehicles, to maintain the commercial life of the city. People would still be able to access by car everywhere they currently can, but may have to find a different, possibly longer route. While there are concerns that this could lead to an increase in traffic and congestion on some roads, experience and research elsewhere – including Oxford when the existing filter was introduced on High Street – suggests that people adapt to such changes.

For the package to be successful, we need to see a balance of 'carrots and sticks'. A key requirement is for enhanced bus services – including Park & Ride - to be available from the outset, offering people more frequent services, with lower fares and the introduction of services in areas which currently have little or no provision. New services offering better links across the city centre are required and improved ticketing arrangements are needed to reduce the time spent at stops.

The other key element in the package is the proposed Workplace Parking Levy. This would introduce an annual charge for commuter parking at people's workplaces. This should lead to fewer car trips as more people make their journeys by other means. The carrot is that revenue raised will help to fund the additional bus services that are needed – and allow fares to fall. In an ideal world, there would be a period of very cheap or even free bus services.

The two Councils deserve credit for recognising that conditions in Oxford are not satisfactory, that without action they will get worse, and for being prepared to take potentially unpopular decisions to try to address this.

There are, however, very strongly held views both for and against the approach they are proposing. Undertaking an experiment to understand how the traffic filters impact on the life of the city and how people respond to the changes is surely a good place to start. Councils must however make clear at the outset what carrots are available and they must be implemented at the same time as the traffic filters are introduced. Timing is everything.