Proposed Oxford Traffic Filters

Consultation response, by Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS)

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POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) is a group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focussed primarily on planning and transport in Oxfordshire.

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1. POETS fully supports the objective of reducing motorised traffic levels in Oxford and encouraging greater use of public transport and active travel. This dovetails perfectly with the Council's corporate priorities with the focus on decarbonisation, health and equality. The Council has set itself challenging and ambitious targets for traffic reduction and will need to adopt a wide-ranging and comprehensive approach if they are to be achieved.

2. Experience throughout the world has shown that traffic reduction is best achieved by a careful balance of carrots and sticks, to incentivise changes in behaviour. The majority of people will not be opposed to a sound package of measures that may restrict some of their movements, provided they are persuaded that they are balanced (or preferably outweighed) by other tangible improvements.

3. The Connecting Oxford strategy has set out just such a package and also has the POETS support. Coordination of the individual measures within the whole package and the timing of their introduction is however crucial to public acceptance and their successful delivery. It would appear to POETS that by proposing to progress traffic filters in 2023 – albeit on an experimental basis – in isolation from other parts of the package, the essential balance needed in a package containing restraint measures is being overlooked.

4. Traffic filters are necessarily designed to impact on traffic movements and require road users to change their current behaviour including encouraging a switch to other modes of travel. Correctly implemented, traffic filters, particularly those at the three city centre locations, offer the potential for transformational change in conditions over a wide area and could for example enable wider pedestrianisation of streets such as St Giles and George Street. POETS are however disappointed at the wide range of exemptions being proposed which mean such transformational change in the city centre would not be possible. These also greatly increase the complexity of the scheme which could in turn reduce public comprehension of, and compliance with, the restrictions. The extent of the exemptions may also pose a problem tactically and politically for the council; it is likely to be much harder to tighten the restrictions at a later date – possibly during the experimental period – than it would be to start with more stringent restrictions that could be subsequently relaxed.

5. More fundamentally, irrespective of the hours of operation and exemptions, POETS believes that the proposed traffic filters should not be introduced ahead of other measures which we believe are essential to the effective delivery of the Connecting Oxford strategy. In particular the filters should not be implemented:

    a) before a more comprehensive bus network in Oxford, particularly the restoration of services linked across the city centre, is in place

    b) before a more comprehensive network of bus services is in place across the county as a whole

c) before the proposed Workplace Parking Levy is introduced, which will provide essential revenue for the enhancement of bus services and can fund free or reduced fares for many of these bus services, at least for an introductory period

d) before a fundamental review of on- and off- street parking provision and charging in the city centre has been undertaken to ensure that use of public transport is incentivised, (to also include consideration of Park & Ride services and fares)

e) before an effective solution is in place to ensure that cars queuing for car parks – primarily, but not solely, at Westgate – cannot prevent free movement of other vehicles including buses, which the filters alone will not achieve

f) before there is a clear city-wide plan showing how cycling provision will be enhanced on all routes

g) ahead of the anticipated closures of Botley Road, which will arise from the planned alterations to Oxford Station.

6. Taking a little more time to develop and refine the proposals for Connecting Oxford, should not only result in the best possible package of measures, but will also enhance the prospects for their successful implementation.