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Consultation response on draft designs for the A37 and A4018 bus route 2 scheme

Summary

This scheme is important because it is the first of the programme of arterial route schemes – ‘strategic corridors’. The designs for this scheme set a precedent for future schemes, which will determine the future of Bristol’s transport provision for years to come.

We have considered whether the draft designs are bold enough to achieve the objectives. In summary, for each of the travel modes:

- *Walking*: there are some welcome changes, especially the public realm changes near the Victoria Rooms. But there are two major exceptions – at the Triangle, and on Bath Road leading up to Three Lamps junction.
- *Cycling*: there are some very good proposals in the city centre, but outside the city centre there are large gaps in provision. A quiet route parallel to part of the A37 is offered, but the draft designs do not show any alternative route to the north. The proposals are insufficient to encourage less confident cyclists to switch mode. The council needs to be clearer on what it *will* be able to deliver to enable all-ages cycling – not just on this route, but across Bristol.
- *Buses*: there are some good proposals in the city centre, especially the bus gate on Park Street. Away from the city centre, there are some significant gaps in bus lanes and there are doubts that the changes are enough to transform the provision. Buses will be freed up on some parts of the route, but not much outside the city centre. Good bus infrastructure that allows free passage, faster journeys, and more reliability is crucial to a viable and popular bus service. The proposals should attract more passengers, but it is questionable whether the changes are enough to encourage a significant switch to bus travel.
- *Private motor traffic*: judgements have to be made about whether each potential design intervention would excessively impede the flow of private motor traffic. In the city centre, bold decisions have been made, including bus gates at Baldwin Street and Bristol Bridge, and proposed at Park Street. Outside the city centre, we suggest that bolder interventions, including removing car parking spaces, as in some other cities, could have been presented as options, as part of a ‘decide and provide’ approach, not the conventional ‘predict and provide’ approach.

Design compromises can be down to practical constraints or political choices. There is no explanation of the design compromises that have been made, but it seems clear that in this case, some compromises have been a political choice, using the argument ‘why propose something that will not be accepted by enough people?’ This seems short-sighted as the designs do not appear to deliver on the objectives. Where choices are the result of technical judgement of officers, it would be helpful to explain why bolder choices are not an option.

1 Introduction

1.1 Importance

This scheme is important because it is the first of the programme of arterial route schemes. It is the first time we can see the reality of what is proposed on an arterial route. The policy statements and the transformational aspirations only get tested when designs are produced that share out the available road width between buses, bikes, footways and parking, and the compromises start to be made. Some of those compromises are down to practical constraints, some down to political choices.

The compromises made in this scheme's designs are bound to carry across to other arterial routes to some extent, even though there will be route-specific variations. In this way, the designs for this scheme set a precedent for future schemes, which will determine the future of Bristol's transport provision for years to come.

1.2 Policy context

The policy context is Joint Local Transport Plan 4, Bristol Transport Strategy, Bus Service Improvement Plan, Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), and the City Centre Framework.

The scheme information pages say:

"The proposals look to achieve:

- bus infrastructure improvements to help buses move quickly through the traffic improving journey times and reliability.
- better pedestrian spaces providing safe crossing points and attractive streetscapes.
- reallocation of road space for cyclists to make it easier and safer to cycle

Our aim is to provide a better travelling experience for those who take the bus, cycle or walk, to encourage more people to choose to make the switch, which will help reduce congestion and improve air quality."

Reallocation of road space is contentious because the road width may be insufficient to cater for all uses. The rationale is to prioritise space to the most space-efficient modes – buses, walking and cycling.

The approach was confirmed in an October 2021 Cabinet Strategic Corridors Update paper "These routes will be designed to provide a high degree of segregation, either on dedicated infrastructure or running freely with traffic. In principle this will seek to deliver high quality rapid transit."

1.3 The 2020 consultation

Feedback from the first round of engagement on the scheme included:

- Nearly 80% agree and strongly agree with taking road space away from the car and providing more walking, cycling and bus infrastructure.
- Over 70% strongly agreed that safe crossing points and feeling safe were key for transport corridors closely followed by clean air and a place to walk and cycle.
- Over half of the respondents think the road is unsafe to cycle on and unpleasant to walk along as the streets are congested with too much traffic.
- 64% want safer cycle corridors and 52% want more cycle priority

1.4 The current consultation

The funding for the scheme comes from government via WECA. WECA has allocated funding to the scheme, but this is dependent on BCC presenting a business case to secure the money to implement the scheme. This consultation will help determine the design of the scheme to be presented in the business case.

2 Is it bold enough ?

2.1 Enough for First Bus ?

The Council and First Bus came to an agreement in 2019 that in return for freeing up passage of the buses, and thus making buses more reliable, First Bus would double the service frequency. This is a critical rationale.

The proposed bus gate on Park Street and the existing bus gates on Baldwin Street and Bristol Bridge, speed up the route 2 bus in the city centre. Some existing bus lanes will be changed to operate 24 hours a day, reflecting the post-Covid change in the daily pattern of congestion. But the proposed bus lane provision on both Whiteladies Road and Wells Road will remain far from continuous. Will that be enough ?

If proposals get watered down, buses may not be freed up, and the whole purpose of the scheme will fail. For instance:

- if the bus gate on Park Street is rejected
- if a satisfactory solution at North View is not secured

2.2 Walking – good but could be better

Improvements for walking tend to be smaller simple interventions. A number of continuous footways and pavement buildouts across side turnings are proposed. These are important: they give recognition that the pedestrian has priority in that location. There are a few new and improved pedestrian crossings, and a few widened footways. [Note: this is not completely apparent from the plans put to public consultation: some of the interventions are on parts of Wells Road and Whiteladies Road that are not included in the public consultation.]

There are three proposals that will radically change the balance of street use in favour of pedestrians:

- creation of new public realm at Queens Road between the Victoria Rooms and the Triangle
- bus gate and wider pavement on Park Street (but disappointingly Heavy Goods Vehicles are exempted)
- creation of public realm at places on Victoria Street

These changes are good, but there are two major omissions:

- it is very disappointing that the traffic engineers have decided it is not feasible to design a scheme at the Triangle which would pedestrianize Queens Road. Doubly so because the proposed scheme does not even widen the high-footfall pavement, even though this was part of the temporary changes of the last year.
- there is nothing proposed for the narrow footway from Bath Bridges to the Three Lamps junction that is shared between high flows of pedestrians and cyclists. If this scheme does not address this, then it won't get done in the next 5 years.

2.3 Cycling – squeezed out ?

Bristol's cycling strategy is to “Build a comprehensive cycle network accessible for all and segregated wherever possible, meaning free from motorised vehicles and to reduce conflict with pedestrians.” ‘Accessible for all’ is important: people will not switch to using bikes unless they feel safe, and continuous segregation by bollards or kerbing is required for that.

There are some very good proposals in the city centre, but outside the city centre there are large gaps in provision. The proposals do not include ‘accessible for all’ proposals on Whiteladies Road or Wells Road. The improvements for bikes are not continuous, and become patchier away from the city centre.

Wells Road is narrower, and it is more difficult to see how a segregated cycle way could be accommodated. An alternative parallel quiet route is proposed for Wells Road. But no alternative is proposed for Whiteladies Road (there is an existing Sustrans route, the Downs Way, but this is not mentioned in the consultation). A route through back streets which isn't direct is unlikely to achieve the same take-up as a route directly along the arterial road.

The proposals are insufficient to encourage less confident cyclists to switch mode. The council needs to be clearer on what it *will* be able to deliver to enable all-ages cycling – not just on this route, but across Bristol.

2.4 Extrapolating to other arterial routes

Using these proposals as a precedent, and making use of the information in the LCWIP, it looks likely that the strategic corridors will be as follows:

Arterial road	Continuous bus lane ?	Continuous cycle route ?	
		Segregated on arterial road	Alternative quiet route
Portway	Yes	Yes	-
Bath Road	Yes	?Yes	River Avon Trail
M32	Yes	No	Concorde Way, Frome Valley Greenway
Whiteladies Road	Partial	No	Downs Way
Wells Road	Partial	No	Bayham Road etc, Whitchurch Way
Gloucester Road	Partial	No	Southmead Quietway, Concorde Way
East Street/West Street	Partial	No	Whitehouse Lane, Filwood Quietway
A370	No, but Metrobus from P&R	No	Festival Way
Church Road	Partial	No	Wesley Way
Stapleton Road	No	No	Frome Valley Way
Fishponds Road	Partial	No	Railway Path

The policy statements and the transformational aspirations do not appear to translate into reality for buses and bikes on arterial routes. Few arterial roads will have continuous bus lanes or cycle lanes. The alternative quiet cycle routes are variable: most are indirect, good as leisure

routes but less good for regular utility travel; some go through parks and are unlit at night. It seems a realistic conclusion that the desired modal shifts will not be achieved.

2.4 Car parking

Take Whiteladies Road. It has road width for 3 or 4 carriageways along most of its length. It has a long length of shops, and a good deal of roadside parking, which would have to be removed in a more radical plan. That will raise concerns from motorists and traders, and would take 'political capital' to implement. But the Council seems to have ruled this out without putting it to consultation. It could have presented two options: 1) removing car parking and showing the benefit for space-efficient transport modes, and 2) the status quo – delayed buses and less safety for bikes.

There are examples in other cities where parking has been removed outside shops: Oxford Road in Manchester, and Mile End Road in East London (CS2).

Another place where parking could have been removed is on Henleaze Road.

2.6 Summary

Bolder interventions, including removing car parking spaces, could have been presented as options. These bolder interventions could have been part of a 'decide and provide' approach, as in some other cities, not the conventional 'predict and provide' approach.

3 Key locations for improvement

3.1 Locations from 2020 feedback

The consultation feedback says that respondents to the 2020 consultation sought improvements for pedestrians, cyclists and buses at a number of specific locations. The table below lists these places and comments on whether the scheme delivers those improvements for buses and bikes.

Location	Improvements included in the draft designs	
	For buses	For bikes
A37 junction with Airport Road / Wootton Park	No substantive changes	No substantive changes
hill section of A37	Inbound bus lane upgraded to 24 hour	Bayham Road cycle route. Uphill cycle lane between 3 Lamps and St Johns Ln
Broadwalk and A37 junction	Outbound bus lane upgraded to 24 hour	None
Bath Bridges area	None	None
Park Street cycle lane	Bus gate	None, but the bus gate makes the road quieter
Triangle gyratory	None	Segregated bike lane
Top of Whiteladies Road junction with Westbury Road and Stoke Road.	None	None through junction.

3.2 Other locations

Location	Improvements included in the draft designs	
	For buses	For bikes
North View	Bus gate rejected, proposals under review	Proposals under review
Whiteladies Road	Outbound 24 hour bus lane on Blackboy Hill Outbound hours to be reviewed on bus lane north from Clifton Down	None. Nothing in the draft designs about an alternative quiet route

3.3 Commentary

The analysis in the tables above supports the doubts that the scheme proposals do enough to help ease bus flows. They demonstrate also that the improvements for bikes are not continuous, and become patchier away from the city centre.

4 Engagement

We recognise that consultation is difficult and takes a huge amount of council officer time. The Council has improved its engagement processes by asking the public about their issues and suggestions for the route in the first round (in 2020 for this scheme), before presenting any proposals. But the second round of engagement does not seem to have changed much: it is still mostly a single proposal put forward for reaction, not more than one option. There is no explanation of the design compromises that have been made, and why.

5 Comments on particular locations

NORTH SECTION

Southmead Road: The new bus lane will reduce delays to buses, but removing two lanes from Southmead Road may cause traffic delays. It is hoped that the planners have carried out surveys of the stretch to ensure the new layout can cope with acceptable volumes of traffic.

Henleaze Road: We welcome the closure of Holmes Grove, which will allow an enhanced bus stop and an upgraded public space.

North View and Parry's Lane

We await the proposal for North View, where buses are currently delayed. A bus gate seems to have been rejected.

We support using a small section of the Downs to provide footpaths.

Whiteladies Road/The Downs Junction

We welcome the proposed outbound bus lane on Blackboy Hill, but it is relatively short. The car parking that is currently allowed in the outbound bus lane delays buses as cars move in and out of the "parking" lane: we support an extension of bus lane hours of operation.

We support the closure of Roman Road to private motor traffic.

Clifton Down: integration with train services would be improved if the bus stops were moved nearer the station – north of the pedestrian crossing.

CENTRAL SECTION

Queens Road: (the section of road between the Victoria Rooms and Triangle West). We welcome the (costly) new public realm, but the reduction to one lane may slow down buses. The segregated cycleways will enhance safety but will only work if cyclists are willing to cross the road to reach them.

Triangle: (the section from University Road to the top of Park Street) This area sees high numbers of cyclist and pedestrians. The changes are for good for cyclists; for pedestrians they are worse than in 2020 when Covid changes widened the pavement.

Park Street: We support the proposed bus gate. It is not clear why HGVs are exempted: it conflicts with the scheme's objectives. Reducing the traffic on the street would allow major benefits for pedestrians as footpaths could be widened. The bus gate on Park Street will have an impact on traffic volumes on Park Row etc, but some of this impact has already been felt as a result of the bus gate on Bristol Bridge. Motorists who need access to properties will need to learn a more complicated route to reach them; similarly a visitor to the city staying at the Marriot Hotel on College Green.

College Green: We support the changes that allow additional pavement width for the high flow of pedestrians, and close off the left turn from Canons Road for motor vehicles.

Victoria Street/Bristol Bridge: the new 'floating bus stops' are located between the road and the segregated cycle way. This approach has proved controversial in some other locations across the country. The detailed design should mitigate the risk of collisions with alighting passengers.

Victoria Street (southern end): We welcome the widened footpaths, segregated cycleway, and improved public realm. The existing route 2 bus stop at the south end of Victoria Street is a long walk from Temple Meads Station. The northbound bus stop is over 400m from the station entrance. Consideration should be given to moving it closer to the station.

Bath Road: consideration should be given to the feasibility of a bus stop close to the projected new southern entrance to Temple Meads. Even if this is not feasible as part of the route 2 scheme, it should be part of longer-term plans.

SOUTH SECTION

Woodbridge Road: we welcome the extension to 24-hour operation of the bus lane from Woodbridge Road to Broad Walk.

Wootton Park (Airport Road) and West Town Lane junctions: the 'Wootton Park' junction is the main crossroads of the Bristol South Ring Road and a busy strategic 'A' road into Bristol bringing major traffic flows from the south. When the junction was re-modelled some years ago, the design meant that there are four separate phases at the traffic lights, causing delays to traffic, particularly to vehicles on the ring road. The closing of the West Town Lane rat run route will impact on ring road traffic at the Airport Road junction.

West Town Lane: the new 'floating bus stop' at the bottom of Sturminster Road is located between the road and the segregated cycle way. This approach has proved controversial in some other locations across the country. The detailed design should mitigate the risk of collisions with alighting passengers.