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BRISTOL CIVIC SOCIETY:

COMMENTS ON THE PROPOSED CUMBERLAND ROAD BUS GATE

August 2022

SUMMARY

Bristol City Council (BCC) has made a proposal to install a bus gate on Cumberland Road, historically a through route for eastbound (inbound) traffic. A bus gate would permit it to be used by just buses, taxis and cycles. The stated objectives are to reduce delays to buses, particularly at the Bedminster Bridge junction, prioritising public transport over private vehicles, and to improve air quality.

We support the policy of prioritizing public transport, but in this location, unless evidence of bus delays can be provided, it feels difficult to argue for a bus gate at this time. We have proposed an alternative measure which may help free bus flows.

Turning to two other possible reasons for change, the strategic case for restricting private vehicles is not overwhelming; and the evidence that air pollution will improve as a result of the proposed scheme is not clear.

BACKGROUND

At present, there is only one bus route along Cumberland Road, the m2 Metrobus service from Long Ashton Park and Ride site. The buses run every 10 – 20 mins depending on the time of day.

A large number of people commute into the city from the towns and villages to the west of Bristol, especially W-S-M and Portishead, and are employed in the many new offices on the western side of the city centre.

The topography of the area is defined by two waterways: the river Avon flows to Hotwells where it splits into the river itself and the non-tidal Floating Harbour. Since the Floating Harbour was created in 1809, roads have developed so that there are now three routes into the city centre from the West:

- Hotwell Road to the north of the Harbour.
- Coronation Road running south of the river.
- Cumberland Road between the two waterways.

PARK & RIDE ERA

In the early years of this century three Park and Ride services were set up in Bristol, two of which were located on the western side of the city.

The Avonmouth P&R on the Portway has developed and is now connected to a new integrated railway station on the Severn Beach line.

The Long Ashton P&R was located to be convenient for Weston, Clevedon and Portishead. Originally, it had conventional buses using the Plimsoll Bridge to reach the north side of the Harbour and Anchor Road, thus meeting the needs of the many office workers in that area. However, the bridge complex has always been a source of congestion, so the decision was made to route the m2 Metrobus along Cumberland Road, from where it circulates around the city centre before returning to the P&R site. To achieve this, and in an effort to reduce journey times, the new route included three innovations:

1. A dedicated busway was constructed from the P&R site to the western end of Cumberland Road. This was to be a partially guided busway, i.e. it has short sections of raised kerbing to steer the bus in these sections. It is a system that has been used for many years in cities such as Leeds and Cambridge.
2. To avoid conflict with other road users, two dedicated bridges were created. The first allows the busway to cross the Network Rail line alongside Winterstoke Road. The second is to cross the river Avon by utilising the redundant 1906 road/railway swing bridge by Cumberland Basin. The latter was a costly exercise but did include provision for cyclists and pedestrians.
3. Because of the guided busway sections, only dedicated buses can be used on the service. Five ADL Enviro 400 buses are used. These have side wheels connected to the steering mechanism and can self-guide where there are raised kerbs.

PROBLEMS

There have been many problems with the operation of the m2 buses.

One immediate cause for complaint was that the P&R buses no longer ran along Anchor Road. Notices were put up at the Long Ashton terminus detailing how passengers should now alight at Wapping Wharf and then walk to Anchor Road via Harbourside, Merchants Road bridge and Pero's Bridge. This was not what many passengers wanted. Current usage does not appear to be high.

The kerbing used for the guided sections began to break up. Despite remedial work this is thought to be an ongoing problem. Ideally when the bus enters the guideway, it should slow down and carefully align, otherwise the wheels on the side of the bus hit the kerb with a force that is likely to cause long term damage.

However, the most serious problem to affect the route was the collapse of the river wall just west of Vauxhall Bridge. This occurred early in 2020 when a whole section about 100m long slid into the river. Whilst Cumberland Road dates from 1809, the collapsed wall, railway line and footpath are much later, constructed when the GWR brought a line from Ashton Junction. to the Harbour area in 1906, with the section alongside the river being built on a series of arches. It had been noticeable for a number of years that there was a problem beneath the track/path with signs of distortion indicating that all was not well below ground.

Work to repair the wall has been ongoing for about 12 months and is not due for completion until later this year. To allow the work to take place, a 250m length of the road has been made

into a contraflow, and to reduce the amount of traffic using the road, restrictions have been placed on Avon Crescent, Ashton Avenue and the western end of Cumberland Road. It is thus currently very difficult to access Cumberland Road eastbound and the road is eerily quiet. Currently there are three sets of temporary traffic lights in the short section because of new build work at 65 Cumberland Road, utility work near Spike Island and the work on the river wall.

ASSESSMENT AGAINST REASONS FOR CHANGE

There are 3 rationales for change:

1) Strategic

The strategic argument is the general policy of discouraging private vehicles from entering the city centre, restricting them to the inner loop road and creating a 'traffic cell' within the loop where through-traffic is barred. The thinking is that freeing up Metrobus will encourage more people to use it, instead of using their car, which reduces congestion, pollution, and carbon emissions. We support this policy.

The idea is that the area within the inner ring road is divided up into traffic cells. You can drive into a traffic cell but you come out the same way – there is no through-route. There is a choice between whether Spike Island should be a traffic cell in its own right, or part of the Redcliffe traffic cell.

The strategic argument *for* restricting private vehicles at Cumberland Road is presumably that traffic heading for the Redcliffe traffic cell should do so via Coronation Road and the Bedminster roundabout, and that Spike Island should be a traffic cell in its own right. An argument for this is that that curtails through-traffic using Cumberland Road to cut from one side of the ring road to the other. An argument *against* might be that it is unreasonable not to have an access route from the west into the Redcliffe traffic cell, and for deliveries and for residents with cars at Wapping Wharf, Merchants Landing and the General. Overall, the strategic case *for* is not overwhelming.

2) Clean Air Zone

The Cumberland Road bus gate has been included in the CAZ scheme for which the Full Business Case was approved by Cabinet in February 2021 and approved by government.

Closing Cumberland Road to eastbound private motor traffic has impacts on other roads. Some in the group argue that removing eastbound traffic from Cumberland Road significantly increases congestion on Coronation Road and Hotwell Road, leading to slower moving traffic and more pollution on those roads for longer periods of the day. Others argue that, whether there are 2 or 3 roads from the west, there will always be congestion on Hotwell Road/Anchor Road and Coronation Road at peak times, and the marginal impact of closing Cumberland Road is small. Either way, the evidence that air pollution will improve as a result of the proposed scheme is not clear. The CAZ argument is not overwhelming.

3) Bus flow

A stated objective is to reduce delays to buses particularly at the Bedminster Bridge junction. This would be part of a package of measures, such as enhanced P & R sites, more frequent buses, targeted routes with bus priority to improve journey time and reliability.

No evidence of bus delays before the current traffic restrictions has been provided so far. When all the current traffic restrictions on Cumberland Road are removed, thus allowing Avon Crescent and all of Cumberland Road to be re-used for general traffic, then a vehicle count and timing survey would provide real evidence of where the hold-ups are occurring. This should include Cumberland Road, Hotwell Road and Coronation Road. Unless evidence of bus delays due to traffic congestion can be provided, it feels difficult to argue for a bus gate at this time.

Work may still need to be done but rather than a bus gate in the location proposed, alternatives should be examined. The situation for inbound buses could, for example, be improved by the option of a bus-only left slip from a re-marked/widened Commercial Road on to Redcliffe Hill at the Bedminster Bridge roundabout leading directly into the bus lane/stop. This bus-only slip would join up with the existing stretch of bus lane.

(History also suggests that when the m2 Metrobus route was first proposed, there was an initial suggestion that a right turn spur for buses from Redcliffe Hill into Commercial Road, avoiding crossing the river twice, was to be included at this junction. That was never built.)

It is a sensible long-term objective to reduce road traffic and congestion in the city centre and bus gates form part of this. However, it is not clear that a bus gate on Cumberland Road at this point would provide net benefits unless evidence of bus delays can be produced.