



Oxfordshire Liveable Streets
Statement on "Connecting Oxford"

November 2019

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Summary

"[Connecting Oxford](#)" is the county and city councils' proposal to improve transportation in Oxford and between Oxford and outlying towns.

Oxfordshire Liveable Streets supports this proposal. We believe it will succeed in its main aim of reducing congestion and increasing connectivity.

We also believe it will significantly increase the share of journeys taken by active and sustainable means. This makes it probably the most ambitious pro-climate, pro-liveability, pro-public-health transport initiative in the UK.

To increase its chances of success, we would like to see liveability improvements included. Experience from other large-scale transport reforms nearby suggests that the public reaction is better when public-realm improvement is coupled to the transport improvement.

Background

As congestion gets worse, small changes and modifications have diminishing prospect of improving the movement of people. For example, [£1.35 million](#) was spent in 2015 re-developing The Plain roundabout at the eastern end of Magdalen Bridge. Yet the area remains highly congested and the number of crashes is still high.¹

This kind of "[expensive incrementalism](#)", to borrow OLS director Danny Yee's phrase, is repeated up and down the country. Billions of pounds have been spent on schemes trying to ostensibly improve conditions for walkers and cyclists while not interrupting car traffic 'flow'.

The highway authority in Oxford, as in most cities and towns across the country, is the county council. The city council is responsible for air quality. With transportation responsible for 75% of air pollution in Oxford, it was inevitable that the two authorities would produce a transportation strategy moving beyond expensive incrementalism.²

That strategy -- Connecting Oxford -- recognises the difference in space efficiency of different transport modes. Private vehicular travel is the least space-efficient mode of transport. There are people who legitimately need to use it, but it isn't working as a mass-transportation option.³ For example, travelling from Summertown to Oxford Business Park (5 miles) in the morning peak takes "typically 18 - 40 minutes" by car. A journey from

¹ Crashmap.co.uk reports 44 crashes on The Plain in 2016-2018.

² Oxford City Council (2016), "2016 Air quality status report", https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/3832/air_quality_annual

³ This is why electric vehicles are not a panacea.

Witney to the JR Hospital in Headington takes "typically 28 - 55 minutes" by car.⁴ And because of the variance, the higher number must be used in the commuter's planning.

Connecting Oxford is a conscious choice to prioritise bus travel and to incentivise mode-shift out of private cars. In taking out a large volume of private vehicular traffic, it will also improve conditions for those walking and cycling.

Connecting Oxford

Connecting Oxford has three main elements.

1. Bus gates

The first element is a set of five 'bus gates'. These give buses, taxis, PHVs, bikes and emergency vehicles privileged access through key corridors. Bus gates are ANPR-camera-controlled points to enforce particular restrictions.



Drivers of private cars can still reach their destinations, but need to use the ring road if those destinations are on the other side of a bus gate.

The placement of the five bus gates meets two objectives. The first is to take vehicular through-traffic out of the city centre and thereby also reduce demand for space on arteries into the city centre. To do so, bus gates are placed, roughly, on Worcester Street, Oxpens Road and South Parks Road (map).

Image: Oxfordshire County Council

The second objective of the bus-gate placement is to prioritise the movement of buses on key arteries outside the city centre. For that reason, bus gates are also located on Hollow Way and Marston Ferry Road.

⁴ Both figures are from Google Maps.



The bus gates work as a whole. If the city-centre gates are not complemented by the Hollow Way and Marston Ferry Road gates, bus travel on those routes will have the same or worse congestion as now. In the case of Marston Ferry Road, the relevant congestion is at the junctions either side of the road itself. For Hollow Way, congestion affects its length.

2. Eastern Arc bus route

The second element is a brand-new bus route linking the north of the city to the south-east, travelling a route serving a number of large employment centres in the east. The bus gates on Hollow Way and Marston Ferry Road make this a fast and reliable option.

The service will be every 8-10 minutes.

Commuters from outside Oxford will be able to use park-and-ride facilities to the north, such as Pear Tree, and Redbridge Park-and-Ride in the south. They will be able to avoid the hub-and-spoke style of current park-and-ride bus transportation, instead going straight to employment sites along the eastern arc.

3. Workplace parking levy

To help pay for the new bus service, as well as for some other improvements to help people transition to bus or cycle, employers will be asked to pay a workplace parking levy of roughly £400-£600 per parking space per year. This would apply to employers with more than ten spaces, and only at employment sites within a ten-minute walk of the new bus route.

The workplace parking levy is also seen as giving employers an incentive to encourage employees not to use their car for commuting and for reducing the amount of parking they provide.

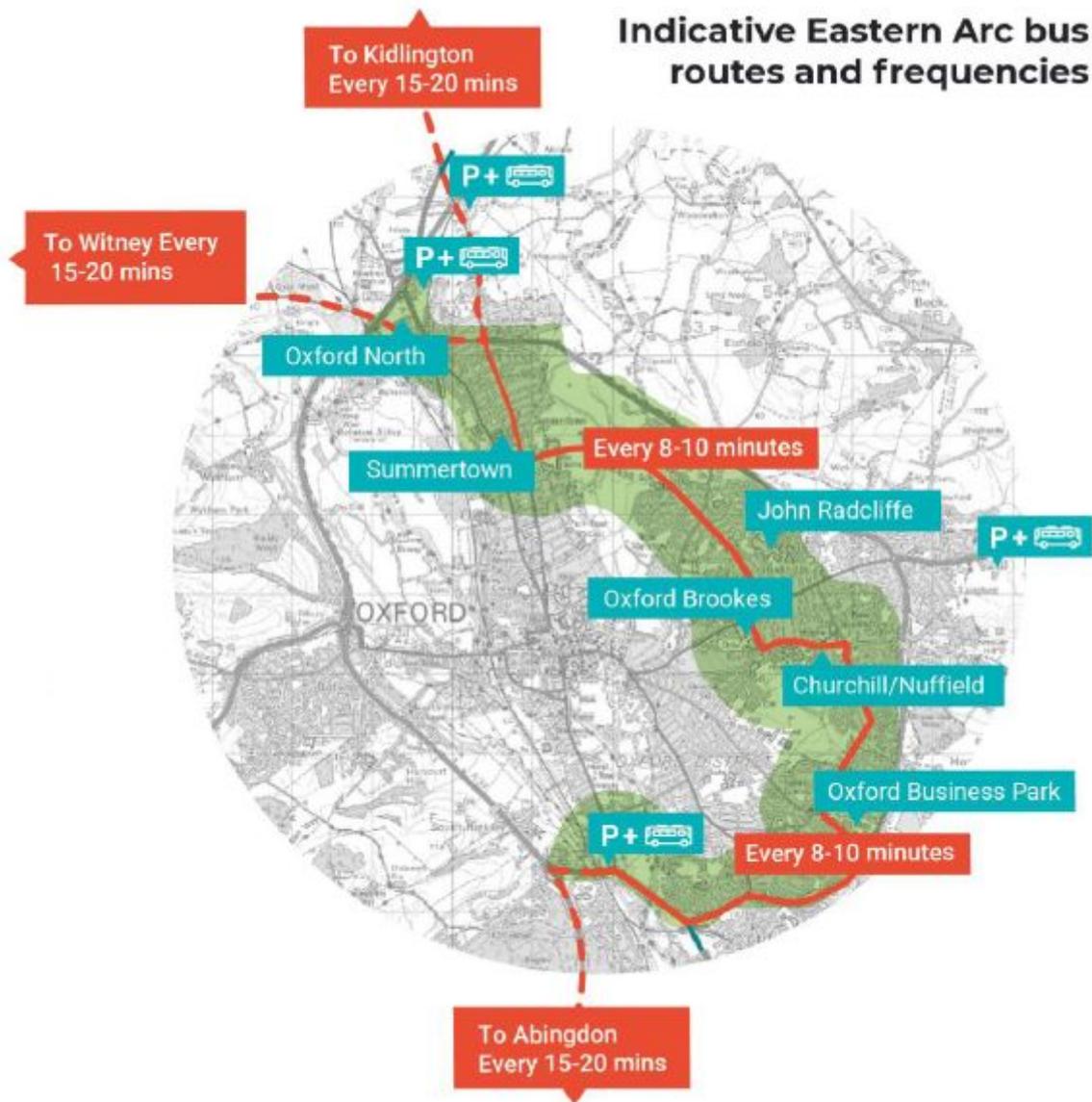


Image: Oxfordshire County Council

OLS Response

OLS believes this is the most ambitious pro-climate, pro-public-health, pro-liveability transport proposal in the United Kingdom. OLS director Simon Pratt said,

The scheme includes a necessary balance of carrots and sticks. Experience in this sector across Europe and over decades suggests strongly that successful measures to alter mode share in favour of active and sustainable transport requires incentives and disincentives. It has to be made less convenient to drive and easier to take a bus or cycle or walk. And it is a virtuous circle. As people leave their car behind, the roads become safer for other people to cycle or walk, thereby encouraging more people to leave their car behind.



The response from active- and sustainable-travel advocates has been positive. The county's Coalition for Healthy Streets and Active Travel ([CoHSAT](#)), which includes Oxfordshire Liveable Streets, [stated](#),

We wholeheartedly commend both Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council for their radical plans outlined in Connecting Oxford. Taking such bold steps to tackle demand is the only way to resolve the problems of travel in and into Oxford, with people stuck in traffic jams, creating congestion, air and noise pollution, and unsightly impacts on our beautiful city.

There are elements of Connecting Oxford that the councils have not decided upon. Oxfordshire Liveable Streets supports the following approaches:

- Bus gates in operation 24/7.
- Permitted vehicles limited to buses, taxis, private-hire vehicles (PHV), emergency vehicles and cycles.

Connecting Oxford Plus

Oxfordshire Liveable Streets encourages the councils to go further. This is a step-change in transport patterns and will require a big push. It is sensible to be comprehensive. It will also help the public buy into these changes if they are offered a number of associated high-visibility liveability improvements.

South-east Oxford

We believe two additional bus gates are needed to prevent heavy use of south-east Oxford corridors Iffley and Cowley roads to avoid the Hollow Way bus gate. These would also address concerns about 'rat running' through residential streets in East Oxford to avoid the Hollow Way bus gate. The locations of these two gates should be:

- St Clements just south of the junction with Marston Road, and
- Warneford Lane.

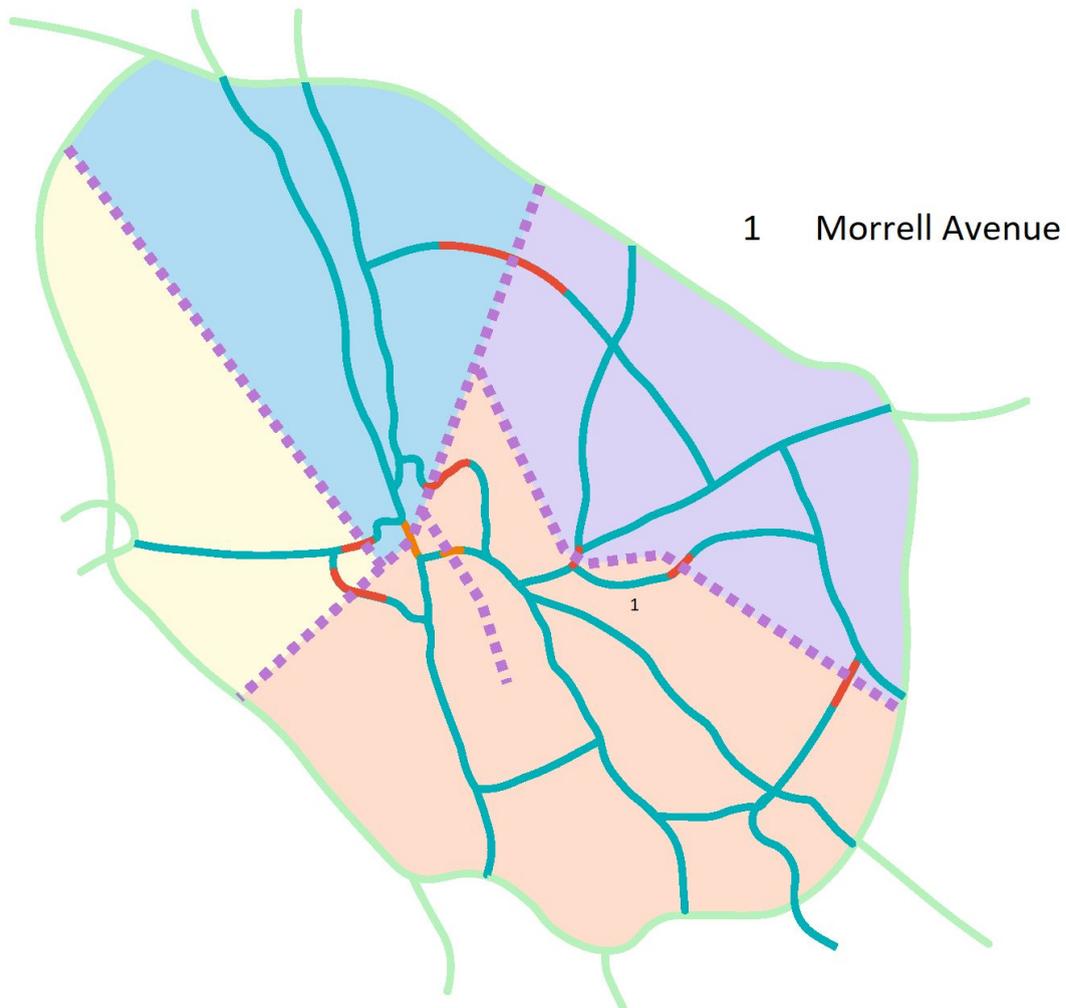


Image: Stephen Gower (Twitter @sjgower)

We would like to see an improved bus service from the city centre to the JR Hospital via St Clements and Marston Road. We call this the "13F", described further below. This would address concerns that East Oxford is being "cut off" from the hospital.⁵

As shown in the map below, the current drive-time reported by Google Maps between A34/Southern-bypass and the JR Hospital is 12 minutes by Iffley Road versus 14 minutes by London Road. Without bus gates on St Clements (just south of Marston Road) and Warneford Lane, these will be default options.

⁵ We understand from a key architect of the city's 1985 3-month experiment of closures between Hollow Way and The Plain that inaccessibility to the JR hospital was a key concern among the public.



Image: Stephen Gower, Twitter @sjgower

Marston and Old Marston

We believe that for Connecting Oxford to succeed, two additions are needed for Marston.

- There must be a more direct and more frequent number-13 bus service between the city centre and the JR Hospital. Its route should be directly down the Marston Road, without deviation, to Headley Way and the JR. We call this the "13F" for 13-Fast.
- There will need to be a modal filter in Old Marston. This could be close to Marston Ferry Road (on the Oxford Road) or close to the Ring Road (on the Elsfield Road). People in Old Marston should be asked which they prefer.



Oxfordshire

We believe Connecting Oxford is too reliant on Park-and-Ride and should offer more to people arriving in Oxford from parts of Oxfordshire not currently served by good bus routes.

Connecting Oxford should include a timeline for restoring bus service to under-served and unserved areas in the county and for transitioning a portion of Oxford's park-and-ride facilities to bus interchanges.

Oxford City Centre

Space allocation in the city centre is currently unacceptable, with buses dominating the public realm and too little space on pavements and no space at all for bikes. In addition, there is no cycle route linking the east of the city to the west. We believe that the three city-centre bus gates are a necessary but not sufficient condition for improving this.

Connecting Oxford should include a clear timeline for transitioning extra-Oxford bus services to park-and-ride transfer stations. We would also like to see progress on ideas to create more footpath space in High Street and St Aldate's, along with protected cycle space. In addition to consolidating bus services at the park-and-rides, ways to do this include the two councils' [earlier proposal](#) for a one-way loop system in the city centre or others' proposals for a [micro-bus transfer](#) at The Plain and Speedwell Street.

The bus companies cannot have it both ways. They cannot enjoy the significant uplift from the bus gates while saying 'No' to changes that would benefit the city centre.

Connecting Oxford would find greater public buy-in if it included the de-motorisation of Broad Street, St Giles and Hythe Bridge Street. Broad Street is the city's natural plaza and its occupation by cars for the benefit of a handful of individual parking spaces is unacceptable. St Giles offers the perfect opportunity for de-motorisation, as the volume of traffic using the route will fall considerably with the adoption of the Worcester Street bus gate. Hythe Bridge Street is already a redundant artery connecting the centre to the west end. Such redundancy will be more pronounced with the introduction of the Worcester street bus gate. De-motorised, it would offer a wonderful link between the centre and the rail station.

Politics

OLS applaud the two councils for producing the Connecting Oxford proposal. We know that it will be a tough sell for some residents in the city and county. But we also know that a silent majority are likely to appreciate these changes -- perhaps in ways they cannot now know. This is the experience of city-transport reforms across Europe. Policies that shift incentives from the private car to public transportation and active transportation are met with resistance but find favour once bedded in.



An example is Groningen, Netherlands. The council officer responsible for that city's revolutionary Traffic Circulation Plan (not dissimilar to Connecting Oxford but implemented in 1977) told us that "everyone was against it" and that "even the police opposed it". Merchants circulated a petition and held a vigil against it, and the officer himself at one point was under police protection.⁶ In the intervening years, city control has passed back-and-forth between left- and right-leaning administrations; none have proposed undoing the changes.

Another example is the outer-London borough of Waltham Forest. The borough has created five 'liveable' neighbourhoods protected from through-traffic and has reclaimed space from roads for green areas and protected cycle lanes. It has pedestrianised two "B" roads and installed 300 lockable on-street multi-bike storage facilities in residential areas. The project, which began in 2015, has been met with public protests and even a lawsuit. Yet the councillors who supported it were returned to office in 2018 with bigger majorities. And the lawsuit was found by a court judge to have "[no merit whatsoever](#)".

But there's a cautionary tale from Waltham Forest. As noted, there was fierce and highly organised initial resistance. The council by its own admission had attempted to implement changes without adequate community engagement nor an adequate communications effort.⁷ There is no reason for Oxford to repeat this mistake. Significant resources must be allocated to community engagement and communications as a matter of urgency.

It is crucial that the two councils hold their nerve and see this through. We will do our part to help people understand the reasons for this bold proposal, why they should support it, and why they might one day find themselves feeling pride that they, like our councils, were on the right side of history.

⁶ Comments by Jacques Wallage in a live broadcast to the "Going Dutch" Conference in Oxford (January 2018). Wallage is featured in a [2015 Guardian article](#) about Groningen's transport environment.

⁷ See

<https://www.citymetric.com/transport/has-london-s-outer-borough-cycling-scheme-worked-mini-holland-four-years-3714>. In fairness to the Borough of Waltham Forest council, TfL set an impossibly ambitious timeline of 3 years to spend the Mini Holland award, which surely contributed to the too-fast implementation.