

“The Future of Princes St”

Background note: the meeting was about the **long-term future of Princes Street once trams are running** – not about the issues arising in 2009 and 2010 when the street reopens following tramline installation.

Despite the weather, the hall was as full as ever, for this meeting on a highly significant subject to many Edinburgh cyclists – how to achieve safe, workable sustainable routes across the city given the changes which will result from the trams project. Given the high level of interest expected in this meeting, SPOKES had arranged for an external chair - **Lesley Riddoch**, well-known on the airwaves for putting speakers on the spot!

Some chinks of light in terms of planned cycling developments within Edinburgh, but a fair number of causes for concern too. Lesley’s summary made clear that Edinburgh has a moment now, with the trams coming, for large change to reach the cycle-use target; and if this opportunity for significant change in Princes Street isn’t taken, it won’t ever happen. She made her own report via a full page in The Scotsman on Monday (23.11.09) [see <http://www.spokes.org.uk/wordpress/2009/11/scotsman-article-on-princes-street/>] and a discussion continues on the [CityCyclingEdinburgh Forum](http://citycyclingedinburgh.info/bbpress/topic.php?id=92) [<http://citycyclingedinburgh.info/bbpress/topic.php?id=92>].

1. Peter Hawkins, SPOKES-CTC Liaison, outlined the background to the discussion topic. The Copenhagen “Dreams on Wheels” exhibition in Edinburgh earlier this year was inspirational in showing what other major European cities had achieved in terms of reducing cars and increasing bikes, with consequent improvements in quality of life. This was followed by the start of the trams works, with Princes St closed and buses diverted – providing an opportunity to see how an alternative approach to traffic would work. The SPOKES / CTC response to the CEC consultation on Designs for Streets made the suggestion of restricting Princes St to trams, cycles and pedestrians, and this idea saw a rapid build in enthusiasm to investigate it further, following SPOKES publicity. There is no shortage of rationales: reduce noise, visual intrusion etc from buses, particulate pollution; make Princes St somewhere people want to go rather than somewhere they have to (more pavement cafes, markets, fairs, art), and an East-West cycle route is urgently needed (George St isn’t fit for purpose – the dangers of cars cruising looking for parking etc.). CEC is now proposing a consultation on five options for the future of Prince St (see below).

2. Marshall Poulton, Head of Transport at CEC [City of Edinburgh Council] then outlined the current state of play. [*Background* - Mr Poulton when still fairly new in post had addressed SPOKES previously at the public meeting on 3 December 2008 (see *Spokesworker* 19.1.09 at [www.spokes.org.uk](http://www.spokes.org.uk/downloads) - downloads) – and had said then that he wanted more pedestrianisation in Princes St (whilst retaining its function as a public transport thoroughfare). In addition he’d stated that he envisaged routes to major workplaces, a cycle superhighway, a big bike hire scheme (though no funding identified for these) – and also hoped to address previous lack of joined-up thinking in the council. His advice then – which still holds – keep lobbying the council, emphasising the business / economic case.]

The **Local Transport Strategy** contains targets and policies for increasing the modal share of walking and cycling. A consultation process will start next summer for the 2013-2018 plan. CEC is currently developing a Transport Vision for Edinburgh for the next 20 years - **Transport 2030**, will go to Committee on 1 December. He is working with **Cllr MacKenzie** (Transport Convenor) to meet the Charter of Brussels commitment “*To set a target of at least 15% for the share of cycling in the modal split of trips for the year 2020 and of further growth if this target already is achieved.*” Cycling’s share is around 4% now, for journeys to work, 2% for all trips – so, challenging, but he believes we can do it: “you can if you think you can”. There is also a commitment to reducing cycle fatalities by 50%.

Footfall in the city centre has been static rather than increasing on George St, and fallen slightly on Princes St, resulting in retailer issues: the retailers see the buses as revenue drivers for them, and people are going to where the buses are – it has been a difficult year.

Mr Poulton was asked in April 2009 to look at the possible pedestrianisation of Princes St, and report back to Committee in February 2010, including taking account of the success of the traffic management diversion. He has been investigating options and views - which so far seemed to refer to investigating options with Essential Edinburgh, the central area business /retail interest group, rather than more broadly.

The options currently on the table include:

- 1- status quo

- 2- restricting Princes St to trams, pedestrians and cycles – probably with a 2-way cycle route on one side of the tramlines
- 3- restricting Princes St to trams, pedestrians and cycles between the Mound and South Charlotte St
- 4- restricting Princes St to trams, pedestrians and cycles between the Mound and North Bridge
- 5- making Princes Street westbound-only for buses, with a wider pedestrian area (and cycle route we think) on the shops side, and George Street eastbound-only for buses.

The views of the Central Edinburgh Board (?what is this)(representing significant retail interests) are split on this. MP is seeking from them a letter of support to look in more detail at the proposals for change above, but is still waiting 6 or so weeks on. The idea of a wider central area net (i.e. widening the study to Queen St etc) is not in his remit and so needs to seek permission to examine it. However, he did say that he wants to see Princes St restored to its former glory. Princes St is re-opening to buses on 29 November (tram lines and poles will be visible), and work is currently on schedule for this.

The Cycling Action Plan for Edinburgh includes the maintenance and structure of existing cycle routes, working with the Scottish Government to deliver Edinburgh's 15% bike-use target, which would also cover the government's 10% target. He listed a number of projects already in the pipeline, including the Kings Buildings to Central area (Princes Street?) cycling corridor, extending the towpath resurfacing, Old Dalkeith Road cycle corridor improvements, etc. There will be a bid to Committee to try and ensure the same funding is retained for cycling next year as this, and we'll see the results in February in the Budget allocation.

Some discussion then followed, as Mr Poulton needed to leave the meeting early. He was challenged by the Chair to get on a bike to see what it's actually like on Princes St – might be useful fieldwork to inform the consideration of the merits of the various options.

Q – would taxis be included where buses and cycle share routes? MP – yes, but can discuss with taxi organisations and by traffic regulation orders restrict taxi access into the central area.

Q – isn't the solution the current situation, i.e., Princes St closed from Waverley to S Charlotte St except to pedestrians, trams and cycles? Bus time-keeping now seems better than previously.

Q – why wasn't Queen St mentioned in the options? MP – Queen St would act as the main overflow for traffic, and it's important that it stays as a conduit for through traffic.

Q – any east-west solution for cyclists needs to be joined up, to the Bridges, Lothian Rd, Leith Walk etc, or it would be a waste of time as cycle commuting will still be too unattractive (in terms of safe transit across the centre). MP: absolutely; have EW-NS cycle access as a mainstay in the Cycling Action Plan, to join up developments and link into the tram network. He wants to build on the benefits of trams coming on line with, e.g., additional (cycle) parking at stops, safer routes to work, and sell walking and cycling to the public as a realistic means to travel.

Interestingly, he also talked about making more priority for cyclists, via ASLs, and possibly a cycle symbol on traffic signals to give an advance start of 2-3seconds; these would be technically possible but have a cost in terms of the delay to buses etc [*Spokes note* - he said nowhere else in the UK at present, though there is a left-turn advance cycle traffic light in Glasgow already at Broomhill Cross - Crow Road/Churchill Drive].

Q – who decides, ultimately, what will happen? MP – the Council (i.e., the politicians), but the Leader is very very keen to hear what the community has to say – retailers, business, and the travelling public.

Q – who is speaking to central residents? MP – no one yet, it'll be a consultation in spring 2010. Waiting on the business community to respond on the scope of central Edinburgh and support CEC taking forward the options. Lesley Riddoch commented that that suggests a lot of veto power to the business community, *de facto* at least, if Essential Edinburgh have the capacity to kill this just by not replying!

3. Graham Bell, Chamber of Commerce Press Officer, spoke on views from the perspective of the business community. He noted that in relation to Essential Edinburgh's involvement, people in the district have paid extra business rates to improve the area, hence the CEC concern to consult with them. He also noted that the business community and the retail business community are different. Retailers have suffered badly from the tram construction.

His vision for Princes St is for it to be a jewel among European main streets – a place for a fun day out with a range of businesses on offer – but it will not (should not) be Sauchiehall St! Edinburgh already has the Gyle, Ocean Terminal etc. In Dublin, apparently, footfall has increased by 20% since the trams arrived, following a 'transformation' – better access to employment, greenspace etc etc. Asked by the chair if he wanted more buses, he noted that currently, retailers do very much, to reclaim revenue lost during the tram works, and George St is difficult for pedestrians. BUT, in the long-run, should think about all the options, including the radical, to get the Princes St we want. Should have more cafes, more art spaces etc. He also noted that an opportunity has been missed through taking the strategic view on the trams as an Edinburgh project, rather than a Lothians or even a SE Scotland project. Vital that things link up much better. [*Spokes note* – the impression

came over that views within the business community are quite varied, uncertain and in flux. Graham has his own personal vision but there is currently no consensus business view, so well-founded arguments and lobbying could be useful].

4. Ian Craig, MD Lothian Buses, outlined the bus perspective on Princes St and routes through the city centre. Lothian Buses has a constructive working relationship with SPOKES, though obviously won't agree on everything! His aim is to promote the benefits that that bus can bring for everyone. Buses are good for business. Edinburgh has the highest use of buses per head outside of London. The majority of customers are economically active (£ to spend). Bus travel is socially acceptable in Edinburgh, socially inclusive, socially necessary (the vulnerable rely on it). If Edinburgh is to be an inclusive city, cannot rely on trams, walking and cycling alone.

Lothian Buses moves 700,000 passengers weekly to / from the city centre – so vital to engage with buses as not all of those are going to walk or cycle. Buses have the ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and can facilitate modal shift out of cars. Buses join up journeys. The historic network has been designed to minimise interchange, so go through the centre, not in and back out. Buses are good for the environment. 1 bus has to replace only 6.5 cars to save CO2. Buses need to be near plants as the CO2 (or other pollution?) absorbers – i.e., close to Princes St Gardens (in his view this would help). He considers George St routes to be vulnerable to disruption: if one thing goes wrong, gridlock results.

He said - *“Buses and cycles can share road space – Princes St is an opportunity to emulate best practice.”* Edinburgh should take learning from the best European cities and apply it. He would rather have shared use than no priority; buses and cycles have to co-exist, especially in the short-term. Keen to continue dialogue with SPOKES on cycling safety.

5. Discussion points

- a. Graham Bell suggested that European cities get people cycling largely because of cycle tracks. Perhaps could be one on the Garden side of Princes St?? A quick audience poll revealed, unsurprisingly, that people really aren't keen on cycling on Princes St with buses and trams, as there is just too little space on the carriageway. Interest in a two-way cycle track on the garden side.
- b. Q: on bus/tram dynamics – how many remaining buses will there be, and fewer stops mean increased loading time? Ian Craig replied that fast transactions (given flat fares, pre-pay) mean quick loading. He expects to withdraw 19 buses when the trams come, so 500 left. 80% of the fleet go through Princes St. So not much difference to currently then! However, he expects fewer buses on Princes St than historically as some other services (not Lothian) may stay off, and go direct to the bus station via Queen St. Ian Craig also commented that there will of course be some bedding-in as drivers need to learn how to drive when trams are on street too. Trams will have a high degree of traffic priority.
- c. Graham Bell suggested a possible solution: if buses are on both sides of Princes St, take half of George St for cycles and pedestrians. Ian Craig response was 'Brilliant!' (NB - Buses will be mostly off George St eventually)
- d. Lesley Riddoch suggested that cyclists eastwards in Princes Street will definitely be worse off, as shown in a TIE visual which Ian had shown. Quiet trams every 5secs behind them, grooves etc. Ian Craig's response was that the challenge is to make buses, trams and cycles work together safely and as efficiently as possible.
- e. Q – in Glasgow, the highly successful shopping centre is pedestrianised! Graham Bell agreed that more people will shop where it's quieter.
- f. Q – why is one-way buses unattractive to IC when seems a good solution, with cycles on the garden side and one-way buses one way in Princes St and other way in George St. Ian Craig: oneway buses would be great for cyclists. Problems for bus passengers though if stops are spread across two streets. Lots of tourists who get lost if a big physical divide between the two directions.
- g. Q – what about an efficient Princes St end-to-end shuttle for the less mobile? Graham Bell suggested a circular shuttle bus similar to the museum shuttle might be useful. Ian Craig - shuttles could never cope with the volume of demand, and would devastate commercial viability. Lothian Buses is far more efficient with the existing routing, and that is what people want.

Lesley Riddoch concluded that foresight and political courage is crucial – for example, if David Begg hadn't resisted traders' demands all those years ago, we wouldn't have the greenways now; if he hadn't bought up land for park and ride that wouldn't be in place currently etc etc. Need to start now with change!