

GEORGE ST AND FIRST NEW TOWN (GNT) PROJECT

www.edinburgh.gov.uk/georgestreet

Spokes notes as at 27.2.21

Background

The Council have been preparing wide ranging plans for George St for some time. Our main interest stems from the fact that George St was selected by the Council as the city centre part of [CCWEL](#) - a cycle way which in due course should allow cyclists to travel from Roseburn to Leith Walk largely but, not exclusively, on segregated cycle paths, bidirectional from Roseburn to Picardy and unidirectional along Leith Walk.

For George St itself, we originally suggested unidirectional, segregated cycle lanes on each side of the road but the Council opposed this because they wanted to use the space on the sunny south facing side of the road to allow businesses to establish pavement cafes etc. After wide-ranging discussions with stakeholders including ourselves, Sustrans and Living Streets as well as the full range of organisations representing local businesses, conservation bodies and disability groups, the Project Team (Council staff and various consultants) got approval from the TEC in May 2019 for a bi-directional cycle way on the south (north facing) side of the street and to further discussions with stakeholders on the way "the bi-directional cycleway will be physically and visually separated from the pedestrian and car overrun."

The Current Scheme

The Council organised an on-line stakeholder meeting in the late autumn of 2020 with all the relevant interests in which they announced that they had been working on a new scheme which abandoned the bi-directional cycle way and used the space to provide for a range of other uses such as seats, flower beds, bike parking etc. We were given no advance warning, we were extremely concerned and we conveyed our concerns both to the Project Managers directly and at a meeting with senior Council transport officers. The upshot is that we have had several meetings with Council officials dealing with the project, with their consultants, and separately with Sustrans who are effectively bankrolling the George St project as a whole to the tune of £20m.

Although the segregated lane has gone, we believe that our efforts significantly tightened what will now become the cycle facility, as below, and if implemented and enforced as now envisioned it will provide successful, safe and inviting conditions, with lessons from European 'cycle streets.'

The core of the Council's new argument was that once the car parking is taken out from George St, as they have always proposed to do, and with severe, enforced, limitations on what traffic is allowed, the central carriageway should provide an acceptable and safe cycling space. This would be 7m wide, much reduced from the existing road and central parking width. To symbolise this, they now describe the area as the "cycling zone". Sustrans was and is very much in favour of the revised scheme.

Our discussions focussed on the following points:

a. **Permitted motor traffic.** We have been told that it will be limited to "essential vehicles" i.e. deliveries at limited and specified times and blue badge holders. Taxis, hire cars, cars of residents living in the surrounding streets and all buses will not be allowed. The bus services currently using George St will be diverted although buses will still use the side streets that cross George St. The consultants estimate that there will be less than 30 vehicles per hour along George St. Loading would take place in inset 3.5m loading bays off the central carriageway and from the rear streets behind George St and there will also be similar bays for blue badge holders.

b. **Enforcement.** The council would prefer to use number plate recognition but they accept that this needs further development especially for blue badge holders where the permit is attached to the person not the car. There are currently consultancy projects underway linked to the LEZ programme to develop smarter technology, but if this does not develop results in time for implementation (2025) they have promised to use bollards and other physical measures.

c. **The plaza areas** (now known as central "square" spaces). There are 3 of these along the length of George St, one in each main section of the road. The stated intention is that these will set off the important buildings in the street but will also be available for events. In the past, the use of parts of George St for events in the Festival and Christmas/New Year has been fairly chaotic and disruptive for cyclists although Ewan did a valiant job in negotiating a way through for cyclists. The Project Team have said that they expect events to be on a smaller scale than in the past and the powerful conservation lobby shares our concerns about past events. The Project Team have also given an undertaking to maintain that a 3.5m uninterrupted space in the central carriageway for cyclists.

d. **Pedestrians.** There are very large pavement areas included in the plans on both sides of the road. As well as pedestrian crossings, pedestrians will be able to cross elsewhere but there will be a clear kerb (60 mm) on the edge of the "cycling zone" which is the same as planned for CCWEL segregated cycle paths.

Broader Context

The recently approved [City Mobility Plan](#), building on City Centre Transformation includes the following policy:

"Policy Measure PLACE 1 - [Edinburgh City Centre Transformation](#) Create a city centre focused on people with significantly reduced traffic through pedestrian priority zones, car-free streets, safe segregated cycle routes and rerouted and rationalised bus services."

The Project Team and Sustrans see the revised proposals for George St as being consistent with this and Sustrans, in particular sees this potentially opening the way to a reconsideration of the position of cyclists in Princes St linked to the measures for rerouted and rationalised bus services.

The Future Development of the GNT Project

The proposals published on the 25 February are described as their "concept design" with broad concept principles. The next stage will look at the detailed design proposals and start in early summer. The Project Team have undertaken to consult and liaise with us.

SPOKES Response

Given the imminent announcement and a request from the Council for our comments, we issued the couple of paragraphs below, which were positive in tone and welcomed the scheme "subject to strict enforcement of the limited number of and timings of permitted vehicles".

George Street forms a crucial section of the Council's flagship west-east 'CCWEL' cycleroute project, as well as being a major destination in its own right. The new George Street plans, taking lessons from European "cycle streets," provide a wide central "cycling zone" shared with blue badge and (at restricted times) delivery vehicles treated as 'guests.' This replaces the previously planned segregated bidirectional cycleroute.

This will be an innovative scheme for Scotland, which could be widely followed, and as such the Council must get it right. Given the funding from Sustrans, safe and pleasant conditions for cycling and walking are critical. Spokes welcomes the scheme subject to strict enforcement of the limited number and timings of permitted vehicles, as well as design details. We particularly welcome the assurance of enforcement, by automated means such as number plate recognition or in other ways, which is essential to success.

We will continue to monitor and comment on the design details and if very unhappy about further developments and/or the eventual final detailed plan we can object to the TRO that will be required in due course before the scheme can be implemented.