

Briefing note on transport and mobility issues for Princes Street for June 2026 workshop on Princes Street and Waverley Valley Strategy

This note

This short note aims to set out some of the issues surrounding discussions to change the mix of mobility and transport on Princes St. It has been prepared by City of Edinburgh Council officers in advance of a workshop in June 2026 with Councillors and stakeholders as part of a revised Princes Street and Waverley Valley Strategy.

What do current Council policy, frameworks and strategies covering Princes Street say with regards to transport, mobility, roadspace allocation / priorities, and what function does Princes St currently play in Edinburgh's transport network?

- The Council's approved Circulation Plan "[Future Streets Framework](#)", which is linked to the approved [City Mobility Plan](#) and [Edinburgh City Centre Transformation Strategy](#), classifies Princes St as a primary corridor for buses, place and walking, and a tram route. Most of Princes St is classified as a local cycling corridor (as opposed to primary or secondary), though the importance of space for cycling is identified in the eastern end of Princes St.
- The Council's strategic model indicates over 85% of motorised trips to the city centre are made by public transport. Over 260 buses per hour (both directions) operate on Princes Street currently in the strategic model, with just under 80% by Lothian Buses. Note due to more efficient operations and rationalisation efforts by bus operators, the number of bus services running on Princes St has fallen in recent years (previously close to 300 an hour).
- Information from Lothian Buses suggests over 50% of passenger journeys are on routes which stop on Princes Street. Around 8% of Lothian Buses passengers boarding buses in the city, board on Princes St. In terms of distribution of Lothian Buses passenger activity across the length of Princes St, around 38% of weekly passengers boarding activity takes place in stops in the Western section of Princes Street. It should be noted other operators such as Citylink, Flixbus and Stagecoach (typically longer vehicles and higher dwell times) also use bus stops in the Western section but not the Eastern section, providing an overall more balanced distribution of boarding along Princes Street.
- Some of the First New Town cross-streets, in particular Frederick St and Hanover St are also classed as primary bus routes in the Council's Circulation Plan and play an important role in bus movement across the city centre by city-wide routes.
- Lothian Road is a primary traffic corridor within the Circulation Plan, linking to Queen Street via South Charlotte Street – these are the key cross-city centre North-South and then East-West general traffic routes categorised in Council policy.

Have options to reallocate roadspace away from vehicle movement been explored and what are the impacts of these?

- Some selected footway widening through extended build-outs was explored and tested through micro-simulation modelling in 2024, to inform optioneering in the emerging Princes St and Waverley Valley Strategy. It included reducing roadspace to single lanes in each direction between Castle St and Frederick St, and moving and reducing the number of bus stops in the Western part of Princes St (reducing by half). The results suggested bus numbers would have to be reduced by half in each direction; and journey times tripled eastbound (from c3mins between Shandwick Place & South Charlotte Street to c9mins), and westbound (from c2min between Frederick Street & South Charlotte Street to c6mins).
- Linked analysis suggests diverting buses via Charlotte Square would add significantly more movements to this primary North-South traffic route (via South Charlotte Street) and could result in queueing onto Queen Street and on to Princes St which could impact on tram movements on the latter, limiting any potential for further tram extensions in the city.

Is there an option to remove selected bus services and/or bus operators from Princes Street, and what are the ways we can try to reduce bus services on Princes St?

- It is possible to prohibit all bus movement on Princes Street through a traffic order. There are very limited legal options to allow **selected** bus services / bus operators from using Princes St.
 - o The Council can request that the Office of the Traffic Commissioner determine Traffic Regulation Conditions must be met in relation to a service. This can be requested where there is a particular traffic problem which has arisen or is likely to arise, though the Council would need to satisfy the Traffic Commissioner that the TRC is required to prevent danger to road users, reduce severe traffic congestion, reduce / limit noise or air pollution. The default position is that TRCs will apply to all services operated in the relevant area although there is an ability to apply TRCs to a particular service or services – however, it may be difficult for the Council to satisfy the Traffic Commissioner that only certain services should be covered by the TRC. This process can also lead to an inquiry if requested by the Council, any other traffic authority impacted or bus operators.
 - o A further, more significant option, is bus franchising. The [Centre for Cities describes bus franchising](#) as: “Under a franchised system, the local authority or public transport authority awards exclusive contracts to a private operator to operate bus services in a specific area or on specific routes, with operators bidding for these contracts.” “In this system, the franchising

authority....retains control of key aspects of the service including the setting of routes, fares and timetables.” This is a lengthy, complex and costly process, and arguably the problems it seeks to address, (poor quality bus networks, fragmentation, lack of integration, under-served areas and declining patronage and networks, as described in the aforementioned article) are not prominent in Edinburgh. Edinburgh has a local authority-owned bus company (alongside a number of other commercial operators) and a successful and growing bus network.

- A Bus Service Improvement Partnership is a further option. This requires CEC and all bus operators to enter into a partnership with agreed outcomes. For example, operators may agree to reduce the number of services using a particular route if CEC committed to providing a viable alternative that in some way benefited the operators, i.e. faster, more reliable and attractive enough to grow patronage. This option is considered to have no realistic chance of success on Princes St due to the high passenger demand and lack of clear viable alternative route, even with significant investment in bus priority measures. It should also be noted these involve complex consultation requirements and if sufficient relevant objections, they cannot be made.

Can all or any buses be moved to George Street, and/or Queen Street?

See above response on legal options and constraints.

On the impacts of banning buses completely from Princes St and requiring use of George Street and/or Queen Street:

- Current technical designs for George Street are based on a revised layout that include for widened footways and narrowed carriageways to reduce car dominance and enhance the street environment for people and place. By doing so, walking, wheeling and cycling are prioritised, and direct movements are allowed for at junction crossings. Designing for bus travel along George Street would require a full redevelopment of these proposed layout plans to ensure buses were provided with adequate turning space around the statues at each intersection, which may impact on the original design principles of James Craig’s masterplan based on symmetry and repetition. Widening junctions also has ramifications on widened footways and narrowed carriageways to the full length of George Street. Bus journey times are also likely to be longer on George St due to slow speeds at cross-street junctions and indirect rerouting. Increased bus movements from Charlotte Sq to George St may be challenging to accommodate given the importance of the Lothian Road – Charlotte Sq – Queen St route for general traffic in the Council’s approved Circulation Plan.

- The completion of the CCWEL cycleway through George St could not happen due to insufficient space for segregated cycleways alongside buses whilst maintaining space for pedestrians and bus stops, and it is likely existing cycleway connections at the east and west end would have to be re-considered. The completion of the CCWEL cycleway along Charlotte Street would be difficult to deliver with insufficient space for segregated cycleways alongside rerouted buses.
- It is not currently thought that Queen St footways are wide enough to support bus stops on the northern side, so investment in footway widening would be required. Bus journey times will be longer due to the longer distances involved for buses, particularly those travelling from the south and west. There will be significant equality impacts from requiring bus users to walk uphill to the city centre (Princes St) from Queen St. Older people and disabled people are more likely to use buses, and would be disproportionately affected.

A note on why bus journey times are important

CEC Transport and Environment Committee recently acknowledged the importance of bus journey times via approval of a [motion to initiate a workstream on actions by the Council to tackling a reduction in bus journey times](#) from Cllr Kinross-O'Neill on 29th January 2026.

Slower journey times impact on the feasibility of bus services as it increases costs through a higher requirement for vehicles and drivers to maintain the same level of service – or to avoid cost impacts, it can lead to a reduction in services. Longer bus journey times, and unreliable journey times, make bus journeys less competitive / less attractive to passengers who may choose other ways to travel – if this entails more journeys by private cars, this has many disbenefits to the city and the environment. Slower and/or less reliable bus journey times may ultimately lead to some profitable bus services becoming non-profitable as revenue declines, and costs increase. This could require financial intervention from the Council through supported bus services.