

Princes Street and Waverley Valley

[CEC Planning Cttee 9.9.26, agenda item 7](#)¹

Spokes submission on transport aspects

Spokes fundamentally rejects the recommendations in this report. The proposals represent only minor change from [those rejected by councillors](#)² on 12 November 2025, under Cllr Lang's motion as amended. Their very description as 'pragmatism' does not reflect councillors' request for an "*ambitious and exciting strategy*."

As regards Princes Street itself, the approach mainly consists of repaving the north footway, and a 1.5m improvement to footway width on the south side, whilst leaving the bulk of the width of Princes Street as a 4-lane transport corridor which, whilst busy at times, is for much of the day mainly an expanse of tarmac.

It is not the 'place' proposal which has been recommended by experts in urban design, from the Council's 2011 Jan Gehl report [[para 1102 here](#)]³ and subsequently, for what is Edinburgh's premier street, and, indeed, Scotland's. Gehl [recommended](#)⁴ a place with high pedestrian provision, safe cycling as well as quality public transport.

This can only be achieved by reducing the amount of road width allocated to bus, coach, tram and taxi, and possibly reducing their numbers. We discuss this further below.

Cycling issues

Specifically on cycling, the argument has been made that George Street is adequate for cyclist movements. This is far from the case, with both streets being either more suitable or less suitable for journeys with different origins, destinations and purposes. Indeed on some trips, diverting via George Street instead of Princes Street, and returning, would entail crossing tramlines twice, plus turns across major traffic flows.

Indeed, the central part of CCWEL, rather than being 'only George Street,' or even 'only Princes Street,' should comprise both alternatives for this crucial city-centre section.

It has also been argued that cycle lanes are not required in Princes Street because that is not in the Circulation Plan. Whilst the Plan is a valuable piece of work, it is not a rigid document which has to dictate all decisions, and especially in this critical location at the heart of the city, when major new decisions are being taken.

Despite Spokes having suggested this on several occasions, the Council has never published data showing bike usage on Princes Street. Spokes is intending to do such a count, but the recent fire led to this being postponed. However, we have recently surveyed Spokes members on their own Princes Street and George Street usage, with 233 responses received.

When asked which street would be most useful if both had good cycle facilities, 36% said Princes Street and 15% said George Street (with 35% saying both and 9% neither).

1 <https://democracy.edinburgh.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=147&MId=8183&Ver=4>

2 <https://democracy.edinburgh.gov.uk/documents/s90308/7.3%20-%20Non-Statutory%20Planning%20Guidance%20Finalised%20Princes%20Street%20and%20Waverley%20Valley%20Strategy.pdf>

3 <https://www.spokes.org.uk/documents/members-campaigning/edinburgh/princes-st-city-centre/>

4 https://www.spokes.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Edinburgh_Revisited_4_Public_Space_Public_Life_-4-_Recommendations.pdf

When asked about current usage, marginally more use George Street than Princes Street (9%/7% for frequent use and 34%/32% occasional use). However, we also asked for comments, and these showed very significant suppressed demand to use Princes Street, with unwillingness to do so due to proximity to buses, taxis and tramlines. AI analysis of comments found that *“respondents described a constant trade-off where Princes Street offers a direct, scenic route with fewer junctions but is plagued by tram and bus hazards, while George Street feels safer but can represent an inconvenient detour.”*

Finally, we point out that widening the south footway by 1.5m, *whilst retaining dual traffic lanes*, will bring cyclists far closer to tramlines, for example when passing stopped buses. This will without doubt mean additional tramline cycle crashes and injuries – our tramline crash reports database suggests that around half of bike tramline crashes are to cyclists travelling parallel to the tramlines and crossing them, often due to traffic pressures, at a very poor angle.

Public transport

It is argued that the type of Princes Street envisaged by Jan Gehl is undeliverable because public transport could not cope without four traffic lanes.

A fundamental and often governing factor in traffic flow is the number of lanes at bottlenecks such as junctions, as illustrated in [this video](#)⁵. In contrast to the usual situation of more lanes at junctions, both the eastbound entrance to Princes Street at Lothian Rd, and westbound junction at The Mound currently have just a single lane. It follows that opportunities do exist to reduce road width between junctions, whilst retaining the number of bus stops to avoid impacting public transport. This should be explored. It also helps explain why so much of Princes Street, away from junctions, is visually just empty tarmac for much of the day.

We note that a Richard Murphy simulation concluded that 2 lanes, with bus-bays, is feasible, whilst details of the Council’s own modelling have never been released. We are concerned that dedicated modelling relevant to this report has not been undertaken, and that assumptions are being made based on the results of studies into bus stop reduction, which may be unrelated.

Additionally, Spokes believes opportunities should be seized to restrict private coach traffic and long-distance buses, as the council has investigated. This would assist in traffic flow, cycle safety and place making and is in line with the CMP. Had a [U-turn not been taken on such a plan in 2015](#)⁶, it may have prevented the [2017 cyclist fatality](#)⁷.

Princes Street and George Street – major suggestion

If indeed a truly pedestrian and cycle-friendly Princes Street is not possible without reducing public transport levels (which, as above, we do not necessarily accept) then Spokes calls for a rethink on the relationship between the two streets - treating them in a more unified fashion, and reverting to the earlier George Street plans with wide footways, cycle lanes, and bus services.

We recall historically that Gehl recommended a unified approach to Princes Street and George Street. Very regrettably, councillors subsequently decided this was too difficult and that the council would instead concentrate on George Street, leaving Princes Street to later decisions (e.g. para 2.34 [here](#)⁸).

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1WC49Pdp_k

6 <https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/call-for-u-turn-on-princes-street-coach-ban-1512855>

7 <https://www.spokes.org.uk/2022/06/zhi-min-soh-tramline-safety/>

8 https://www.spokes.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/131029-Item_7.1___Building_a_Vision_for_the_City_Centre.pdf

Ten or so long years of concentration on George Street then followed, focussing eventually on a solution with wider footways, cycle lanes and bus services; and then moving to the present very costly 'Cycle Street' bus-free proposals. At that time, Spokes reluctantly supported the Cycle Street proposals, given promises of minimal motor access in the Cycle Street, albeit stating our ideal preference for the earlier design, and noting the continuing parallel importance of Princes Street. Subsequently, as we feared, the operational plan for George Street has been repeatedly weakened to allow more motor access ([e.g. Spokes 3.11.22 deputation](#)⁹ and [23.5.24](#)¹⁰).

Implementation

We recall at TEC, when George Street costs were rising significantly a few years ago, officers were asked by councillors if a low cost initial solution would be possible, removing central parking and private traffic, whilst installing cycle lanes and allowing bus and taxi use. Officers confirmed this was possible, in a relatively modest timescale and at relatively low cost. **Spokes urges this initial approach, which would also at low cost test the feasibility of the wider unified approach to Princes Street and George Street which we suggest above.**

Conclusion

The report before councillors today basically means that a very costly George Street project, banning buses, and with partially compromised cycle space, is likely to go ahead **at the expense of** leaving Princes Street, Scotland's premier street, dominated by roadspace, pedestrian congestion, unsafe cycling, and with its magnificent views not taken advantage of.

These decisions will cement the future of Princes Street and George Street for years, maybe decades. Both streets, in a European capital city like Edinburgh, should be places for walking, cycling and public transport – not seeking a supposedly gold-plated solution for one, whilst sacrificing the other.

9 <https://www.spokes.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/221103-Spokes-Geo-St-Deputation-to-TEC-Nov2022.pdf>

10 <https://www.spokes.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/240523-7.5-George-St-Spokes-written-deputation-May-2024.pdf>