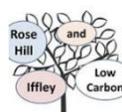


Coalition for Healthy Streets and Active Travel

About CoHSAT

The Coalition for Healthy Streets and Active Travel (CoHSAT) is a group of voluntary and campaigning organisations working across Oxfordshire to create attractive, accessible and people-friendly streets. We will do this by encouraging efficient, active, low carbon and sustainable travel, which will reduce traffic, air pollution and noise, and enable healthy and thriving communities. More details can be seen at <http://www.cohsat.org.uk>.

The 10 CoHSAT members are: Low Carbon Oxford North, Low Carbon West Oxford, Pedal and Post, Oxford Friends of the Earth, Oxford Pedestrians Association, Oxford Civic Society, CycloX, Rose Hill and Iffley Low Carbon, Oxfordshire Liveable Streets and Oxfordshire Cycling Network.



Healthy Streets and Active Travel, 2020-21 – summary of findings

Our five activities have focused primarily on awareness-raising and education. We are particularly delighted about the success of the popup shop and that we have helped six of the county towns take up active travel initiatives. The Walkability Index is a unique contribution to identifying how to improve the amenities in 15-minute neighbourhoods. The Metadata will help groups in their research and comments on the way that active travel is developing in Oxfordshire. And our briefing paper on Bike Hangars provides the launch-pad for Oxford City Council to make cycle parking safer.

We have enjoyed undertaking these five activities and hope that our findings will promote action on active travel and healthy streets in Oxfordshire. With thanks to the Low Carbon Hub for its essential support.

Context

When Oxfordshire County Council adopted the Oxford Transport Strategy (LTP4)¹ in 2016, there were clear references to the need to redesign St Giles:

‘Public realm schemes, which include rationalisation of on-street vehicle parking such as those for St Giles and Broad Street, will provide opportunities for increasing cycle parking’ (p23);

‘There is a need for major improvements to public realm and ‘sense of place’ in the city centre. In the short term, the pedestrianisation of George Street and Queen Street, as well as public realm improvements to St Giles, Magdalen Street and Frideswide Square will greatly improve the quality of public place within the city centre’ (p24);

‘consolidation of public parking into fewer locations, predominantly underground (eg new Westgate car park), with existing surface car parks redeveloped for other uses and on-street parking rationalised as part of public realm improvements (for example, St Giles and Broad Street) (p29).

¹ <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/roads-and-transport/connecting-oxfordshire/policy-and-overall-strategy>

By February 2021, five years later, none of these beneficial, though piecemeal, suggestions for St Giles had been implemented, despite the precedent set in the City when Cornmarket was pedestrianised and all traffic removed during the main part of the day.

CoHSAT undertook an extensive re-assessment of St Giles to provide the basis for detailed development plans. A contributory reason for the remodelling of St Giles is that under the adopted Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) for Oxford, the number of cyclists using Banbury and Woodstock Roads (and, therefore, often St Giles) will double by 2031. The plans for the redevelopment of Banbury and Woodstock Roads are being formulated, from the beginning of 2021 with, at least, some strong implications for the future shape of St Giles.

St Giles is also affected by the Zero Emission Zone's green plan and by Connecting Oxford's proposed busgate/traffic filter in Worcester Street. Both of these will result in less traffic in St Giles.

The site

St Giles is a wide road from the centre of Oxford City leading north to the start of the Banbury and Woodstock Roads. It is about 350m in length, stretching from the Martyr's memorial in the south to the war memorial, St Giles church and graveyard in the north. It has historic buildings on both sides: the east (St John's College) and the west (St Cross College, the Taylorian and small businesses). Both sides of the road contain magnificent plane trees. The road is important for cars, buses, cyclists, pedestrians and tourist coach parking (at the southern end, outside the Taylorian).²

At least some of the road is owned by St John's College and in September, when there is no Covid, there is the annual 4-day St Giles Fair, when the road is totally closed to traffic.

From the back of the pavements on both sides, St Giles is 63m wide. The majority of the space (Figure 1) is dedicated to vehicle use, as road (28m, 44%) or parking (23m 37%), with relatively narrow cycle paths and pavements and a 1m-wide central division



Figure 1: Cross section of St Giles today looking north

There are no bus stops on St Giles nor is there a pedestrian crossing. The one-way Pusey Street enters in the middle of the west side, but this has limited traffic. There are no other streets joining St Giles. On the east side at the southern end, there is a walled-off grass and tree area, which is the private property of St John's College. It makes the eastern carriageway narrower at that end. The present status of this is not known – it is not a burial ground, but water-tanks were installed under it during the second world war.

At the southern end on the west side, Beaumont Street feeds traffic into St Giles, together with buses coming up from Magdalen Street. The City and County Councils are proposing to instal a traffic-filtering system (aka a bus gate) on Worcester Street. This was due to happen in Autumn 2020, but has been delayed. When this happens, the traffic travelling between Beaumont Street and St Giles will be limited to taxis and blue-badge holders and, perhaps, the tourist sightseeing bus. The buses coming up from Magdalen Street will not be affected. An excellent opportunity to reassess St Giles occurs when the Worcester Street traffic filter is installed, hopefully some time in 2021, although most of the proposals below are not dependent on this.

² A satellite view can be found at: <https://www.maps-streetview.com/United-Kingdom/Oxford/streets.php?street=ST+GILES%27>

The proposal

Building on the somewhat tentative proposals in the Oxford Transport Strategy, cited above, there is a real opportunity to reallocate space on St Giles, to reduce the dominance of the car and enhance the historic and attractive townscape – to return most of St Giles to pedestrians.

With the amount of width there is in St Giles, there are numerous options for how it could be refigured. As Figure 2 shows, there is ample room for adequate road (two 5m carriageways) and cycle space (two 3m wide segregated lanes). This would enable there to be pedestrianised spaces of 20-25m width on each side. These would provide wonderful opportunities for imaginative ideas - for cafés, for seating, for flower kiosks, for sculptures - to make St Giles an even more attractive place to walk, visit and dwell. It would become a new, tourist destination in our historic city.



Figure 2: Potential vision of St Giles with enhanced public realm: a cross section from West to East, with no parking and reduced road space. The trees and the central division would stay in the same place as in Figure 1.

An illustration of how it could look is given in Figure 3, from Joelle Darby of Original Field. St Giles could become the place to have a *passaggiata* and enjoy an enhanced public realm.



Figure 3: Space reallocated in St Giles to provide a segregated cycle track, kiosks and sculptures in the old parking area and a pedestrian crossing. Looking north and west

This remodelling of St Giles could start immediately – the car parking could be removed before the Worcester Street traffic filter is installed. In the longer term, consideration should be given to a scheme that puts the people in the centre, literally, and the traffic on the outer edges. This would have the benefit of a very large central space, providing even more attractions for pedestrian enhancing its popularity – like Las Ramblas in Barcelona. However, there would be issues if there continues to be two-way traffic on both Woodstock and Banbury Roads, necessitating some crossing over to get to the edges of St Giles. There are implications for these more extensive proposals from the imminent plans for Woodstock and Banbury Roads.

These plans for St Giles were displayed at CoHSAT's pop-up shop in July 2020. The vast majority of the comments from the public were supportive, or even ecstatic:

- St Giles is so wide and it's brilliant to see public space reallocated to people not traffic!
- Absolutely wonderful! I have longed for this.
- Like it – especially moving the tourist buses out (cf Cambridge, Winchester, Bath ...)
- Yes please! Looks amazing. Thank you.
- Segregated cycle lanes – yes!! Essential
- St Giles would be so good transformed!
- Wonderful.
- Don't forget older and disabled people
- More space for people!
- San Sebastian has brilliant pedestrian and cycle routes in Spain
- Disabled people need to get within 50m of every part of the city (A criteria for a blue badge)
- Spot on.
- Better to have cars / buses /... in roads to side – with centre free, like Las Ramblas
- Great idea!
- Yes! We so need it.
- Yes let's get this motorway-width road made into a beautiful public square.
- This is such a great idea and would/could become a real location/spot in Oxford. The trees and space that already exist there mean this just makes perfect sense. It's a no-brainer.
- Thank you for getting us all thinking and believing in making Oxford a cycling city.
- Love this! St Giles now might be the worst possible use of space in Oxford

International evidence

There are numerous international precedents for making large, central, traffic-dominated spaces into car-free attractive areas of public realm. The most famous is probably the conversion of Times Square in New York³. Other examples in Europe have been successful⁴ and the precedent was set in Oxford with the pedestrianizing of Cornmarket.

Summary

There are great opportunities to transform one of the most attractive streets in Oxford – St Giles. It could become mainly a wonderful pedestrianised area, under the lovely plane trees. Cafés, stalls, planting, sculptures could all be encouraged and would contribute to reinvigorating the way people use this central space. This could be achieved without impairing traffic flow, purely by narrowing the traffic lanes and removing parking. The proposals could be implemented as of now, but will be enhanced when the Worcester Street bus gate is installed and there is less through traffic.

For further information on our five projects for 2020-2021 and other CoHSAT activities see <http://www.cohsat.org.uk> or email us at CoHSATOxon@gmail.com.

³ <https://ny.curbed.com/2017/4/19/15358234/times-square-snohetta-before-after-photos>

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/pubs/pdf/streets_people.pdf