

City Centre Transformation to move forward to the next stage

There will be more consultations to come on specific elements of the City Centre Transformation Project (CCT), but the council will examine the Finalised Strategy at their Transport and Environment Committee next Thursday. If approved then the project moves to the next phase, although it will be a while before many of the specifics are fleshed out.

If the plans are approved by the T & E Committee next week then there will be a formal launch of the project in the autumn and plans for what will actually be done along with costings and funding will be available in December 2019. The work will follow in three phases beginning in 2020. As the working group which has been in charge of this project is an all-party group it is not expected that there will be so much in the way of opposition, but of course there is every opportunity at the meeting for discussion.

One aspect which will be actioned is the closure of certain streets in the city centre like Bank Street, Candlemaker Row, Cockburn Street, Forrest Road, High Street between North Bridge and St Mary's Street, Victoria Street and Waverley Bridge. Some of these will remain open to buses and taxis only.

The areas which will be concentrated upon will be Lothian Road which is destined to become a multi-modal boulevard and Waverley Bridge which could be pedestrianised. Following these pieces of the jigsaw the council will turn its attention to traffic and parking, bus and coach management, allocation of taxi ranks, electric vehicle charging, waste collection and delivery of freight

They also plan for example to stop left turns for traffic from North Bridge the council hopes they might be able to create a high quality public space incorporating General Register House.

According to the report, one of the benefits of making alterations to how everyone gets around the city centre would be financial. The council's research shows that the strategy has potential to generate £420million of quantifiable benefits based on an investment of £314.6million.

CCT will take ten years to deliver, and what will be discussed by councillors next week is only the result of 18 months of work. It is a huge piece of work which is interwoven with other council plans such as the Low Emission Zone strategy, the City Mobility Plan and it also falls within the city's vision of what it will be like by 2030. One part of that is that the city must become carbon neutral. This project is about people and place and we were told quite forcibly that includes people who live here and not just visitors.

There is also provision in the strategy for six monthly reports to the council as a means of oversight.



The proposed pedestrian zone on Waverley Bridge
Examples of the areas included in the plans for change are Waverley Bridge and Lothian Road. We were told that the work being done in the Meadows to George Street consultation has also highlighted to them other areas of concern in the city centre and just beyond it.



A visual of what Victoria Street might look like
The Edinburgh Urban Design Panel have called the strategy an 'exciting, ambitious vision for the city centre with

significant potential to deliver long overdue change'. Not everyone is 100% happy as the bus company Lothian has pointed out that they regard integration with Waverley Station and the Edinburgh Bus Station as crucial, but that closure of some streets might lead to congestion elsewhere. They have asserted that the strategy overlooks many of the actions in their own business plan for 2017-19.

John Lauder, Deputy CEO of Sustrans, said: "The City Centre Transformation is a bold, forward-looking step to reduce emissions, improve air quality and deliver a more liveable city for visitors and residents alike. We're pleased to have supported the development of the City Centre Transformation, and look forward to continuing to work with the City of Edinburgh Council to make George Street and the New Town a place for everyone."

The council was told by the Fruitmarket Gallery in their submissions that the taxi rank in Market Street is very problematic and that deliveries for businesses in the street are compromised by station drop-offs. The answers to all of these detailed points will only be found after further consultation and discussion.

A key aim of the work is to bring the city centre back to the people who live here. The council is keen to look at the outcomes based on solid research. They have for example looked at other European cities and are using statistics like the possible growth in population over the next while and are trying to manage the evolution of the city centre. It is estimated that the population in the capital will climb to 600,000 by 2041.

It will take a lot of investment to fulfil the promises made, and all of this is being undertaken by the council with a good deal of caution flung in. Funding will be provided by developer contributions through the planning regime, capital spending from the council's own resources and applications to

the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland and Sustrans and any other grant funding bodies.

Sustrans has awarded £0.520m from their Places for Everyone grant scheme to support the creation of a pedestrian priority zone in the Old and New Towns. There will be trials before the plans are finalised but traditional traffic modelling will play its part.

The council is very proud of this particular consultation which is being held up as a gold standard. It managed to pull together many policies into one conversation with the public and Cllr Macinnes said this now gives them a strong platform to start from. She said : "We feel as if the consultation fired the starting gun and now we know that we have permission to proceed with these ambitious plans."

The council states that they will have to increase traffic enforcement at the same time as looking at the loss of revenue from reducing car parking spaces.

3,056 people responded to the consultation on the Council website with a further 28 responses. But crucially 78.7% of those who did reply agreed that this would be transformational change, with 56.7% agreeing strongly and 22.7% agreeing slightly. A separate young people's survey was answered by 150 young people.

The Convener was buoyed up by the consultation results which showed that people like the ideas of city hopper buses, pedestrian priority zones and vehicle free streets.

She said : "This is the next exciting stage of the City Centre Transformation project. We have been out to consultation over the summer with a phenomenally good response in terms of volume and the content. We have reached the stage now where we have tested the drive in the city for change, we can tell people the programme delivery plan and funding strategy for the next ten years.

“We are building in a degree of flexibility in that, but right now we need to know what direction we are going in, what are the main key interventions sought and what outcomes that we are looking at. But the means of delivery and the funding will change a bit and will have to be flexible in the next ten years. But right now we can go back out and say this is where we are, where we want to go and how we will get there.

“This is a big complex multi layered bit of thinking and we are not able to dwell on specifics at present. The time for all that detailed work will come during later consultations as we work closely with external organisations such as Lothian and others.”

A period of trialling will also be part of the scheme and the Convener held up the Open Streets strategy as a great way to do just that. The next Open Streets is at the beginning of October. The council closes some streets in the Old Town to cars and other vehicles, allowing those walking or on bikes to enjoy the streets for other purposes.



Victoria Street closed to traffic in July 2019 Photo: Martin
McAdam