

Change is Painful – a resumé of Spokes May meeting

An account of the SPOKES meeting held on Wednesday – suggesting it might be possible to make enough change in Edinburgh that few need a car.

Edinburgh's New Active Travel Action Plan Discussed and Dissected

By most measures, Edinburgh is one of the most congested cities in the UK. As a consequence, the issue of transport and how we move around Edinburgh is constantly high profile. These themes were discussed and debated at a public meeting on Wednesday evening, organised by the cycling campaign group Spokes. 'A city where you don't need a car' was the theme. The background to the meeting was Edinburgh's New Active Travel Action Plan (ATAP), which is currently out for consultation.

Dr Caroline Brown, a Transform Scotland policy adviser introduced the event. The main speakers were Transport Convener Councillor Scott Arthur. Strategy Manager for Active Travel and Streetspace Phil Noble presented Edinburgh's transport plans aimed to support Edinburgh NetZero 2030, and a 30% reduction in car miles by 2030. Adrian Davis, Professor of Transport & Health at Napier University offered a critique.

One sided?

The event as usual took place at Augustine United Church on George IV Bridge. While there wasn't a religious aspect to the

event, there was a general sense that most panellists and attendees were singing from the same hymn sheet. In short, there was general consensus in the hall that radical action was required to ease congestion and help reduce emissions. The meeting was 'very one-sided' according to one attendee, who suggested that car travel is essential to some, including caregivers. In response, Cllr Professor Scott Arthur emphasised that the aim was to reduce car usage, not to prohibit it. The aim was to create a city where you don't *need* a car, not why they are outlawed. Arthur rejected the idea of a binary division between cyclists and car drivers saying that 'most people who cycle also use cars'. More generally, he hoped that debates on transport policy could avoid simple binary choices. The aim is to make the city more usable by all.

Time is tight

In her opening remarks, Caroline Brown emphasised the urgency of the climate situation. Significant climate change meant that 'time is very tight'. There were plenty of good ideas and high-level policy targets being presented, but they weren't enough. There were issues about 'translating' these 'fine words' into 'actions on the ground'. Actions that would 'change the way we live, change the way we move'. She noted that there was no shortage of policy and plans and that, as a consequence, it was 'easy to become overwhelmed by the variety of policies which are on the table'. One aim of the evening was to try and make sense of this multiplicity of policy and proposal.

Cllr Arthur outlined what he saw as the 'general direction of travel'. Lots of changes had been implemented, such as the trial 20mph zones, LEZ (low emission zones) and new cycle lanes. All these were to mitigate the effects of climate change and deal with a growing city where lots of new homes were being built. As Arthur noted, 'these people will need to travel around the city'.

Arthur admitted that these policies and trials had not been without controversy. Ideas such as 15/20 minute neighbourhoods had attracted a lot of conspiracy theories, along the lines that they are an effort to curtail freedom. Some of the angry online exchanges had had real world consequences. Some of those involved in these policies had, Arthur revealed, received threats. The highly argumentative character of some of the online debate on transport and planning issues was a major hurdle that needed to be overcome. Arthur himself often engages on social media with those who believe there was a hidden anti-car and anti-freedom agenda to the policies of the 'council'.

Adrian Davis also addressed this topic. He believed that 'pluralistic ignorance' was a major aspect of transport debates, flooding public discourse with 'erroneous information'. There was a loud segment of the population whose voices were very prominent. They were, Davis believed, 'trying to make us feel that we are in the minority'. The 'us' he was referring to were those, such as the majority of the audience, who accepted that radical change is needed. For Davis, the truth is that the majority agreed that significant change is required. This was supported by major surveys such as British Social Attitudes.

Arthur did accept that some of the concerns were legitimate. They had sometimes been a failure to combine the major projects with maintaining the current infrastructure. He admitted that convoluted talk about 'transport systems' often goes over the heads of many, who are just getting on with their lives. Those implementing change 'have to get the basics right first', including maintaining good road surfaces. In many places they were 'pretty awful' and 'weren't good enough' with potholes in particular causing a lot of disquiet and the sense of the council had the wrong priorities. Gaining trust on 'these key everyday issues...gives us the right to be heard on these other issues'. The state of the roads partly

reflects what Arthur saw as 'chronic underfunding' over the decades.



The council has leased this Pothole Pro for six months on a trial basis

Change is painful

Arthur also accepted that some of the tensions over transport policy were inevitable as 'change is painful'. The sheer scale of the changes in the lead up to 2030 is going to be massive, with around £2 billion likely to be invested. How can this be done without 'bringing the whole city to a halt' and turning people against change. This pain was most evident in the impact on shops, such as those on Leith Walk who had suffered during the recent tram works. Arthur firmly believed that, when the trams are running, the area will be a better environment for businesses in the long term. However, there needs to be a lot of effort to ensure that businesses 'survive long enough to benefit in the long term'. Arthur believes that the 'failure' of the first trams project was still affecting the tenor of debate on public transport in Edinburgh. In

contrast, the recent extension project (taking the tram line to Newhaven) had come in on budget and on time.



Transport Convener Scott Arthur and Council Leader Cammy Day announced the date for Trams to Newhaven to open to passengers – 7 June 2023 PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter



Similar challenges will also be faced by some traders on [George Street](#) which will soon be part of a major project to reconfigure the street and make it less car dominated ('it's been a car park for too long'). Arthur believes that there are economic benefits to the changes being made, as well as a significant improvement in the quality of life. Arthur saw no tension in working alongside business and tourism in the transformation of the city. There was no need to see business, residents and tourists in competition. All could gain from a better transport system and reduced car dependency. Similarly, the City Centre West to East Link (CCWEL) project had been characterised by 'good quality of design' and was 'an exemplar' for future projects. He had faith that the short term disruption felt by those in Roseburn and other areas along the route was part of the 'pain' inevitable in making substantial, long-lasting change.

Phil Noble focused on how the different modes of transport could interlink and coexist rather than clash. The idea was a model of the city in which different modes of transport had priority in different places, on different streets. Many of Edinburgh's arterial roads are rather narrow. As a result, there was always considerable 'competition for street space'. In some areas there would have to be coexistence, and this would involve things such as properly segregated cycle lanes. The question was always 'who gets priority where?'. He saw the future network as an overlapping one. It would not be possible to satisfy everyone in every area. Choices would have to be made. For example, in certain areas of the city there were conflicts between public transport and cyclists. These were not easy problems to solve. But he did believe there was potential for all journeys to be *possible* by bike.



Pedal on Parliament 2023. Photo © 2023 Martin P. McAdam
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A healthier city?

Adrian Davis emphasised the public health aspect of transport change. The question which underpinned his academic research was 'what changes would make us healthier?'. He accepted that Edinburgh Council was, in relation to transport policy, one of the most progressive councils in the UK. However, this was only relative. In the European context, there were many cities which had much better transport networks and were achieving better health outcomes. There was much that Edinburgh could learn from places such as Freiburg.

For Davis, a key group often left out of noisy debates on transport were children. A focus should be ensuring that the city was one in which they felt safe and comfortable making their way around. He saw the tendency for children to be driven to school as 'setting a dangerous precedent'. It suggested that the city wasn't really suitable for children. Also, these children would consider being driven to school as

normality and they would, in time, probably do the same with their children. Inculcating the habit of getting to school on foot, by bike or by public transport is an important step in changing the culture. Scott Arthur echoed Davis' in decrying the use of SUVs (aka 'Chelsea tractors') to transport children. It was 'a disgusting thing to do'. He wondered whether a weight tax for cars, as imposed in other countries, might not be appropriate.

Davis largely supported the efforts made so far. While some had been small, they did have the potential to create the right type of 'synergies', where a group of small changes has a large overall effect. He wasn't convinced though that the 30% reduction in car miles by 2030 was on target to be met. Though he welcomed that ambition he didn't believe it was being followed up with sufficient determination. Davis felt that transport policy in the UK was still largely being determined by a 'predict and provide model'. In short, predicting what level of transport use there will be at some future point and then you aim to provide it. Climate change has made such a model dangerous. The reality of climate change was widely underestimated. It had the potential to knock humanity 'off its perch'.

Combating it was going to require a change of mindset, and very active government. He feared that the inevitable compromises would slow things down: 'incremental change is not enough'. One issue that concerned Davis was the disconnect between the academic experts in the field and the policymakers. Academic work was smothered in jargon which made it difficult for non-experts to access and make sense of. It was taking too long for the latest research to filter down to the policy makers.

In the Q&A session, culture war themes again raised their heads. It was noted that cycling was often associated with a middle class lifestyle. There needed to be, Arthur suggested, encouragement of cycling across the city in all communities.

It needed to emulate bus use in the city which was wonderfully democratic. On the buses you found a true 'cross section of society'. Lothian Buses were 'fantastic' (with 300,000 trips everyday) – 'but could be better'.

Marginalised voices

One of the audience members wondered why the meeting was taking place in the city centre. Surely, he wondered, such meetings needed to be taking place in other areas of the city, attended by a more socially mixed audience; 'why not Pilton or Moredun?'. The panellists accepted that such meetings were too often attended by the same people. In the same way, online discussion of transport tends to be dominated by a limited number of voices. As a result, the 'silent majority' were often ignored. Broadening out the debate on the future of the city was essential.

What the evening illustrated was the sheer scale of the changes that we will see in the city. These changes are likely to remain the subject of intense public debate. There was a general view at the meeting that short term disruption would be worth it in the end. In short, that comprehensive change would help create a more liveable city with far fewer emissions. This is clearly not a view shared by everyone. It is clear that the 'pain' involved in such change will go on fuelling further resistance against it.