

George Street pedestrianisation plan – trees and car chargers could be removed

The George Street pedestrianisation plan could be altered to remove trees and car chargers, with cheaper materials used for resurfacing, amid rising costs.

The ambitious but controversial project is set to see most traffic removed to make way for a central cycleway, wider pavements and other pedestrian improvements to the historic New Town street.

In the last year its estimated price tag has risen to £40m – up £7m in the last year. With millions in funding yet to be secured, council chiefs have started drawing up cost-cutting ideas.

A new report set out a range of ‘value engineering options’ and said removing trees could save around £150k.

Planting trees on George Street has proved a contentious subject in the capital, as those arguing they help combat the effects of climate change have clashed with heritage bodies defending the street’s original design. A compromise to have eight at either end of the thoroughfare was eventually agreed.

Other proposals to bring the cost down include building the

cycleway, benches and planters with cheaper materials. Replacing granite setts with asphalt on the central cycling zone, where vehicles will be treated as “guests”, could bring the cost down by around £1.3m, according to the report.

A further £595k saving by removing of electric vehicle charging points led a councillor to query why they were included in the first place, as the options were discussed at the transport committee on Thursday, September 12.

Marie-Clair Munro, Conservative, said: “Can you explain why you propose to spend £595,000 . . . installing car charging points, in an area from which you intend to remove the vast majority of vehicles?”

Project manager Jamie Robertson said as the council urged businesses to electrify their fleet it was felt the plan should “provide facilities for that”.

Fellow project manager Marie Davis admitted it did “seem like an obvious one to take out at this point,” adding: “It’s always something that can be added in as a later addition.”

Additional work needs to be undertaken to determine the potential impact of the savings, the report continued, alongside “dialogue” with heritage bodies to evaluate how any changes could affect the area’s UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Cllr Danny Aston, SNP, asked “why aren’t we already looking” to use a different material to setts which “can be problematic for cycling over”.

Mr Robertson said the redesign had to be “really high quality”.

He said: “The materials at the moment, and we’re only mid-stage through the technical design, have been spec’d to respond to that high-quality nature, but at the end of this

design stage we will be providing options around how could we reduce costs. Certainly, materials will be one of those elements within it that we will explore.”

Meanwhile councillors gave the green light to investigate options for removing parking from George Street ahead of works commencing in early 2027, according to the latest timescale estimate.

William Duncan, chair of the George Street Association, which represents businesses and organisation based in the street, told councillors this request by officials had come “as a very unwelcome surprise to many of us”.

He said while it had been “long accepted” the redevelopment would involve the removal of car parking and restricted access, it was believed this would be “after the completion of the works, not before”.

Conservative group leader Iain Whyte said there was “no justification” given to back up the move, or any indication of “why that might be a good idea” and how much parking income would be lost.

“So where did this really come from?” he asked. “And if it’s a pre plan for something we’re going to do, should we not have asked the businesses first?”

Interim director of place Gareth Barwell said: “We have a target as a council of a 30 per cent reduction in car kilometres. It is a matter of fact we’ve spent a lot of time engaging with businesses.

“I would argue that the mandate of the approved City Mobility Plan gives us this direction, but I would apologise if it’s caused any concern to the businesses.”

He added: “It’s literally to ask members ‘is this something we want to look forward to do’. It’s a message I’ve heard from

members of this committee that we can't just do transport strategy through public realm schemes. We have to do it through other means."

Cllr Whyte said: "I think back to various things that have been done as temporary measures in the interim. Some of those were to do with Covid and were put in four years ago to allow people to socially distance. We've got a lot of them still, and they're looking increasingly ugly as time goes on."

The revamp's design stage is expected to run until late 2026, with more detailed value engineering options set to go before councillors for a decision next year.

A funding shortfall of around £14m still looms over the project, which could grow even larger if costs rise again.

While a £23.7m cut to the Scottish Government's active travel budget means less grant funding will be available to plug the gap.

Chairing his first committee, newly-appointed transport convener Stephen Jenkinson, Labour, said: "One of the main funding sources for the project is the Scottish government and if they are reducing the amount of money that is available to invest in these kind of projects we have to be mindful of that."

Lib Dem group leader Kevin Lang questioned whether it was "right" to use £40m "on one street, irrespective of how good this scheme looks, feels and the difference it would make".

He said: "I do think we can put a flag in the sand and recognise the very significant issues which there are around the costs of this, the affordability and also the impact of spending money on this could have on a range of other active travel projects."

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter