Design principles and concept for the first stage of the transformation of Oxford Street

This factsheet explains in more detail how we have developed proposals for the first stage of the transformation of Oxford Street.
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DESIGN VISION AND URBAN DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Design Vision

_Transform Oxford Street into one of the world’s best public spaces which, together with its wider district, offers a multi-layered experience that combines commerce with culture, art, and play while continuing to provide pleasant places to work and live_

Urban Design Principles

The delivery of this vision will be guided by the following urban design principles:

1. Strengthen the identity and coherence of Oxford Street and its relationship to its wider district
2. Create a greener environment
3. Refine hierarchy of streets and spaces
4. Improve connections within the wider district
5. Create an accessible and welcoming place
6. Evolve a place of culture, play and activity
A STAGED APPROACH

The first phase of this vision is Oxford Street West (Orchards Street to Oxford Circus), which will be delivered in two stages:

Stage 1 of transformation: permanent changes to traffic management (how buses, taxis, general traffic, pedestrians and cyclists move around the area) will be accompanied by temporary finishes to the public realm

Stage 2 of transformation: temporary finishes will be upgraded to permanent finishes

The advantage of a two-stage approach

The opening of the Elizabeth Line in December 2018 will be a notable change to central London with six stations opening and particularly to the West End where two stations are opening. The predicted increase in pedestrians (over 40% more in some places) will cause an already crowded and unpleasant environment to become dangerously crowded during periods of the day and add to existing public health concerns arising from conflicts between pedestrians and vehicular traffic.

In line with the ambition of the West End Partnership (WEP) and the Mayor’s manifesto, Transport for London (TfL) and Westminster City Council (WCC) aim to transform the pedestrian experience on Oxford Street West by removing a significant amount, if not all the vehicular traffic and for the reasons given above we propose to do so in time for the opening of the Elizabeth Line in December 2018.

Oxford Street is London’s premier retail street, so it is critical to take this rare opportunity to upgrade and improve this unique place. To deliver a world-class public space by December 2018, on a tight budget, is a challenge, but also an opportunity to use a temporary scheme as a test-bed to inform the permanent solutions that will follow.

Much of stage 1 will be in place by next December, but we want to leave room for evolution through the time stage 1 is in place, to test ideas in response to an increasing understanding of how the changes to vehicular and pedestrian movement and behaviour impact the dynamics of the district: how it looks, feels and functions.
DEVELOPMENT OF THE STAGE 1 TRANSFORMATION PROPOSALS

The following stages are required by the opening of the Elizabeth line to enable the street to be functional under a new traffic management strategy and improve the public realm:

1. Traffic signals and road signage – permanent works
2. Kerb re-alignment and utility diversions – a mix of permanent and temporary works
3. Stage 1 of the public realm – temporary/demountable & re-useable – integrated with district improvements
4. Activation and management programme – framework/governance

Recognising the design vision, but also the time and budget constraints, Stage 1 of the transformation will focus on:

1. A good quality temporary scheme that facilitates the journey to the transformational outcome
2. Improvements to the street, the wider district and the relationship between the two
3. Making the most of the opportunity presented by changes to traffic management in advance of a more permanent scheme
4. An increased understanding of the street’s potential, to shape the design of the permanent works – a test-bed for change
5. A balance between transformation and prudent expenditure of public funds on a scheme which will have a short-life
6. An approach that is both a celebration of one of the world’s great shopping streets and a reflection of the particularity of the places that make up the wider district

The process for developing stage one of the transformation of Oxford Street West was agreed through joint decision making by WCC, the London Borough of Camden (LBC) and the New West End Company (NWEC).

A four-stage process was agreed:

A. Analysis and Ideas
   Including place analysis and research into relevant precedents, and ideas workshops with project partners and key stakeholders
B. Public realm toolkit
   Including workshops with project partners and key stakeholders
C. Design for Transition Public Realm
   Including a review by the London Quality Review Panel (a review by urban design professionals to ensure the proposals are responding to current thinking)
D. Implementation
   To follow public consultation

There has been extensive dialogue with stakeholders representing owners, occupiers, retailers, business organisations and residents groups.

The toolkit includes a flexible range of measures that can be applied to Oxford Street and its surrounding streets and places, depending on their use and traffic management once agreed.

Adding colour and pattern to the carriageway can significantly change the look of the street and how people react to it, as these international examples show.

The Loper, Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, designed by Alphons ter Avest

New York Times Square streetscape improvements before (left) and after (right)

Southwark St, London designed by Camille Walala
The toolkit includes a range of benches that will meet the everyday needs of those just wanting a rest as well as more playful versions inspired by Jeppe Hein’s Modified Social Benches at the South Bank.

Public art is central to the toolkit and will play an important part in wayfinding, activating side streets and drawing people into the wider district.

Raising the carriageway in pedestrianised areas, flush with the existing footway, would create a step-free environment, particularly benefitting disabled people and parents with buggies.

The toolkit includes the use of the existing suspension wires (used for Christmas Lights) to provide year-round light and art installations which could change through the seasons.
**Applying the toolkit**

*Taking an example of an existing block...* 

...the toolkit can be applied in a number of ways. In this example the carriageway is retained for vehicular traffic on a reduced or timed basis.

In this example the toolkit is applied to a more pedestrian-focused option.
WHAT WE ARE PROPOSING

In line with the design vision and urban design principles set out at the start of this report, we propose the following.

1. Strengthen the identity and coherence of Oxford Street and its relationship to its wider district

Strengthening the identity of the street

The place analysis showed that Oxford Street lacks visual coherence: the buildings fronting it are of varying age, style and architectural quality. The analysis also identified urban zones along the length of and straddling the street. Along Oxford Street West, the zones identified are:

- Selfridges zone
- Bond Street zone
- John Lewis zone
- Oxford Circus

We propose a program of art installations and streetscape which, through a consistent general approach will bring coherence to the street, while variety in detail will celebrate and enhance the particularity of places including the urban zones listed above (see Activation and Public Art Strategy).

Our analysis showed that Oxford Street has a rich history of culture beyond shopping. Lunardi’s balloon was exhibited at the Pantheon in 1784, Selfridges has played host to fashion shows and crazy golf on the roof (1920s) and Stanley Tunick’s photography of 400 nudes in 2003; the Beatles recorded their first album in London at HMV in the ‘60s and the Sex Pistols played the 100 Club in ‘76. Barbara Hepworth’s ‘Winged Figure’ was installed on the John Lewis façade in 1963 and colourful light installations floated above Oxford Circus as part of Lumiere in 2016.
Our approach is intended to re-capture this spirit and energy, to make Oxford Street and its district a multi-layered experience that combines culture, art, commerce and play with places to work and live.

We propose to appoint a Creative Director to curate site specific installations. What is shown here is illustrative only and includes:

**Linear artwork**

To change the look and perception of the former carriageway we propose an artwork that stretches from Orchard Street to Oxford Circus; a total of 800m long in four sections. Each section will relate to the above urban zones, potentially referencing the rich history and culture of each area and it could be the work of a single artist or a different artist for each urban zone.

**Suspended seasonal art and lighting installation**

For December 2018, coinciding with the opening of the Elizabeth Line, the New West End Company (NWEC) plan to install new Christmas lights. We are working with NWEC (a project partner) to elaborate this into a year-round, seasonal installation. During the darker months, the focus will be on light, changing in the summer months to something less reliant on illumination.
Illustrative masterplan of stage 1 of transformation
Visualisation of proposals for Oxford Street outside Selfridges (looking east)

(Public art shown is illustrative only)
2. **Create a greener environment**

Planting street trees that will survive and thrive requires care. Between now and during the implementation period for stage 1 of the transformation, there is insufficient time to ensure a robust planting regime. Instead, we propose to retain the existing trees and test several locations for new trees using transportable potted trees.

Sustainable drainage is a challenge facing the whole of London. Rain gardens act as SuDS (Sustainable Urban Drainage System) while providing delight and habitats to support bio-diversity. These require careful design in such an intensely used space as the Oxford Street area. We propose to trial this approach on a side street, and assess the viability of introducing these into the wider transformation project.

3. **Refine hierarchy of streets and spaces**

The place analysis showed that, while Oxford Street itself is predominantly a shopping street, the side streets off it and the nearby parallel streets support a great variety of uses including restaurants and cafes, art galleries, museums, green spaces, places of work and places to live.
If Oxford Street is to be a great place and the “the world’s best outdoor shopping experience” (West End Partnership, Strategic Imperative), connections are needed to this rich and varied hinterland such that a day out on Oxford Street can compete with other attractive retail destinations (including the Westfield malls) which offer a broad range of activities. One of the potential strengths of Oxford Street is its interaction with the surrounding district and we propose to enhance this.

We propose to activate side streets to provide greater amenity and to encourage people to explore what the wider district has to offer. This will complement improvements to side streets and the wider district, improved pavements, widened at key points, and new and improved pedestrian crossings. Again, art will be integral to the approach. For instance, on Old Cavendish Street we propose playful benches, a temporary fountain, greening and art.

As part of stage 1 of transformation we have begun a dialogue with the existing street traders, to explore how they might contribute to the improvement of side streets and better connections between Oxford Street and its wider district.

Emphasis will be put on streets that need improvement and that lead to new transport infrastructure such as Old Cavendish Street (leads to proposed bus stops on Henrietta Place) and Dering Street (leads to Bond Street Elizabeth Line Station on Hanover Square).

4. Improve connections within the wider district

North-south connections: breaking down severance

The place analysis identified Oxford Street as a line of severance between neighbourhoods to the north and south of the street. There are many reasons for this. Historically Oxford Street is the edge of Great Estates and urban districts to the north and south. Volume and type of vehicular traffic along the street has also played its part.

Removal of east-west traffic allows stronger north-south connections across the street to be established. In transition we will explore this through art installations, temporary landscaping and potentially events rolled out in phases through 2019 in suitable locations.

Care must be taken, however. Severance has existed for so long, that while streets to the north may align with streets to the south, their use and character may be very different. Along Oxford Street West, the strongest potential connections we propose are:

- Duke Street
- James Street – Gilbert Street
- New Bond Street – Vere Street
- Dering Street – Old Cavendish Street
- Holles Street – Harewood Place

It is also important to integrate Oxford Street with well-connected side streets, even if they do not form particularly strong north-south connections. For instance Marylebone Lane does not lead to a particularly well-connected street on the other side of Oxford Street (Woodstock Street) but is an important connection to improve.

Colourful crossings

We seek to make the whole district more walkable, with the number of signalised ‘green man’ crossings nearly doubling. We propose that several of these crossings are also made into ‘colourful crossings’ – designed by an artist, and installed using hard-wearing thermoplastic transfers, as has been done for instance on Southwark Street. These will bring a greater sense of place to key nodes or meeting points in the district and raise awareness of important crossing points.

Selected crossings would lead to key destinations in the district such as galleries, green spaces, and new bus stops to aid wayfinding.

Through association with the artwork on Oxford Street we propose to make stronger conceptual links between Oxford Street and its wider district.

An example of a colourful crossing: Southwark St, London, artwork by Camille Walala
Design principles and concept for the first stage of the transformation of Oxford Street

Visualisation of proposals for Wigmore Street, at junction with Duke Street (looking East)

Public art shown is illustrative only.
5. **Create an accessible and welcoming place**

**A place for all**

Our analysis has shown that crowding on Oxford Street discourages many people, particularly disabled people, from coming to the street. By removing vehicles, particularly during the busiest times for pedestrians, we will reduce crowding and encourage a broad spectrum of people to use the street.

Furthermore, in pedestrianised areas, we propose to raise the existing carriageway to be flush with the footways thus removing obstacles for disabled people and people with buggies. In areas that have timed-access for vehicles, the retention of a small upstand kerb to delineate the carriageway may be required to meet the needs of the visually-impaired. Existing footways will be retained and all cracked paving stones replaced.

**Decluttering street furniture**

Removal of vehicular traffic will facilitate the removal of much of the traffic signage, signals, road markings and signal boxes. We will also review all other street furniture and remove or rationalise it if possible. The result will be a less cluttered streetscape.

**Places to rest; places to gather**

Our place audit identified deficiencies in public seating along Oxford Street. Discussions with accessibility groups and the project’s independent advisors on accessibility further emphasised the problems. There are insufficient numbers, so spaced too far apart. The seats themselves are low and have no back rests or arm rests.

We propose to introduce new seating including benches that meet all accessibility requirements. Our aim is to provide sufficient numbers such that these will be spaced at no more than 50m along Oxford Street. There will be benches with back and arm rests. Benches will be fixed but designed and constructed such that they can be relocated and adapted to test different locations and configurations.

As well as good, simple benches meeting the needs of those who just want a rest, we propose more playful versions which test the possibilities for play and social interaction. Clusters of benches are proposed at meeting or gathering points.

We know that rough sleeping and anti-social behaviour can be focused around areas of public seating, so we will closely observe all areas of seating and make necessary adjustments to inform the permanent design. This will form part of the district Management Plan being put together by Westminster City Council (WCC) working with partners.

**Innovative technology**

We are exploring innovative ways to focus on digital connectivity and information:

- Tie into WCC plans for free wi-fi across the district
- Soundscape
  - Sound loops for the hard of hearing
  - Memorable sounds at key decision points for the visually-impaired
- Work with NWEC or other plans for an Oxford Street App

**Wayfinding**

The district already benefits from Legible London and this will be updated to reflect changes in the area. We propose to supplement this with Braille maps.

Wayfinding is also about legibility and we propose to introduce distinctive streetscape and public art to make it easier to form a mental map of the area. In other words, it will be easier to give someone directions as there will be memorable landmarks that can be referred to.

**Safety**

We are liaising closely with other agencies to establish precise requirements for hostile vehicle mitigation (HVM). Much will depend on the traffic management solution and what vehicles are permitted and at what times.

There are two very different conditions:

- Oxford Street, where large pedestrian flows favour a bollard-based solution (see visualisation of Oxford Street at junction with South Molton Street)
- Side streets, where there is more scope for Hostile Vehicle Mitigation to be integrated with streetscape such as planters and public art (see visualisation of Old Cavendish Street)

We are also working closely with WCC’s Community Safety Team and Local Crime Prevention Officers to address issues of street crime and anti-social behaviour.
Visualisation of proposals for Oxford Street and South Molton Street looking east
(Public art shown is illustrative only)
6. **Evolve a place of culture, play and activity**

**A place for all**

Art and playfulness are integral to all the proposals above. Our proposals include an activation strategy, which we will start to test in the transition period.

We propose to commission mobile stages to test a variety of performance and street theatre formats in locations around the district. Close observation will be made of the results: is there demand; are they popular; do they bring associated activation; do they increase business for shops and restaurants, are there negative impacts to residents or businesses?

Good change takes time. This is a rolling programme and will evolve and respond as we make and assess changes to optimise long-term transformation. It will be informed by feedback from many quarters including the business community, residents, visitors, cultural institutions, WCC’s management team and Local Crime Prevention Officers and by our own observations of what’s working and what’s not.

*Photograph of existing*

*Proposals for a travelling theatre, shown here on James Street (looking north)*

(Public art shown is illustrative only)