



Top-line findings on focus groups into travel in Oxford

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Background

- Oxfordshire County Council together with Oxford City Council are implementing and proposing various traffic measures which will change the way in which residents and visitors travel around the city
- Various consultations have taken place with results not universally accepted
- There is a question mark as to whether various groups of people whose lives will be fundamentally changed by these measures have been adequately consulted
- They have been called the 'silent majority'
- But what exactly does their voice say when heard?

Research objectives

- To investigate the travel patterns and needs of groups of citizens, often the 'silent majority', who may have particular difficulties with the traffic measures implemented or proposed
- To define exactly what these difficulties are or will be
- To understand whether they have joined in council consultations
- To assess their reaction to these consultations
- To assess their attitudes to the councils' traffic plans
- To discuss their own recommendations for managing transport in Oxford – public and private

Sample

- We recruited three groups of people intended to represent people who may have particular difficulties with travel in Oxford.
- Mobile tradespeople (MT). We are here talking about the vast numbers of people who help to keep the city going. These are of various types:
 - skilled workers, classically thought of as 'White Van Man': builders, plumbers, plasterers, scaffolders, carpenters, electricians, painters etc, etc. These are people who have a daily need to cross the city with heavy equipment both to get supplies and to travel to the place where they are working.
 - other groups of people with either professional or caring roles who need to cross the city. A few examples would be non-professional carers, hospitality workers, hairdressers, child carers, dog-walkers. All used cars.
 - balanced between males and females. Middle social classes.
 - 8 respondents.

Sample (cont)

- Elderly people, both with cars and without, who need to cross the city for both practical (e.g. medical appointments) and leisure purposes (EP). Half male; half female. Half with car; half without. Aged 70-80+. Mixed social classes. 9 respondents.
- Working mothers – and working fathers with childcare responsibilities (WM). People who need to move around different parts of the city to make possible the difficult combination of job and childcare (eg school run). Largely female. Mixed social classes. 6 respondents.

Conduct of the groups

- All groups were recruited and conducted in accordance with the protocols of the industry body, the Market Research Society.
- The groups were moderated by Nigel Clarke, trained and experienced in social and market research. A brief CV appears in the appendix
- The groups were conducted in Littlemore, Oxford, in September 2023

Summary of findings

- What follows is a top-line summary of the very rich material produced in the groups
- Subsequently, a detailed report will be produced featuring verbatim quotations from the respondents
- An observation: in a thirty-year career of moderating and watching group discussions, the moderator has very rarely found such unanimity of views

Travel in Oxford

- All groups had their special needs:
 - Transport to work, sometimes across the city (MT,WM)
 - Transport between work appointments (MT,WM)
 - Transport of children to school and after-school leisure activities, also sometimes to different areas of the city (WM)
 - Shopping – sometimes in a different area of the city
 - Seeing friends/relatives (all, but particularly EP)
 - Their own and children's leisure activities (MT,WM)
 - Simply 'getting out' (EP)
- How do they travel?

Travel in Oxford: Means

- Unanimously, nearly always by car or van
- This was vital for the school trips and post-school leisure or learning activities. On occasions when a car was unavailable, children had been denied the latter (WM, MT)
- It was also vital for work in different ways:
 - For MT, it was vital for moving equipment and tools
 - Particularly for MT, it was vital for getting from one job to another – for example, someone has an electrical issue in Botley, the next in Abingdon Road, all to be reached from Littlemore
 - For some (WM), it was vital for simply getting there. One NHS nurse had to get from Littlemore to Botley. Bus was impossible; cycling out of the question
- For EPs, it was very simple. No car (sometimes via family or friends), no trips – amongst which shopping and visiting friends and relations were key

Travel in Oxford – cycling and motor scooters

- Some people were keen cyclists
- But this was not a viable mode for their everyday lives – moving children, equipment etc
- For the EPs, the response was “Get me on a bike?”
- In any event, there was huge criticism of a lot of the cyclists in Oxford – young people who appeared not to know the rules of the road
- This made cycling a dangerous pursuit – particularly with accompanying children
- As for motorised scooters, these were universally condemned: a total danger, ridden irresponsibly
- Some respondents had heard that Paris had banned them and suggested that Oxford should follow suit

Travel in Oxford – Means (Cont)

- People were open to using other means of transport – but what?
- The buses were seen as unreliable and unsuitable for the journeys they needed to make. Buses frequently did not make the sort of journeys they needed across the city
- And the demands of changing buses were too much: one mother of a child with special needs had tried using the bus to get from Littlemore to his special school in Summertown. Result: total stress for 2 hours and the near-breakdown of the child
- For MT and WM, buses were simply unsuitable for the people/equipment to be carried
- For the EPs, it was laughable that they could do their weekly shopping on the bus – or a cycle
- Similarly, cycles did not come into the equation for other groups

Travel in Oxford: the experience

- That's how our respondents get around the city. What is their experience of doing this?
- There was unanimity that things had gone from difficult to almost impossible for car or van travel in Oxford and this had interfered importantly with their lives
- For this, they blamed the LTNs
- To avoid these, motorists were forced to try to enter the ring road
- But everyone else was trying to get to the ring road for the same reason. One house painter had to get out to the ring road and back in again to fetch his supplies – when formerly it had been an easy direct journey
- The result was total chaos
- Some people, who lived on a road leading to the ring road, could not get out of their drives....
- Before the LTNs, things had been 'normally' difficult

Why had this happened?

- So, universally, people blamed the LTNs
- They realised that they benefitted a small number (in their eyes) of people, but they disadvantaged vastly many more
- By and large, they supported initiatives to limit pollution
- But they thought that the LTNs had significantly increased pollution by the traffic congestion they caused
- A small number, largely MTs, also had experience of the ZEZs – and had a similar reaction to them
- “Why would you do this?” was a common question
- They couldn’t see an obvious answer
- Which turned their minds to who had initiated this....

Reactions to the Council(s)

- Universally, they blamed the council(s)* for “this mess”
- They gave various explanations for why this had been done:
 - Money: councils would get government money and the proceeds of fines/costs of entry
 - An agenda/ideology: councils had a misguided vision of traffic management which ignored the needs of ‘ordinary people’
 - To please other influential groups of citizens: the university and the ‘rich people’ of North Oxford who shared their vision
- They believed that some councillors had reservations, but had either been shouted down or ignored

* Note. People did not distinguish much between the county and city councils. Their reactions are here generalised.

More on the councils

- They viewed the councillors as an elite group, frequently not living in the city, who bulldozed through their vision and quelled opposition
- They saw them as very much in league with Oxford University which they believed wanted to make the historic centre of the city their own preserve
- For some, it was a resuscitation of the old 'Town and Gown' division, with the interests of Gown coming first
- A few thought it a class issue – for example, the middle classes of North Oxford (often Oxbridge graduates themselves) versus the interests of the 'working class'
- In any event, they believed that the things that were being done were not in their interests and were actively disadvantageous to their lives
- But surely they had been consulted?

Consultations

- When asked if they had been consulted about traffic plans, there was a mixture of anger, hilarity and disbelief
- A very few had taken part
- Most were unaware of consultations
- This was particularly true of the EPs: “Nobody knocked on my door” said one gentleman
- Online consultations were a particular issue. Few would consider doing them. And none of the EPs would do them – or indeed would know about them, and how to access and do them
- In any event, such consultations as existed were thought of as ‘a sham’. One person even claimed that an employee of the council had told him that the council would do whatever they wanted, regardless of the outcome of consultations. Some claimed that this had happened in the past

The bus gates proposed

- Except for the EPs, most people were aware of the proposals for bus gates in the city
- It is true to say that they caused horror
- They would vastly add to congestion and bring the ring road to even more of a standstill
- Not just journeys into the city would be affected, but also necessary journeys across the city
- The gate in Hollow Way would affect their ability to move within their own area; the bus gates near the hospitals and on the way to them would force them on to a highly congested ring road
- Condemnation of the plans was universal
- And people did not believe that they had been consulted

The bus gates (cont)

- In short, people believed that the proposals would fundamentally affect their daily lives – very negatively
- This was at its worst for the EPs: already limited in their movements by age and infirmity, this would imprison them
- One MT, an electrician, said that, unless his vehicles were fully exempt, he would have to begin turning down business: travelling time across the city was already a problem, and the gates would make it even worse. This would be detrimental to both his business and his customers. Other MTs emphatically agreed
- People were told about the plans to give residents 100 passes per year
- There was confusion as to how these would work
- And there was a suspicion that it wouldn't be very long before they were charged for these

'The silent majority'

- People were informed that one councillor had publicly stated that he believed that the 'silent majority' supported the bus gates plans
- This was ridiculed
- People had not been silent, but silenced
- There had been no meaningful consultation
- And their views would not have been properly taken into account, anyway
- They had no doubt that their view on the bus gates was shared by everyone they knew
- The silent majority, though silenced, was stridently opposed
- The council's idea that they would reduce congestion and therefore pollution was totally wrong – the opposite would be the case

The '15-minute city'

- People were asked whether they knew that the council had said that the bus gates would bring about a '15-minute city' where everyone's needs would be accommodated within an area across which one could travel by foot, cycle or bus in 15 minutes
- Again, the idea was ridiculed
- The services they needed were not available within such an area. And the hospitals certainly weren't
- The EPs reiterated the "Get me on a bike?" thought. And most emphasised that they couldn't possibly do a 15-minute journey on foot
- The consensus was that this idea had been 'dreamt up' by a council official sitting behind a desk looking at maps. The official would have no conception of the daily lives of 'ordinary people'

A new 'Berlin Wall'

- Respondents were told that one commentator had publicly said that the bus gates would constitute a new Berlin Wall for Oxford
- There was emphatic agreement – though some said that the proposals would result in six Berlin Walls
- The EPs reiterated their sense of impending imprisonment
- A few people regarded this as building a divide between rich and poor areas and people
- For some older respondents, this had echoes of a notorious situation in Cutteslowe some decades ago. A wall had existed between private and public housing. It had only been demolished after long protests

Suggestions for changes to road and traffic systems

- Emphatically – remove the LTN barriers
- Just as emphatically, abandon the plans for bus gates
- Create a more harmonious balance between space for cyclists and motorists. It was felt that the balance had been altered in favour of cyclists
- Insist on road proficiency education for cyclists
- Make a study of traffic light timings and adjust them more for different traffic levels at different times of day
- Encourage schools to develop their own carpools to minimise car journeys to schools
- And a plea – please reduce the “extortionate” parking charges in areas outside the city centre. They were having to pay these for essential car/van journeys

Suggestions for improving public transport

- Develop the Cowley to Oxford railway branch line with all possible speed. This had been a proposal for many years. Many would definitely use this.
- Any other realistic railway opportunities?
- Do whatever is possible to increase the reliability of buses – particularly in the periods after maximum evening traffic when delays caused by jams are not an issue
- Reinstate buses that cross from one area of the city to another – for example, buses that cross from east of the city to north/south/west Oxford. There are very few. Decades ago, they were the norm

Conclusions

- Unanimously, these people – who classed themselves as ‘ordinary people’ – find travel in Oxford extremely difficult
- For most people, the essential journeys which they make have to be made by car – there is no realistic alternative
- The difficulties have increased significantly since the installation of LTN traffic barriers in their areas. This is particularly true for the Working Mothers/Fathers group and for the Mobile Traders
- At the busiest times in mornings and late afternoons, traffic moves from standstill to standstill – particularly when trying to access the ring road, which motorists need to do because of the LTNs
- For some, this is not merely interfering with their lives. It is also affecting their business as they try to cross the city for work
- Extensions of the ZEZs would merely exacerbate this problem

Conclusions

- In the case of the Elderly People's group, their mobility – hence their life – is greatly impaired. The buses – let alone walking and cycling – are not realistic choices. They either have to face the traffic jams, or stay at home – and frequently choose the latter
- The proposed bus gates met with a horrified response
- This would fundamentally restrict the working groups in pursuing their business. Many Mobile Traders would find it impossible to cross the city to where the work was – and would reluctantly have to refuse work
- For the Elderly People, this would make their sense of imprisonment even worse. Their lives would deteriorate
- The idea of the 15-minute city met with ridicule. The services and facilities (eg hospitals) which they need are not within such an area. This was dismissed as the invention of a bureaucrat at a desk, totally out of touch with real life

Conclusions

- The council were universally blamed for this state of affairs. No one thought that 'ordinary people' had been properly consulted about traffic plans. And councillors, many of whom lived outside Oxford, were viewed as not very concerned about the needs of the poorer people in Oxford
- Many thought that this was deliberate. The council had a vision for traffic plans which they did not want challenged. Yet it was a vision that totally conflicted with the needs of the respondents
- There was also a belief that the council would reject any consultation that was against what they wanted to do – and do it anyway
- Our respondents were the silent majority – but they had been silenced because, they believed, the council did not want to hear what they had to say

Conclusions

- Unanimously, it was strongly believed that the LTNs should be abolished and the plans for bus gates should be abandoned
- Most people recognised the problem of pollution and agreed that measures should be taken to control it (some said by China and Russia). These should, however, be proportionate measures which not did stop their ability to carry out the necessities of life
- The idea of the railway branch line from Cowley to Oxford was received with great enthusiasm
- There was a call for cross-city bus routes – and greater reliability of buses

Appendix 1 – Focus Groups

- Focus groups are, by definition, a ‘toe in the water’
- But they are a toe in water which runs deep
- And it is their job to try to explore these depths – which is what we have done here
- It has to be said that the unanimity of reaction encountered in these groups is a rare phenomenon – especially since it is the moderator’s job to ensure that it is not only the most opinionated members of the group who are heard and to make sure that all group members are given the opportunity to express their views
- It is therefore very likely that people similar to those interviewed here – and there is a very large number of such people in the city – would have very similar views

Appendix 2 – CV of Nigel Clarke

- After graduating from St Edmund Hall, Oxford, he joined the market research department of Ogilvy & Mather, a global advertising agency. Here, he was trained to conduct focus groups – amongst many other things
- He then joined D'Arcy Masius Benton and Bowles, another global advertising agency, where he eventually became Head of Planning, London, and subsequently Head of Strategy, Europe
- He has conducted and observed more focus groups than he cares to remember....
- Now retired, he moved with his wife to live in Oxford – a city he loves – in 2006