

The intermediate Alternative: Written by Peter Elvidge.

Construction work is soon to begin on the council's deeply flawed Valley Gardens proposals. So deep are these potential flaws, that once these issues become apparent, significant changes are likely to be needed to the design- (at potentially significant extra cost, and greater additional delays to buses/other traffic). Given this, it would be far easier if the design was right in the first place, avoiding these additional costs and delays. Overall, a variation order could work out significantly cheaper, than going ahead with the current design.

Identified problems with the current design:

It has been suggested that despite the design narrowing traffic down to a single lane, and other capacity reduction proposals; that traffic will be free-flowing, and existing traffic problems will miraculously disappear.

This indicates there are likely to be serious problems with the existing traffic model:

- (1) One likely omission of the traffic model, is that the London Road/Oxford Street junction, with its existing substantial delays to northbound traffic. Consequently, this substantial northbound traffic queue, would be expected to continue passing through the London Road/ Cheapside/St. Peter's Place junction, past St. Peter's Church. This would not be shown up in the traffic model. It would also fail to show up the likely substantial queues of unwanted traffic, in the former bus lanes- east of St. Peter's Church (potentially causing long delays to buses).
- (2) In Grand Parade: Whereas there are currently three lanes on the southbound approach to the busy Church Street turn off, the new proposal narrows this down to two lanes. Now it is likely that vehicles wanting to turn right to right into Church Street, will soon bring the outside lane to a standstill, leaving just one though lane for traffic. Surveys done on a normal weekend, show the junction to be running at full capacity, even before the number of effective *traffic lanes are halved!* This is expected to cause substantial delays to southbound traffic, even at quieter times of year. Compounding problems for buses.
- (3) By choosing to model traffic on a comparatively quiet October midweek day, it does not take into account normal traffic flows are often at much busier at weekends. Similarly, at busier times of year- such as school holidays (particularly summer and Christmas holidays).

By ignoring the seasonal/weekly peaks, the council could claim that traffic would be freeflowing on an October midweek day; but at busier times this is likely to result in substantial extra delays to traffic; even before the identified problems with modelling are considered!

We are after all, a major shopping and tourist destination, and these are relatively quiet on an October mid-weekday, so these potentially severe extra delays could prove problematic to the city's economy. Making a disruptive redesign even more likely.

Problems for buses: *These fall into two categories:*

- (1) By the final design making traffic congestion much worse, especially at busy times, this will not only have a direct effect on bus services, as buses get caught up in the delays beyond the 'bus lanes'. But equally important, traffic will seek alternative routes (**this is likely to become more prevalent, as GPS real-time data/routing becomes far more sophisticated, encouraging motorists to use less suitable routes**). This will tend towards equalising delays on all routes into the city, so risking buses facing severe delays on most bus routes (not just one-or-two); with the risk of severe unreliability problems, particularly at busier times. Unreliability is the reason most likely to put people off using bus services; and bus usage has previously reduced when severe roadworks have caused problems.
- (2) Equally important, the second major worry is the plan to remove the current useful bus lanes. There are considerable concerns about the enforcement of the so called 'low usage' traffic lanes, on the west side of the valley.

It has been suggested that 'bus lane' signs are put up, but it is difficult to see how these can be legally enforced, without there being a physical bus lane to enforce. Second how do you define local access? Again without this being very specific, it would be difficult to enforce.

It has been suggested the council would like to split 'access' traffic at North Road.

Even if this worked, it means unwanted northbound traffic would be forced to turn right at the North Road crossover, with northbound general traffic (on the east side) likely to be near stationary, (at particularly busy times), this tailback could delay northbound buses in Marlborough Place.

More importantly, when the considerable traffic heading down North Road, observes this near stationary traffic, it is likely to quite legally turn left, northbound up the 'low usage' road. When this substantial northbound traffic reaches the London Road/St. Peter's junction, it will cause long delays to buses. With the current bus lane, east of St. Peter's Church, these problems are avoided. But as the current proposals do not include a bus lane- this would result in substantial delays to northbound buses.

There has been a suggestion that further traffic enforcement could be added at the Trafalgar Street junction. While diverting traffic would reduce the problems for northbound buses, it would force substantial levels of traffic up Trafalgar Street. This road is little more than one vehicle wide, and pavements so narrow that pedestrians have to walk in the road to pass easily! This is totally unsuitable for major traffic flows; and so is likely to be dropped quite quickly. It also raises questions how well thought through, these proposals are.

If this enforcement does not work (or was successfully legally challenged), then this would leave general traffic even more free to head north, on the west side of the valley. With traffic seeing how congested the east side of the valley is, using the west side of the valley would look very tempting; with the likelihood of causing highly disruptive delays to buses, as head towards the London Road. This is especially likely, as traffic already heads northbound on the west side of the valley.

Neither would traffic would not gain overall, using this route, as:-

- (1) traffic would still tailback from the Oxford Street (and perhaps Cheapside) junctions:
- (2) this route is less efficient and would reduce the Cheapside junction capacity, possibly causing further problems; and
- (3) the likely loss of bus passengers, could cause overall traffic congestion increase, as passengers become motorists. Again potentially increasing congestion.

The problems for southbound traffic could be equally problematic. Whereas as at present, only buses etc. are allowed southbound, on the west side of the valley. Under current plans, general traffic will be allowed to pass unhindered. Unless this traffic is forced up the totally unsuitable Trafalgar Street, it will be free to pass unhindered on the west side of the valley down towards the Edward Street junction, on what should be a 'bus only' right turn, at the north-eastern corner of the Pavilion grounds.

With southbound traffic on the east side of the valley already slow moving, at busy times (and that is before halving traffic flow is considered); even comparatively modest amounts of extra traffic heading southbound on the west side of the valley, has the potential to cause service disrupting effect to bus services.

We currently have a very useful bus lane through the corridor. The proposal risks this current advantage disintegrating, with potentially severe problems to buses, particularly at busier times of the year/week. All this would be avoided with the Intermediate Alternative.

The council's current proposal is likely to cause a number of other problems to bus services. These are covered later.

During construction:

Because the current design changes almost every kerb-line within the proposed development area, this can only cause substantial disruption. More worrying the council does not appear to have taken into consideration Brighton's highly seasonal nature, so there are currently no plans to totally stop work during the Christmas and summer peaks. Or to minimise delays at weekends.

While it is good news that the council has delayed constructing the scheme until after the summer peak; even if traffic delays are not immediately apparent, this does not mean that serious disruption will not occur, particularly at weekends and school holidays. And this is likely to prove a foretaste of the completed scheme.

The council should also be praised for reducing likely delays to bus services during construction. However a number of potential issues for bus services remain unresolved, and there is a strong likelihood buses will be potentially be badly affected by disruption to general traffic, and traffic seeking alternative routes (particularly in Queens Road).

Principle advantages of the Intermediate Alternative:

- This not only prevents all the problems buses are likely to face from the completed current proposals, but would actually be beneficial to bus services.
- It would substantially reduce (perhaps even eliminate) delays to general traffic caused by capacity reduction of the current completed proposals, so avoiding delays to buses beyond the 'bus lanes', and by traffic seeking less suitable alternative routes.
- It would maintain the current 'linear Gardens' concept, and arguably be even better for cyclists and pedestrians.
- While the design could be similar in relation to kerb-line, to the present design (to encourage early adoption). However changes should be seriously considered- which while maintaining the positive aspects of the scheme, could dramatically reduce delays during construction, and may even save money.
- **If the problems are as predicted; then changing the design now, it will avoid the potential considerable extra constructional delays and cost, caused by modifying the design, at a later date.**

Where this proposal fits in: The Intermediate Alternative, started life as the bus user group's March Minimum/minimal Alternative, and this remains the group's most likely outcome. The Intermediate Alternative then adds several ideas based on the group's earlier proposal, to solve the second major issue with the council's current proposal (the traffic restriction on the right-turn towards Church Street).

As well as solving the bus problems, the Intermediate Alternative aims to maintain all the positive cycling/ pedestrian measures of the current scheme, plus offers further positive ideas for cycling/pedestrian facilities.

Why not make the scheme as good as it can be? And more importantly **why not encourage, rather than discourage, vitally important bus services?**

Some other problems caused by the current proposal.

- (1) A perfect storm of problems, including- the narrow road, poor manoeuvring space, the Zebra crossing, taxi rank; are together likely to cause significant problems at the St. Peter's bus stop. So much so, if the current design proceeds; it is likely a number of bus services will need to be removed from these important bus stops (the nearest bus stop to Brighton Railway Station for many bus services).
- (2) The council is forcing all University/Lewes services, to use St. Peter's Church Place. Not only is this time consuming (possibly costing extra buses), and add to delays at the St. Peter's bus stops, but would also add to pressure on the London Road/St. Peter's Place junction.
- (3) At 0.8 metres less than standard road width; it is suggested that the 6.5 metre standard width for the bus lane- is too narrow. As well as increasing the risk of bus mirrors colliding, it gives buses little room for manoeuvre should someone accidentally step into the road.
- (4) Several other minor problems were noted, and resolved.

How the proposal will help resolve these problems: Starting with the Minimal Alternative.

The bus user group started by reintroducing real bus lanes on the west side of the valley. These would operate in one direction, giving very effective bus priority; yet have been designed to retain full access to properties. The direction of the bus priority alternates as it heads north (or south), preventing through traffic using the route. As general traffic is likely to be much lighter than under the current proposal, this would benefit the linear Garden principle, giving even easier access for pedestrians/cyclists from the west. The design will also prevent traffic being forced up very narrow Trafalgar Street.

It is suggested the 'bus etc.' road is at least 7 metres wide (preferably 7.3 metres), so solving the narrowness issue, which could also prove useful at the constructional stage. The design incorporates a much improved St. Peter's bus stop, preventing anticipated problems. This is further improved by northbound University/Lewes services (including many long bendy-buses), being moved to the east side of the church (maintaining the current much shorter/quicker routing for bus services).

A road south of St. Peter's Church:

To make this whole system work- providing real bus priority, retaining access to properties, and absolutely minimising traffic on the east side of the valley; it has been necessary to reopen an east-west route, south of St. Peter's Church. But for the following reasons, it will have little impact on pedestrians and cyclists; and little effect on the concept of a linear garden.

Firstly the 'road' would be mixed priority, similar to New Road (where pedestrians and cyclists have priority), and would not feel like a road.

Second traffic would be incredibly light. An observant pedestrian may have to wait three minutes to see an eastbound bus (plus some taxis). Westbound traffic could be even lighter, because the road doubles back on itself, it prevents through traffic, leaving just minimal genuine access traffic. East-west traffic really should be negligible.

As a well as further reducing problems at the St. Peter's bus stops, it avoids buses (including bendy-buses) needing to turning right into St. Peter's Place (saving considerable time). This is helped by the new northbound bus lane on the east side of the church. It will also reduce pressure on the St. Peter Place/London Road junction, and allow a much longer Toucan crossing time, for important Pedestrian/cyclist link, between the London Road shopping area and St. Peter's/Valley Gardens Linear Park.

Removal of the eastbound bus link along St. Peter's Place, will provide the road width to create a useful westbound bus lane, so avoiding the delays that *southbound* University/Lewes services will otherwise currently face, now the main A23 runs along St. Peter's Place. It also improves cycling facilities.

The intermediate Alternative continued:

While the intermediate Alternative started life as the Minimal/minimum Alternative; it also tackles the scheme's main traffic capacity issues- particularly the problem of southbound traffic capacity being approximately halved, as it heads towards the Church Street/Edward Street junction.

These problems are unlikely to be regarded as acceptable, with congestion problems even at quieter times of year. The council has all but admitted there could be a problem. So it is likely changes will need to be made to the proposed junction. So why not change it now!

How the intermediate proposal tackles the problem:

As there is insufficient road width for two southbound traffic lanes, and a separate right-turn lane, at the Church Street junction. Therefore to maintain the two (ahead) through lanes, the alternative proposes traffic wanting to turn right into Church Street, would instead turn right at the North Road junction (so avoiding problems at the Grand Parade/Church Street junction).

To achieve this, does require several major changes to the design.

First, a new separate right turn lane will be required in Grand Parade, north of North Road. To provide this space, a new 4.2 metre (northbound) single lane road would need to be created for the short distance between the North Road junction and Morley Street. As well as providing the space for the right turn lane, the second through lane would provide extra capacity for southbound traffic- so avoiding any capacity issues at the North Road junction (earlier Valley Gardens designs included a short second southbound traffic lane).

With regard to the new 4.2 metre road, the latest design angles this short road away from the tree roots of the important Elm Trees- preventing harm; and re-joins the existing carriageway near Morley Street, where there is a large gap in the trees.

To maintain junction capacity; the green signal for the southbound right turn- towards North Road, would be synchronised to be at the same time as both the North Road extension/Grand Parade exit, and the Pedestrian phase across Grand Parade. So preserving northbound traffic flow, which in turn retains the same long Toucan crossing phase, across the mouth of the North Road extension (the pedestrian/cycle phase is likely to be green, for excess of 70% of the time), so there is no need for an earlier idea of a pedestrian/cycle underpass.

Once the modest amount of traffic wanting to access Church Street, turns right towards North Road, it crosses the North Road extension, then heads south on the west side of the valley. While this is not particularly desirable, given the high level of self-enforcement from the Alternative, this means that overall, there is likely to be much less traffic on the west side, than under the current proposal!

There is a second advantage: if the great new Toucan crossing from the Pavilion grounds to the Valley Gardens Park is created (see page 6); the design diverts this traffic away from the crossing, making it even easier for pedestrians/cyclists to cross.

Further south: At the Church Street/Marlborough Place junction, a separate right turn lane would be provided, for traffic turning right into Church Street. This serves two functions:-

First, this would prevent vehicles turning right into Church Street from delaying southbound buses. Second, it would provide clear 'bus lane' road markings, preventing general from heading towards the Edward Street junction. The road between the Royal Pavilion gates, and the Edward Street junction would be bus (etc.) only, maintaining the existing bus priority through to the junction, which will be lost under the current proposals.

Even with no general traffic trying to get out from this exit, towards Edward Street; when the area become particularly congested, it will be difficult for buses to turn right onto Grand Parade, potentially causing notable delays to buses. To this end, a southbound mini bus lane would be provided, making it far easier for buses to merge with the general traffic stream. Also, assuming phase 3 goes ahead, it could also create the start of a southbound bus lane, through the junction.

continued

Flexibility within the proposal:

While the design remains basically the same, the positioning with relation the existing kerb-line could be different. The design could change most kerb-lines, in line with the council's plans, to encourage early adoption.

Alternatively, the kerb-line positioning could be modified to minimise disruption during the construction phase (and could save money): There are three ways this option, should dramatically reduce delays to traffic.

- (1) The main way it should greatly reduce delays, is changes to the road layout are only made when absolutely necessary (substantially reducing the amount of roadworks). Changes to Grand Parade, Richmond Place, and the eastern end of St. Peter's Place would be minimal. This is in complete contrast to current plans, which with a few notable exceptions, almost every kerb-line will be changed, causing substantial delays to traffic. It is also likely drainage will need to be adjusted or completely renewed, which can be very time consuming. The saving in construction time should be considerable, and could result in a net reduction in cost (even after the additional cost of the short 4.2 metre road is taken into consideration).
- (2) Because only a fraction of the current road network will need to be changed, so it would be far easier to schedule the roadworks, outside the seasonal peaks (Christmas, summer etc.), and the most 'delay inducing' roadworks could be scheduled, at the quietest times of year for traffic (especially January to April), to further reducing delays. The council has not even admitted that there are quieter times of year, let alone scheduled roadworks at these times.
- (3) As slightly more traffic lanes would be retained in the final scheme, it would be possible to do slightly more, without adversely affecting traffic flow.
With fewer changes to the existing road layout, it should also reduce the risk of cost overruns- remember Shelter Hall (West Street/seafront), where costs almost doubled!
- (4) It avoids narrow bus lanes: With the current planned 6.5 metres narrow bus lanes, if roadworks involved the whole of the single lane, then to give a safe working distance it may be necessary to close the whole 'bus corridor', causing substantial disruption to bus services, during the construction phase. At 7 metres (or hopefully 7.3 metres wide), it is hoped that the extra 0.5 (or 0.8) metre width will prove sufficient working space to maintain bus services, along the bus lane. Also there is a small concern bus priority could be removed during later construction phases. This would not be the case under the alternatives.

Walking, cycling and Linear Gardens:

Whatever option is chosen many factors remain sacrosanct. Ideas for the through Linear Gardens remain intact. The park's internal layout is expected to be unchanged. If the council chooses to remove major events such as 'the Ladyboys of Bangkok', and possibly affecting Brighton Fringe's 'The Warren', this is for the council to decide, and for others to object to.

More important all the planned cycle and pedestrian routes would be retained (or improved- see Gloucester Street below).

However to show the bus user group does not just think about bus issues, several (totally optional) pedestrian/or cycle improvements are suggested.

The first suggestion, is a new Toucan crossing, directly linking the Pavilion Gardens (and the south side of Church Street), with the main Valley Gardens linear park. This is a great improvement over the currently proposed dog-leg, two stage crossing.

The second suggestion is a greatly improved cycle crossing, across St. Peter's Place. By totally separating A23 northbound traffic, from A270 traffic, and improving the crossing; it would be possible at off-peak times for cyclist (and pedestrians) to cross St. Peter's Place/Richmond Place/Terrace junction, in a single movement. Something cycling groups have been keen to achieve.

It is suggested the Gloucester Street pedestrian crossing should be moved north of the junction, to better serve the bus stops, and offer a better direct pedestrian/cycle route between Richmond Parade and Gloucester Street.

As well as cycle improvements in St. Peter's Place; a westbound cycle lane is suggested in Marlborough Place/Church Street between Grand Parade and the Pavilion north gate. This would greatly improve westbound cycle access between Edward Street junction, and Church Street (and hence to Churchill Square/Western Road). This would avoid cyclists needing to use up to three Toucan crossings, to use the official cycle paths. Other minor cycling/pedestrian improvements are suggested. While recommended, these ideas remain optional, rather than essential, to the core proposal.

Conclusion:

The first principle objective of the Intermediate Alternative is to reverse the current negative aspects towards bus services. The fact the proposal would actually be beneficial to bus services, is a bonus. It would also almost totally avoid the congestion inducing aspects of the current proposal, especially at busier times of the week/year. This would mean motorists are less likely to seek alternative traffic routes, which could be so detrimental to bus services.

It would however maintain the positives of the current linear park scheme, especially for cyclists and pedestrians; with options to actually improve pedestrian and cycling facilities. And there is the potential to greatly reduce delays, during the construction period.

It may be suggested it is too late to make changes, but on the other hand, can the council justify not making these changes.

Assuming many of the concerns expressed here are fulfilled (and as the current poor design becomes more apparent); then there is likely to be considerable pressure on the council to make significant changes to the design, after the scheme is completed. This is likely to be at considerable extra cost and as the road has already been narrowed, could potentially be very disruptive to buses and other traffic.

It is still possible to act with hindsight, before it happens!

Peter Elvidge- August 2018