

Every Journey Matters?

Does smoothing traffic flow work for everyone?

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Introduction

Transport is one of the priorities for Londoners in the coming election for Mayor, and is the single policy area over which the Mayor has most influence. The terms of both Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson as Mayor are synonymous with transport initiatives – the congestion charge and public realm improvements (such as Trafalgar Square) under Ken Livingstone and the Boris Bikes and Boris Bus under Boris Johnson.

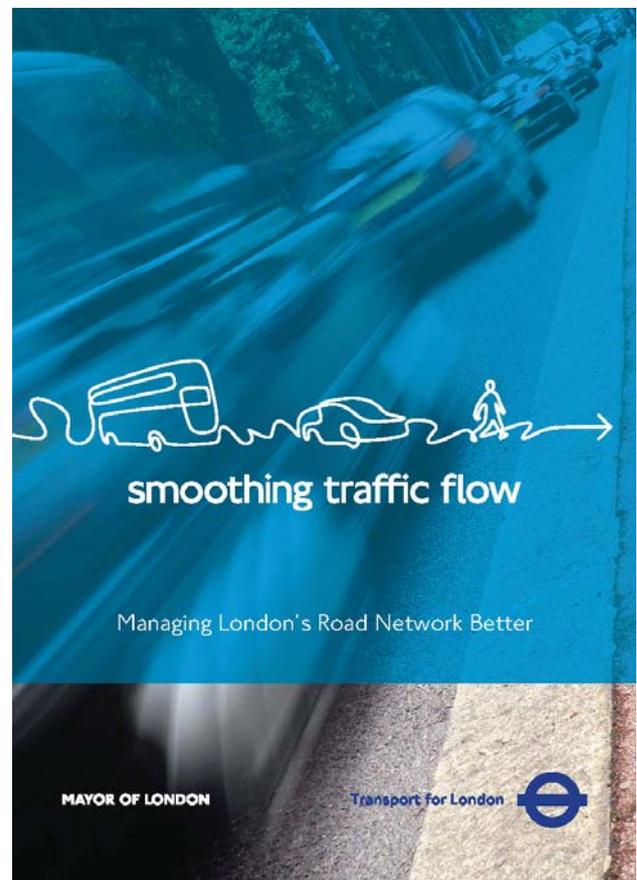
The policy that has arguably had most impact under Boris Johnson is less well reported. Boris Johnson introduced the Smoothing Traffic Flow initiative with the uncontroversial aim of managing London's road network better. However, the way it has been delivered in practice marks a return to 1960s' transport planning by the Greater London Council that put the movement of vehicles above the needs of pedestrians and cyclists. That approach failed to recognise the value of London's streets as public spaces, as places for shopping or sightseeing, or simply as places that people feel attached to in their neighbourhoods.

The Smoothing Traffic Flow approach is in principle uncontroversial. It has obvious benefits for buses and commercial vehicles as well as cars. But in practice it has involved choices that have tended to help speed up car journeys at the expense of the safety and convenience of cyclists and pedestrians. There is a danger of whoever is Mayor wanting to have it both ways – of seeking high quality public spaces, which are good for people on foot and bike, while also seeking to keep car and van drivers happy.

Creating safer conditions for walking and cycling is a matter that all candidates will have to address in the coming election. The question, urgent now but likely

to become more urgent as the population grows and the economy improves, is whether to pursue an approach that places the highest priority on facilitating car and other motor traffic or to cater for London as a city with high-quality public transport and safer conditions for many more journeys to be made on foot and by bike.

We want to see all mayoral candidates adopt measures to make London a world-class city with streets no longer dominated by traffic, where it is safe and enjoyable to walk or to cycle.



As the cover of this leaflet published by the Mayor and Transport for London (TfL) implies, the Mayor's policy is mainly about car travel. Many of the measures it contains concern the operation of traffic lights to increase the green time for traffic. Others are intended to reduce the disruption to traffic from road works.¹

Smoothing traffic and safety

Boris Johnson knows that safe conditions are essential if more people are going to walk and cycle. For example, the draft transport strategy, published in the year after his election, stated that: "Fears about personal safety are a significant barrier to starting or continuing cycling. Road enhancements such as advanced stop lines at junctions or improving conditions for cyclists on bridges would help address these fears by improving safety, as will on-going work with the freight industry to address HGVs and cycling safety."

He frequently asserts that cycling in London is becoming safer. The Guardian's transport correspondent, Gwyn Topham, does not agree: "Although Boris Johnson has been keen to push his image as a champion for cycling in London, the trend for safer cycling has reversed since he came into office. The TfL figures show, I calculate, a casualty for every 58,000 cycling trips in 2007 to a rate of about (a casualty for) every 49,000 in 2010 . . . While we don't have the numbers for the first three quarters of 2011 to make the same per trip comparison, the bare figures so far in London suggest it is set to be the worst annual toll since 2000."

Meanwhile there is growing evidence that Boris Johnson's intention of smoothing traffic flow is at odds with safe walking and cycling conditions and his own pro-walking and cycling policies. This can be shown by looking at specific locations that are notorious as hostile to pedestrians or as places where cyclists have lost their lives.

Smoothing traffic in practice in London's streets and squares

Parliament Square



Parliament Square is one of the main showcases for London to the world and one of the most visited places for tourists. Few would claim that it represents London at its best with crowded pavements and traffic surrounding the green space in the middle of the square. However, in August 2008, only four months after becoming Mayor, Boris Johnson cancelled plans for the part-pedestrianisation of Parliament Square saying: "There is **absolutely no sense in Londoners paying £18m from their already stretched transport budget in order to reduce capacity on London's roads . . . The last Mayor was famed for his love of blocking the traffic but this scheme was a step too far. We will now look at other, more imaginative ways of improving the square, without affecting traffic flow.**"³

By March 2012 new legislation and by-laws had been introduced to regulate protests and other activities in

Parliament Square but no change had been made to the traffic dominated roundabout that dominates this public space

King's Cross

Attention has focused on the one-way system that includes the junction of Gray's Inn Road, York Way, Caledonian Road and Pentonville Road where a cyclist was killed in a collision with a heavy goods vehicle in early October 2010.

The junction does not comply with TfL's own Cycle Design Standards. Moreover TfL had been warned about severe safety problems at this junction in a report of March 2008 that it had itself commissioned but failed to act upon and which was only made public following a Freedom of Information request. One of the key findings of the report was: "The pedestrian experience is further compromised by the sheer dominance and impact of traffic owing to its speed and the number of lanes it occupies."⁴

The Camden Cycling Campaign had asked for a cycle lane from Gray's Inn Road to York Way but was told by TfL that it would add to pressure on this already busy junction and cause delays for road users.

Elephant and Castle

This major intersection, a junction of six main roads, consists of two multi-lane roundabouts, a north and a south, connected by many more lanes of traffic. It has long been notorious as a hostile environment for pedestrians, accessible only by a maze of bleak underpasses, and as a particularly dangerous place for pedal and motor cyclists. The 89 road user casualties recorded by TfL at the northern roundabout in three years from 2008 to 2010 include one cyclist who was killed and six pedestrians, 36 pedal cyclists, 15 motorcyclists and 32 bus, taxi and car occupants injured. Two of the casualties were children.⁵

Changes have recently been made to the southern roundabout allowing pedestrian crossings at surface level⁶. However, proposals to improve the northern roundabout, which include making it a public square, have been resisted by TfL, "because it would interfere with the traffic flow too greatly", according to the Deputy Chief Executive at Southwark Council.⁷

Meanwhile Boris Johnson, as a cyclist as well as Mayor, claims that: "**Elephant and Castle . . . [is] fine. If you keep your wits about you, Elephant and Castle is perfectly negotiable.**"⁸

Blackfriars Bridge

For many cyclists and others, what happened at Blackfriars Bridge epitomises the serious shortcomings in TfL's approach to the provision of safe cycling. In 2003 a cyclist was killed while travelling north in a narrow central cycle lane between a bus lane and a general traffic lane. There was an outcry about the danger of the cycle lane. Just over a year later, and only two weeks after the cycle lane had been widened by 20 centimetres, another cyclist was killed in almost the same place. Over a thousand cyclists joined a memorial ride to the victim.

Amid growing protests and media interest in its failure to provide safe cycling facilities, TfL removed the central cycle lane overnight and commissioned a report on its procedures to improve cycling safety which was published in December 2004⁹. Four of the report's recommendations were that:

- Schemes be audited to determine their effects on cyclists
- Consultation procedures be improved
- TfL develop a strategy for assisting cyclists on bridges
- The consequences of introducing 20mph limits be investigated

TfL later promised that it would address the lack

of consideration for cycle users in road schemes, gaps in training for officers and inconsistent use of safety audits.

In 2006 TfL finally responded to the lobbying of cyclists' groups and installed a wider cycle lane on the side of the carriageway. 20mph speed limits were introduced as part of the works on Blackfriars Station. But, extraordinarily, in 2011 a new scheme was proposed without properly consulting cyclists. Said to be necessary to provide for pedestrians arriving at the renovated Blackfriars Station, it included more traffic lanes, shorter cycle lanes and a 30mph instead of a 20mph limit. Again there was uproar.

Despite the fact that by 2011 more cyclists were using the bridge in the morning peak than cars and taxis put together, a letter from TfL said they "had to bear in mind traffic flow across the bridge" and that "reducing the number of lanes on the bridge would greatly restrict traffic movement".¹⁰ At Mayor's Question Time Boris Johnson replied: "a speed limit of 20mph could be a serious impediment to smooth traffic flow" on Blackfriars Bridge.¹¹

A new scheme is now being installed on Blackfriars Bridge. Ignoring London Cycling Campaign proposals that would have reduced the impact of motor traffic and enhanced the public realm, this continues to treat the area as a major traffic route and intersection. Most cycling facilities will be retained but there will be no 20mph limit. TfL claims this is immaterial as average traffic speeds on the bridge are only 12mph anyway.

Bow Roundabout

The final junction considered here was the site of two recent cyclist fatalities and also became the focus of strong protest and media interest. The first cyclist, Brian Dorling, was killed in October 2011 only three months after the opening of Cycling Superhighway 2

(CS2) on which Bow Roundabout is located, and the second, Svitlana Tereschenko, less than three weeks later.

Bow Roundabout had been identified the year before by Jacobs Consultants, employed by TfL, as a place where high traffic volumes and speeds were a problem for cyclists¹². Among the recommendations made by the report was that Toucan crossings for pedestrian and cyclists should be installed on the north and south sides of the roundabout. The Mayor admitted not having seen the report and the recommendation was not followed when TfL implemented CS2.

The London Cycling Campaign had also warned TfL about the dangers of the Superhighway proposals "During a 2010 inspection ride, prior to the implementation of the Cycle Superhighway that connects with this junction, we warned TfL in the starkest terms of the dangers of left-turning vehicles, high traffic volumes and speeds, and the absence of provision for cyclists."¹³

Brian Dorling's widow told Tom Edwards, BBC Transport Correspondent: "[the] Mayor and TfL . . . need to sort the traffic flow out . . . they appear to have chosen speed of traffic over safety."¹⁴

Despite not having seen the Jacobs Consultancy report, the Mayor set the priority that TfL followed when responding to it. In May 2011 Boris Johnson told the London Assembly Member, John Biggs: "TfL have been unable so far to find an immediate solution for providing controlled at-grade pedestrian crossings at Bow Roundabout that does not push the junction over capacity and introduce significant delays to traffic."¹⁵

TfL is now considering proposals to improve the roundabout.

The present position

Concern about the danger of these major junctions is one of the factors calling into question the safety of the Mayor's Cycle Superhighways. This concern is shared by Steve Norris, Boris Johnson's predecessor as Conservative Mayoral Candidate: "I'm a huge supporter of more cycling in London . . . but I do think that we've got to look at the Cycle Superhighways and make sure they really are safe."¹⁶

Proposals for urgently needed improvements are at different stages of development for each of the locations described above (except Parliament Square for which, to our knowledge, there is no proposal). TfL has said that it hopes to proceed with improvements to Bow roundabout in April 2012. Other proposals may have to contend with a reluctance to make changes to the road network before the Olympics.

On 14 December 2011 a motion was unanimously carried by all 20 Greater London Assembly members present expressing "concern that some cyclist deaths and injuries could have been avoided if the road network designs for the locations where these deaths and injuries occurred had been safer" and calling on the Mayor and TfL, amongst other things, to:

- "Provide a comprehensive list of dangerous road junctions across London for cyclists, to include any where a cycling fatality has happened.
- Carry out a full review of each of these junctions, considering any proposals made by cycling and road safety groups on how to redesign these junctions to make them safer . . . and include details on why any suggestions have been rejected."¹⁷

Finally, on 8th February 2012 TfL announced that it would review cyclist safety at all junctions on the Cycle Superhighways and at major junctions on the Transport for London Road Network. Obviously it

is not yet known what improvements, if any, will be made. No funding for changes has been allocated and in any case, with the exception of the Bow roundabout, any junction improvements will have to wait until after the 2012 Games.¹⁸



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The conflict between safe pedestrian facilities and smoothing traffic flow

Pedestrians' interest groups are less well-resourced than cyclists' and provision for pedestrians is therefore less well scrutinised. Pedestrian activists suspect this allows TfL to feel that enquiries from pedestrians can more readily be ignored. Nevertheless there is evidence that pedestrians have also paid a price for smoother traffic flow.

Improving conditions for pedestrians does not appear to have enjoyed the same attention as improving conditions for motor traffic. According to figures supplied at the end of 2011 by TfL to London Assembly Member, Caroline Pidgeon, in response to a Freedom of Information request:

- 347 pedestrian crossings have no facilities for people who are blind or partially sighted in breach of long standing national accessibility standards
- 113 pedestrian crossings do not provide the minimum time for pedestrians to cross the road, and are also in breach of national standards

TfL's changes to traffic signals have been based, partly at least, on the results of a trial carried out on its behalf by TRL and published in a report of 2009¹⁹. The trial looked at the effects on pedestrians and other road users of reducing the green man (or invitation to cross period) at signal controlled junctions. These were some of the findings:

- There was an increase in the number of pedestrians who failed to comply with the signals and crossed on the red man or when no sign was illuminated
- Fewer pedestrians were satisfied with the time provided for crossing
- There was an increase in pedestrians with mobility impairments who felt rushed or unsafe. They also felt they had to wait a long time for the green man
- There was an increase in Grade 2 conflicts or 'near misses', defined as 'pedestrian deviating from route or vehicle undertakes controlled braking'
- The number of vehicles passing through the signal increased by 6.5 per cent

The report claimed that the short duration of the trial did not allow an evaluation of the safety implications but also that the trial results suggested that the timing of the changes was 'safety neutral' – an apparent contradiction. Despite these conclusions the report has underpinned TfL's review of traffic light timings.

The Mayor has asked TfL to step up its programme of reviewing traffic light signals and since April 2009 TfL has undertaken to review 1000 sets of signals a year. Between then and the end of Quarter 3 in this financial year, TfL reviewed 2,572 traffic lights. In 2009/2010 TfL connected traffic lights at 345 additional sites to SCOOT, an intelligent traffic control system which can alter signal timings to reduce stops and delays for traffic, and plans to connect 1000 more sites by 2015/2016.²⁰ Hitherto SCOOT has only been capable of detecting and adjusting traffic light timings in response to high motor traffic flows. According to a

recent report, TfL plans to trial making SCOOT capable of extending green man times when there are heavy pedestrian flows and to investigate adapting SCOOT to improve detection of cyclists²¹. If successful this could help redress the imbalance of the smoothing traffic flow project.

In addition, TfL has identified 145 sites where traffic signals are causing unnecessary delays and might be removed altogether or replaced with other measures to improve traffic flow²². Many of these are pelican crossings installed to provide pedestrians with a safe means of crossing heavily trafficked roads such as the Embankment or Curtain Road on the remaining part of the Shoreditch gyratory system. London Assembly member Val Shawcross has warned the Mayor against removing pedestrian crossings: **"Pelican crossings are there for the safety and convenience of people on foot but they make up half of the lights proposed for removal. If anything we need more safe places to cross busy roads; not less. Pensioners, those with disabilities and parents of young children might not shout as loud as car drivers but they're [the] ones who stand to lose out under these plans."**²³ Other pedestrian crossing facilities are being lost when traffic signals at road junctions are removed.

There is a common perception that pedestrian waiting times at traffic lights, and the time taken for a traffic signal to respond to a pedestrian pressing the button to cross, have been increasing, with a corresponding increase in the time allowed for vehicles. In response to a 2009 Freedom of Information request, TfL said it was "unaware of any studies on pedestrian 'wait' time exclusively in the UK".²⁴ Recently TfL's responses to enquiries about changes in pedestrian waiting times have not denied that these have occurred.²⁵ The public needs more information about this.

Information is also unavailable about pedestrian casualties at signalised crossings because, according

to the Mayor in answer to an Assembly Question: “It is not possible to identify the number of pedestrian casualties at or within five metres of signalised crossings as collisions are not coded to this level of accuracy.”²⁶

Finally . . .

The Traffic Management Act of 2004 placed a duty on traffic authorities including TfL and the boroughs to “secure the expeditious movement of traffic” (meaning goods and people, including pedestrians and cyclists) on the authority’s road network. This had the aim of securing the more efficient use of the road network and the reduction of congestion or other disruption to traffic movement.

A pledge to smooth traffic flow was the first of several pledges made in Boris Johnson’s 2008 Transport Manifesto. TfL subsequently amended this to a more broadly acceptable policy of increasing journey time reliability and maintained that smoothing traffic flow did not mean increasing road traffic capacity or sacrificing the interests of pedestrians or cyclists. But, in practice, smoothing traffic flow and increasing road capacity have become confused and a higher priority has been placed on motor traffic flow. The result is that pedestrian and cyclist interests have suffered.

As implemented, smoothing traffic flow does not allow for the most efficient use of the road network which, as many progressive cities have discovered, requires that the highest priority on increasingly scarce road space is given to the vehicles and modes that make best use of it: pedestrians, cyclists and buses. The policy has not even succeeded in TfL’s own terms and figures. Data for the journey time reliability of road traffic (a Strategic Outcome Indicator in the Mayor’s Transport Strategy) for 2010/11 and 2011/12 show a deterioration in the second year.²⁷

The challenge in the coming election is for candidates

to set out transport policies that see London as a concentration of places and spaces ripe for improvement through transport change, not primarily as corridors and thoroughfares for movement and traffic. This could transform not just London’s town centres, neighbourhoods and public spaces but its prospects for retail vitality, its attractiveness for tourism and its competitiveness as a location for business.

In comparison with TfL’s overall expenditure of about £8 billion and with current transport projects such as Crossrail or Tube Modernisation, the costs of embarking on even a major programme of pedestrian and cyclist improvements on the main road network would be modest. Campaign for Better Transport has proposed a £100 million London Suburbs Transport Fund to allow ambitious and creative transport schemes to proceed in many of the outer London boroughs where the need is greatest.²⁸ Making additional funds of this magnitude available across the TfL road network could start to create the sort of conditions for walking and cycling now taken for granted in many other European cities.

Campaign for Better Transport
April 2012

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Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

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