



REPORT OF THE FOCUS GROUPS ON THE TRAFFIC SYSTEM AT ARCHWAY

1. INTRODUCTION

The Better Archway Forum organised a set of focus groups in August 2005 on the transport and road ideas presented in the Council's consultation on the redevelopment of Archway in Spring 2005¹.

Two ideas were discussed - Option 2, a two way system with the buses stopping in a bus-only area in Lower Highgate Hill and Option 3, a different two way system creating a new road across the Archway site and a piazza between the Island and the Tower.

Focus groups are a well developed and reliable method for establishing the attitudes and views of people. They do not produce statistical data – this requires a representative sample of a larger number of people. However they are an excellent way of finding out the full range of issues relating to the subject of interest, establishing what people think are the most important of these, giving explanatory reasons for their views, and asking for the solutions they see as appropriate to problems. It is not possible to collect this type of detailed information in statistical surveys.

We held six groups in the area affected by the Archway Gyrotory, with an average of 6 people in each group. They were organised by a BAF member with previous experience in research and consultation methods. Three groups were with social housing residents, one with Junction Road traders and two with people who lived in privately owned or rented housing. There was a good geographical spread, with four of them living near or working near the proposed site and two in more outlying areas. All members of the residents' groups lived within the borough of Islington.

¹ BAF conducted an initial set of groups on the development of Archway in Spring 2005, to supplement the Council's consultation exercise. It was not possible to cover the transport issues in this exercise, because this would have made the sessions too long.

Rather more women than men attended the groups. The age spread was from older young people to pensioners. Many had lived in the area for a long time. Ethnic minority people were well represented, and included Asians, West Indians, Greek Cypriots, Irish, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, and Mauritian. There were three registered disabled residents.

Most of the participants had also taken part in the first set of focus groups, with the exception of the Miranda Estate residents. Only two of the participants were members of the Better Archway Forum – the rest being unconnected with it at the time of recruitment. A common topic guide was followed in all the groups, and they were led by a moderator who did not express his/her own opinion and encouraged everyone to take part.

2. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Preferences of the groups for change to the gyratory system

Three of the six groups had a clear preference for Option 2. Only a few people supported Option 3; these were members of a fourth group which was split between the two options. The members of a fifth group expressed no preference and the sixth did not want either. The groups who wanted Option 2 thought that it was simpler and cheaper to implement than Option 3, which was seen as complicated, disruptive and expensive. Those who wanted Option 3 in the divided group said that although it was expensive and disruptive, it could allow for more extensive and imaginative improvements to the site.

The group which did not want either scheme said that the existing layout with some improvements was preferable. They thought this should have been offered as an option in the consultation (which offered only the status quo as Option 1).

Other ideas suggested included an underpass, putting the A1 traffic through the Island, and running the proposed new road through the Mall area.

Present problems with the gyratory

All the groups except one said there were problems with crossings and danger for pedestrians. Bus and tube interchange was also seen as a problem and there was serious congestion and pollution at the gyratory.

All groups thought that the problems ought to be sorted out quickly.

Option 2

Four groups thought access to the Island and pedestrian safety would improve with Option 2. Access to public transport and interchange would also be better with the new bus stopping area, but the two estate groups did not want this because they said it would be more difficult for their residents to reach the buses. Opinion was divided over whether this option would reduce congestion.

Of those who expressed a view on the impact on site development, Option 2 was seen as less disruptive and cheaper to put in. It could be done more quickly than option 3, without the involvement of a developer. Three groups said that a piazza could still be provided with this option in the main part of the site.

Option 3

Three groups thought the new piazza would be safer and pleasanter for pedestrians, and improve access to the Island. However the proposed new road through the site would be dangerous for pedestrians, divisive for the area, and disruptive for local businesses. Opinion was divided on the pedestrianisation of Junction Road. There were also concerns about the loss of part of the Archway Park - this was particularly unpopular with people living nearby.

Opinion was divided about the impact of this option on traffic congestion and some groups thought it would not improve bus and tube interchange.

One group commented that Option 3 had been made to sound the most attractive scheme in the consultation document, and another said they were impressed with Option 3 until they thought in more detail about it in the group.

Vorley road bus stand

There were serious problems with noise, pollution and danger to pedestrians from the buses for the Girdlestone estate residents. They and several other groups wanted the stand to be located elsewhere in the area. Other solutions such as roofing the stand, more control of driver behaviour and reducing the number of buses stopping there were also suggested.

Council consultation methods

Most groups commented negatively on the way the Council consults residents, including non-delivery of questionnaires, lack of choice and bias. The groups suggested more open meetings, doorstep canvassing and earlier involvement of residents.

3. THE RESULTS OF THE DISCUSSIONS

PROBLEMS WITH THE CURRENT GYRATORY SYSTEM

Pedestrians

Five groups said that pedestrians have difficulty making crossings especially to the Island and St John's Way . A lot of detours and multiple crossings are involved. However one group said crossings were not a problem. Three said there were dangers for pedestrians, although one of these blamed pedestrians for taking risks, and the bad behaviour of car drivers rather than the system. One group mentioned danger for children and older people in particular, and another for people leaving the Tavern and club on the Island at night. One group thought the lights were too short for pedestrians. The poor access to the Island meant that the shops there lose trade. A further danger to pedestrians was traffic turning left from Holloway Road into Junction Road to avoid the gyratory.

Public Transport

Interchange between and access to buses and tube was seen as a problem by by three groups. However the positioning of the bus stops was seen as convenient by two groups (who lived on the estates near the site), because although they are far apart, they are convenient for residents carrying heavy shopping. One group thought the positioning of bus stops was confusing.

Traffic

The main problem for traffic on and around the gyratory was congestion, although the reasons given for this differed. Three groups blamed the two way system in Holloway Road, made worse by the buses stopping there. Also mentioned were double parking by the buses in Junction Road, the switching of lanes at the bottom of Archway Road, and the installation of double bus lanes, which were seen by one group as a money making exercise by the Council. People also park in bus lanes after hours. One group mentioned the fact that buses have to make a lot of turns around the gyratory.

Several groups mentioned the high levels of pollution as a problem.

Should these problems be sorted out quickly?

All the groups thought this would be a good idea, but one said it depended on there being a good solution.

DISCUSSION OF OPTIONS PRESENTED IN THE LBI CONSULTATION

OPTION 2 - Two way system with buses stopping in a bus only area in Lower Highgate Hill

Impact on pedestrians

Four groups thought access to the Island and pedestrian safety would be better with Option 2. Some suggested that pedestrian safety could be further improved by building a footbridge or putting in pinch points with lights at either end of the proposed bus stop area. One group said that if the underpass were to be made safer, this would also help. Another said that there was no need to improve matters for pedestrians, and that cameras should be installed at crossings to enforce better behaviour and stop people taking risks.

Pollution levels were seen as being reduced only by the groups who thought the two-way system would improve traffic flow (vi). No one objected to the removal of the triangle in Sandford St, and one group welcomed it as the area had been a magnet for street drinkers in the past.

Impact on traffic and public transport

Relocation of the bus stops was seen as improving transport accessibility and interchange by four groups. However the estate groups said it would make it more difficult for their residents to access public transport, although it was suggested that some bus stops could be retained a bit further down Junction Road and St John's Way. One group wondered whether Lower Highgate Hill could take all the buses. Another thought the Vorley Road stand might be used for bus stops instead of Lower Highgate Hill (see section on the bus stand below). One group said that the improved interchange would make it easier for people changing at Archway to use the shops.

Opinion was divided on whether this option would increase congestion, with two groups saying it would lessen it, and three thinking it would make it worse or make no difference. Those who thought congestion would increase said it would mean more traffic in the side streets. One group suggested a pilot project to find out. Reasons given by those who said it would reduce congestion were the removal of the bus stops from Junction Road and the possibility of removing the bus lanes. Also, if the drivers changed in Lower Highgate Hill this would remove the hold-ups caused by this taking place in Holloway and Junction Roads. One group said they did not have the expertise to decide, and wanted more information.

Impact on development of the Archway Site

Four groups expressed a view on this. They felt that Option 2 would be less disruptive for the area, that it would be simple and cheap to put in and that it could be done quickly. One group said that the scheme was possible without the involvement of a developer. Another said that they did not want a big development on the site, and felt that Option 2 would be better because it need not entail large scale demolition. One group expressed doubts about whether Transport for London would be able to fund the scheme in the next three years.

OPTION 3 – RADICAL ROAD REALIGNMENT

Impact on pedestrians and residents

Three groups thought the new piazza would make the area safer and pleasanter for pedestrians, and improve access to the Island, but there was concern that the proposed new road through the site would create another danger area for them, as they would have to cross it to go from one part of the site to the other. One group remarked that it gets rid of one island and creates another. Three groups also noted that a piazza could still be created without implementing Option 3 eg. by opening up the Mall area. One group commented that the Option 3 piazza would be very shady.

One group thought that the impact of the new road would be huge on local facilities and businesses. It cuts the site in two (“cuts the heart out”) and the disruption would be very great for everyone.

Two groups were happy with the pedestrianisation of Junction Road, but another two were not. One of these was the traders’ group who did not like the idea because no one would be able to stop in their cars and there would be a loss of trade. They saw it as suitable only for retail areas in the centre of town.

Three groups expressed a view about the loss of part of the Archway Park. One group, representing the residents of the Miranda Estate which borders the park, were very concerned about this, because of the value of the open space to the area, and the loss of trees. They were very unhappy at the idea of running the road across part of the park because it would bring pollution and noise much closer to their homes, and, for those who had bought them, reduce the value of their properties. The second group did not understand why it was necessary, and said it would break up the land area and increase pollution. The third group did not mind losing part of the park – although they lived locally, some members did not know it was there!

Impact on traffic and public transport

Two groups thought that Option 3 would not reduce congestion, one said it would be worse, and one that it might possibly be better. If the buses stopped in the new road, this would create congestion.

Two groups thought that Option 3 was not as good as Option 2 for transport interchange. One said that not all the buses would be able to stop in the new road eg. those coming down Archway Road into Holloway Road would have no exit back on to their routes. One group was not clear about where the buses were supposed to stop.

Impact on the development of the site

Three groups said that Option 3 would mean a lot of demolition and rebuilding and two of these did not want this. One of the latter did not want the developer to pay for part of the cost of the new road, because they would have to compensate for this by making more profit from the site, to the public detriment. Two other groups thought that only some of the buildings would have to come down, and one of these said there were advantages because the scheme created a pedestrian piazza and combined the site and the Island. Two said that Option 3 would be divisive, splitting the site in two.

Two groups said that Option 3 would make it unlikely that the road system could be sorted out quickly, because it would have to wait for the main development of the site to be finished. The others did not express a view on this point.

Preferences of the groups for the two options

Three groups had a clear preference for Option 2, one was divided between the two schemes, another did not like either of them, and the last did not express a preference. The groups who wanted option 2 thought that it was simpler and cheaper to implement than Option 3, which was complicated, disruptive and expensive. Those in the divided group who wanted option 3 said that although it was expensive and disruptive, it could allow for more extensive and imaginative improvements to the site. However, this group found it a difficult choice. They also said that Option 3 had been made to sound the most attractive scheme in the consultation document, and another group said they were impressed with Option 3 until they thought in more detail about it in the group.

The group which did not want either scheme expressed the view that the existing layout with some improvements was preferable. They thought this should have been offered as an option in the consultation (which offered only the status quo as option 1). This was also the group who lived closest to the gyratory, and had said that there were fewer problems than the other groups.

OTHER IDEAS ABOUT IMPROVING THE GYRATORY

One group thought the A1 traffic might go through the centre of the Island. They said this was the case in the past, and that the Close shops are not very old. The same group suggested a modification of Option 3 which would put the new road through the mall, thus making the new island much smaller, and restricting it mainly to the Tube Station. Another two groups suggested an underpass, although this would cause a lot of disruption and perhaps was not possible because of the tube line.

VIEWS OF THE BUS STAND IN VORLEY ROAD

The main problems were for the residents in the Girdlestone Estate and the Early Years Centre, who suffer from noise, pollution, buses speeding and danger to pedestrians, much of this late into the night. There were worries from one group about danger from the buses turning out of Vorley Road. One group did not think there were any problems, but they did not live near the stand.

Solutions suggested were relocation to the bus garage, particularly supported by the Girdlestone Estate residents. This might be located in Pemberton Gardens, Station Road or the former filling station site on Junction Road. There should also be measures to control the behaviour of the bus drivers such as a tannoy asking them to turn off their engines. A reduction in the number of buses could also help eg. by getting the Highgate buses to stop over in the village. There was also a suggestion to roof over the stand to reduce noise and make it warmer for the drivers.

VIEWS OF THE COUNCIL'S CONSULTATION METHODS

Most comment was negative and included the late and partial distribution of the recent questionnaire, the bias built into it, the restricted choices given, a perceived unwillingness to engage in dialogue, and that the Council had already made up their minds.

The groups thought there should be more open meetings, canvassing on the doorstep, and early involvement to discuss ideas before plans were made.

Two groups did not comment.

**Better Archway Forum
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