

The Cockburn Association Annual Report 2014

Transport Committee

Convener - John Fleming

General Overview

Transport remains a crucial part of the work of the Cockburn Association. Edinburgh has the unenviable reputation – reported each year by TomTom, the sat-nav firm – of being in the top five most congested cities in the UK. As we at the Cockburn Association know, building more roads is not the answer. The solution lies in providing attractive and sustainable alternatives to individual motor transport – public transport (buses, trams, and trains), promoting walking and cycling, and, yes, even taxis – they all have a part to play.

It is hard to tell from the TomTom press release whether the measured congestion that they report is of traffic moving solely within the city, of traffic crossing the city boundary or moving around it, or some amalgam of the two.

Those of us fortunate to be able to live within the city are somewhat insulated from the daily grind faced by many Edinburgh commuters. Daily, the car commuters hear of “traffic already queuing past Admiralty, delays of 15-20 minutes”, “traffic slow from Gilmerton to Dreghorn”, and join the dispiriting queues to pass the regular pinch points at the City Bypass at Sheriffhall, Hermiston and Newbridge to name but three. Those commuting by train, amongst whom our own Director from Aberdour station, are often faced with a sea of faces at the door of a short-formed train (if the train has not been cancelled), and wonder whether anyone is willing to, or even able to, move aside sufficiently to allow them on to the train.

Edinburgh is the victim of its own success as one of the job creation hotspots in Scotland, home to a new government still exploring the limits to its power and influence, as well as the more long-established sources of employment in the law and financial services, and tourism and education.

The report by the Strategic Planning & Environment Committee will tell separately, and in greater detail, of the planning deadlock resulting from the political failure of City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) to agree, for the second time, on a Local Development Plan that will direct where, and how many, housing sites are made available between now and the early 2030s.

That, then, much simplified, is the transport problem facing our city. What developments are planned for public transport, what these could do to alleviate congestion, and what more do we think could be done?

Where we now are

First, a quick *tour d’horizon* of current developments on public transport.

1. Bus and tram

In Lothian Buses – uniquely, municipally owned – we are fortunate in having one of the country’s (the UK’s) leading bus operators. They already have one of the youngest bus fleets in the country, 100% low-floor and accessible, and are continuing to invest in new equipment to allow increased frequencies on many routes, and to lower their so-called “carbon footprint”. To follow on from their existing low emission hybrid buses, they will, in 2016, introduce a new design capable of running through the entire city centre on battery power alone.

2014 saw the creation of Transport for Edinburgh, which “provides integrated transport across Edinburgh”, and includes Edinburgh Trams and Lothian Buses as operating units; Transport for Edinburgh declares its vision as “to provide a seamless and high quality transport choice for residents and visitors to our city”.

Current, official passenger numbers and operating profit figures to update those given by Lawrence Marshall in last year's Transport Committee report are not available, as, with the formation of TfE, Lothian Buses has moved to a 31 March year-end. A press release by Ian Craig in December 2014 spoke of bus passengers up by 3 million, at 118 million; he also spoke of tram passenger numbers as around 3 million in the first seven months of operation, ahead of early projections. Lawrence reported that Lothian Buses carried 29% of all journeys to work in Edinburgh in 2013, but, for reasons given above, an update of this market share is not possible.

Edinburgh's press have been quick to seize on every piece of bad news on the trams – “good news never sells newspapers” – but, on the whole, the first ten months of tram operation have gone well. On the positive side, the system has been safe and mostly reliable, and Ingliston, the only park-and-ride served by the tram has been highly successful in attracting car drivers out of their cars. On the other hand, certain features still offer room for improvement, notably (i) street running, especially how the tram interacts with traffic signals, and (ii) resiliency, how quickly normal operation is recovered after disruption. It is unfortunate that the air conditioning equipment was deleted during construction.

We are accustomed to Lothian Buses scoring near the top of the national averages for passenger satisfaction, but it is welcome that, in their first passenger satisfaction survey to include Edinburgh Tram, Passenger Focus rates them well above the UK national average on all five measures of satisfaction.

Love it or loathe it, Edinburgh has a tram line, albeit an incomplete one, and, inevitably, questions start to arise on whether and when the line might be completed. At their December 2014 meeting, CEC did discuss “Future Investment in Public Transport – Potential Tram Extension”. Amongst other points to be noted from this meeting were the key dates for expiry of the powers granted by the “Edinburgh Tram (Line One) and (Line Two) Acts (2006)”. Powers to acquire land expire on 7 May 2016 (Line One) and 26 April 2021 (Line Two); powers to start construction expire in March 2021 (Line One) and March 2026 (Line Two). It was said in the “Future Investment . . .” paper that all of the land required for completion of Line One to Newhaven is already owned by CEC, but that any other necessary remaining compulsory purchase orders in connection with Line One would have to be served before 7 May 2016. Officers are to report back to CEC on a business case for completion of Line One in “late spring 2015”. No Parliamentary powers exist for Line Three, south from the city centre to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, then splitting to Dalkeith and Musselburgh.

One further factor to be noted is the enquiry by Lord Hardie into the Trams project, ordered by Scottish Ministers in mid-2014, and later made statutory. It is unclear whether significant progress could be made on extending the tram line beyond York Place until the issue of Lord Hardie's final report, though he has said that he may issue an interim report. No date is available for either of these reports.

2. Rail

As with Lothian Buses, we in Scotland can count ourselves fortunate in the investment environment in which our rail services operate, considerably more favourable than in the major North of England cities, where continued lack of rail investment over decades has become a major political issue in the election campaign.

a) EGIP

Funding has been made available to electrify the main lines in Central Scotland, within the triangle bounded by Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dunblane, and to authorise the purchase of 70 new electric trains to run on these upgraded lines. The “Edinburgh to Glasgow Improvement Project” (EGIP) has a budget of £ 742 million, and will be complete by 2019. Its major features are:

- Journey times from Edinburgh to Glasgow reduced by 20%, from 52 to 42 minutes
- Train lengths increased from six cars to seven or eight
- Redevelopment of Queen Street and Haymarket stations; major improvements at Waverley

- New station at Gogar (Edinburgh Gateway) giving interchange from the Fife line to the tram

Nevertheless, EGIP was considerably de-scoped before permission to proceed was granted. Features lost included:

- i. the ten-minute frequency, with a headline time to Queen Street of under forty minutes, abandoned for longer trains on quarter-hourly frequency,
- ii. the “Almond Chord” to provide an alternative route between Linlithgow and Haymarket, deemed no longer necessary after the abandonment of the ten-minute frequency, and
- iii. other fixed structures that would have contributed greatly to operability.

The redevelopment of Haymarket, anticipating a doubling in passenger numbers, to 10 million by 2028, is already complete. Changes at Waverley include two new platforms, and one significantly extended, as well as other improvements to operability.

b) Borders Railway

The Borders railway will restore the rail link between Edinburgh and the Scottish Borders that closed in 1969. It will run between Edinburgh and Tweedbank, though Borders Rail campaigners are already pressing for the line to be extended to Hawick and Carlisle. The project is reported to be on time, and within its £ 294 million capital budget. Public services will start on 6 September 2015, offering a half-hourly frequency taking just under an hour between Edinburgh and Tweedbank.

That the project is coming in under budget is due to considerable de-scoping of the original project, the elimination of long sections of double track and reduction of several significant structures. Expert opinion is that the de-scoping has greatly reduced the operating flexibility of the line. If all trains stick near-perfectly to timetable, everything will be fine, but, should even one train become only slightly delayed, or additional trains, for example steam specials, be introduced, the opportunity to recover time is very limited. Future restoration of the elements eliminated to save capital will, of course, be much more costly than the savings made during construction, besides being disruptive to an already fragile service.

There is already visible evidence of increased house building in communities along the route of the Borders Railway.

c) Franchise changes

All three rail franchises operating in Scotland have changed hands recently. ScotRail has split into two parts; Abellio, a subsidiary of Nederlandse Spoorwegen, the Dutch national rail company, won the bid to operate the majority of the ScotRail franchise, and the sleeper services have moved to a new, dedicated operator, Caledonian Sleepers, operated by Serco. Virgin Trains East Coast, a consortium of Stagecoach (90%) and Virgin (10%) is the new operator of the East Coast main line, taking over from state-owned East Coast, who operated the route after the failure of the last private franchisee, National Express. All three new operators have proposed significant service improvements in their bids.

- **Abellio**

Besides being responsible for introducing the two major improvements already outlined, EGIP and Borders Railway, Abellio intend to raise service standards, a major factor in their winning the bid over incumbent First Group. In particular, they will introduce refurbished High Speed Trains on the routes from Edinburgh and Glasgow to Aberdeen and Inverness, answering complaints that the Class 170 units now in use were just not suitable for journey lengths of more than two hours. Their bid for the ScotRail franchise priced the option to introduce a local service between Edinburgh and Berwick. This would bring service to Dunbar up to the level enjoyed by North Berwick, and add two new stations at East Linton and Reston.

- **Caledonian Sleepers**

Serco has just signed a contract to renew completely the fleet of sleeper trains, the new stock due in service in 2018. Catering will be improved, and the accommodation on offer will be broadened, from en-suite showers at the top end, to aircraft-style reclining seats at the cheaper end.

- **Virgin Trains East Coast**

VTEC will also introduce new trains during their franchise, with new IEP (Intercity Express Programme) trains arriving during 2018, delivery complete by 2020. VTEC also plan to increase the frequency of trains to London to twice hourly. This will necessitate the construction of two new platforms at Waverley, occupying the site of the passenger drop-off area and the taxi rank, closed to all traffic in May 2014. It remains to be seen how this plan for increased frequency on the East Coast line can be reconciled with Scottish Government's ambition for ScotRail to introduce local services making three stops between Drem and Berwick.

3. Cycling

Considering the hilly nature of Edinburgh, it is surprising that so many journeys are made by bike, given by Lawrence a year ago as 7% of all journeys to work, and 2% of all journeys. With the objective of increasing these percentages further, City of Edinburgh Council has continued its work of improving cycle routes around Edinburgh. One notable initiative to be commended is the trialling of secure bike storage; this is intended to overcome the theft risks and tensions that arise with storage of bikes in tenement stairs, a significant disincentive to cycling.

4. Walking

It is easy to overlook that walking is still the commonest form of transport with the city, 19% of all journeys to work, and 35% of all journeys within Edinburgh. This figure includes only the population surveyed, which does not include the huge number of tourists that visit our city. Edinburgh's Living Streets group has recently re-grouped, with an objective of improving the pedestrian environment, which, we feel, leaves a lot to be desired.

5. Car

Two significant developments are worth noting:

- i. the adoption of legislation to apply a 20 mph speed limit to large parts of Edinburgh, though the schedule of which streets will be affected is still to be finalised, and
- ii. the opening of the Queensferry Crossing is due in 2016. No date has yet been given for the opening, except that it could be before the current planned date in December that year.

How transport developments could affect congestion in Edinburgh

Where will Edinburgh be in TomTom's congestion ranking in a decade from now? "A decade from now" sounds a very long time, but, in the context of planning, funding and executing public transport improvements, it is but the blink of an eye. We urge those who govern us to plan properly for public transport on long horizons, not just on the cycle of the next election.

Some of these developments outlined above have the potential to be positive for Edinburgh's congestion, others quite negative. Most egregiously, the Queensferry Crossing will be a more efficient, and much pleasanter way (who will miss the deck joints of the old bridge?) of crossing the Forth. But, where will the traffic go once it has crossed the Forth more efficiently and more pleasantly? Will the old bridge, a Category A listed structure, really remain restricted to buses, taxis and cyclists? We wait for answers to these questions.

On the more positive side, we foresee that enhanced capacity for rail commuting, from East Lothian, from the Borders, and from West Lothian and further west, may ease pressure on housing within the city boundaries, and also reduce somewhat the pressure to release building land within Edinburgh's greatly threatened Green Belt. Improved

public transport will act as a nucleus for housing development at Dunbar, East Linton and other towns served by the East Coast line; housing development is already under way at towns on the Borders Railway such as Newtongrange and Gorebridge.

Perhaps the most revolutionary development is planned for Winchburgh, forecast to grow from its current population of 2,000 to well over 10,000. This will necessitate construction of a new station on the Edinburgh to Glasgow line, and the introduction of a new junction on the M9.

The Cockburn Association believes that the Edinburgh Tram also has its part to play in increasing the attractiveness of public transport. While the tram is still overcoming the huge negative reputation that it acquired during construction, it is evidently reliable, safe and comfortable, and, as the healthy patronage at the Ingliston park-and-ride stop demonstrates, is able to attract car users through its doors. While it remains one truncated line, its contribution to moving people around our city will, however, remain small.

What we wish could be done better

1. Low cost improvements to tram operation

As mentioned above, any proposal for improvement to the Edinburgh Tram that involves large capital outlay is unlikely to succeed, at least for the time being. The Transport Committee believes, however, that there may be small alterations that could be made at little or no cost that might improve the performance of the line.

One criticism often made is that, outside peak hours, the journey time on the tram from Haymarket to the airport is frequently slower than on the Route 100 bus. On one hand, the tram stops at each stop, regardless of whether people are waiting to alight or to board; on the other hand, the 100 express bus does what buses do, and stops on request.

Members of the Transport Committee have done small-scale traffic surveys on the tram to see how heavily used the intermediate stops are, especially Murrayfield and Gogarburn. They plan to collect more data, but would urge the management of Edinburgh Tram to be prepared to designate certain of the intermediate points as request stops.

2. Change of mode, tram to bus, tram to rail

The majority of the tram stops seem to have been designed to make changing modes, between tram and either bus or train, as inconvenient as possible. Tram to train interchange at Haymarket is good, as it is at Edinburgh Park, and it is hoped, also at Edinburgh Gateway (Gogar). Tram to bus interchange at Haymarket is also good, though with only two Lothian Bus routes. Elsewhere, the tram passenger intending to change to bus or train has a walk of at least 100 metres, which is disappointing, given the many examples of good practice available in other cities.

Improving this is not a cost-free option. Cockburn Association urges only that Edinburgh Tram accepts how inadequate current arrangements are, and how much better they might be made on any further tram extension.

3. Taxi access to Waverley

The story of the progressive elimination of cars, and then taxis, from “under the roof” at Waverley is too long and tortuous to be repeated here. Suffice to say, private cars and taxis have been excluded from the station. The only identifiable benefit to the rail traveller is that Network Rail will use the space once occupied by the drop-off area and the taxi rank to construct two new platforms and extend one other, all of which should improve train operability, and make boarding trains to London and Glasgow a more pleasant experience.

The downside for the rail traveller is having to queue in Edinburgh’s often hostile climatic conditions under North Bridge, bringing to mind G K Chesterton’s description of an umbrella, “at best, an inadequate tent”. To the newly arrived visitor, the taxi queuing arrangements are perplexing, the taxis facing the wrong direction for most of their fares.

The Cockburn Association urges the parties involved, Network Rail, City of Edinburgh and the Edinburgh taxi operators to put their heads together to produce a workable solution. Here, too, the best solution may not be cost-free, but this impression of our city to arriving visitors is one that no-one in the city should tolerate. The Cockburn Association intends to approach the Edinburgh taxi trade to ask for their ideas of how matters might best be improved, and whether anything might be gained through working together.

Taxi access at Haymarket is also less than satisfactory, but Waverley is so dreadful that it should remain our main priority.

4. Pedestrians – “the Walkable City”

As I outlined above all the capital projects under way for other forms of transport, rail electrification, reopened rail lines, new buses, and a new bridge over the Forth, the pedestrian – remember, 35% of all journeys within the city – could be forgiven for asking: “what’s in this for me?”

Very little, is the answer. A recent visit to London served to demonstrate how far behind Edinburgh lags in high-quality public realm investment. At the risk of appearing repetitious, solutions here are not cost-free, but, again, the impression that our city presents is well short of that to which we should aspire.

As mentioned earlier, Living Streets has re-activated its Edinburgh group. As they write on their website, Edinburgh, with its relatively high-density population could be an exemplar of a pedestrian-friendly city. Too often, the gap between aspiration and practice is just too large.

In conclusion

There is much to welcome in the transport environment, but little about which to be complacent. The Cockburn Association’s Transport Committee consists of individuals who share this interest, and I take this opportunity to thank my fellow committee members, Bill Cantley, James Cook and Lawrence Marshall, and Marion, our director, who calls the meetings and sits through the discussions of a group of self-confessed transport nuts. We have room for more members on our committee, and would welcome those who share our interest to join us.