

The Cockburn Association AGM 2016

Transport Committee Report



General Overview

“Plus ca change, plus c’est la même chose”. And, so it appears to be with transport in Edinburgh. Headlines from mid-March 2016 in the local press – “Edinburgh named one of the most congested cities in the UK”, and “Edinburgh road (the A8 from the West end to the Maybury) is the worst commute in Britain” – might have been written in 2015 when the Transport Committee report led with an almost identical headline.

Why is Edinburgh so congested? And what could be done about it?

As we wrote in last year’s Transport Committee report, and as our colleagues on the Planning and Environment Committee will write in their report this year, Edinburgh is experiencing extreme pressure on housing, with certain types of housing largely unaffordable for those who work in the city. This results in a large, and growing number of Edinburgh workers commuting daily from outside the city. If public transport does not offer the ideal solution, it can be all too easy to fall back to the very worst option, commuting in a single-occupancy private car.

The Cockburn Association has long said that the answer is NOT to build more roads. We feel that the answer should be upon:

1. increasing the provision of public transport,
2. making it more appealing to use, and
3. using public transport to lead major developments, rather than providing it later, when travel patterns have already become entrenched.

Bus and Tram

Improving the capacity of Edinburgh’s bus network presents challenges. Adding more buses to the route may not bring much benefit, given how congested Edinburgh’s city centre streets already are at peak times. Bus dwell times – the time taken to load and put down passengers – may offer the biggest scope for improvement. Those familiar with “touching in” to a bus in London with their Oyster card, will appreciate just how slow bus boarding is in Edinburgh. The time to read an Oyster card is 250-300 milliseconds (0.25-0.30 seconds); compare that with the time taken in Edinburgh for a cash fare payment (now eliminated in London) or to read a RidaCard or Concession Card.

Public transport priority measures, such as more bus lanes, may be easier to implement. There is little hope of persuading a car user to change to using the bus if he sees the bus moving at exactly the same speed in the same traffic jam. We should also like to see better enforcement of the rules on bus lane use; it only takes one car parked in a bus lane to more than halve the carrying capacity of a street.

Rail

Increasing the provision of rail transport requires either more trains, or longer trains. Both approaches to Waverley station, as presently configured, are already running close to capacity. Network Rail recognises what could be done to provide more capacity, but such solutions lie well into the 2020s. In the meantime, running longer trains provides partial relief. The works on the main approach to Glasgow Queen Street, lasting for around twenty weeks from mid-March 2016, are an important step in upgrading the Edinburgh to Glasgow main line to allow all trains to be formed of eight coaches from around the end of 2017. The capacity of the rail network in Central Scotland will increase by around 30% by the end of the decade.

Despite being headlined as the “most congested city in the UK”, Edinburgh has much to feel fortunate about in the transport field, much to look forward to, and very much more to wish for.

As ever, we congratulate ourselves on having the UK’s finest bus service, Lothian Buses, which wins national awards year after year. Moreover, through an accident of history, it is one of the few municipally owned bus services in the UK; other cities are trying to find a way back, regretting having sold off their bus undertakings in the 1990s.

We also count ourselves fortunate in having our rail services responsible to a Scottish Government committed to a future built around rail. Major investment decisions are taken in Scotland, rather than having to go to London, there to be buried in committees. A former head of ScotRail in the 1980s, Chris Green, reminded us of this at a March 2016 meeting.

The second half of 2016 will bring several important rail developments. Starting in late 2016, we shall be able to take an electric train to Glasgow on the main line via Falkirk. December 2016 will bring the opening of Edinburgh Gateway station, on the Fife lines, at Gogar, which will allow passengers from Fife and the North to transfer to Edinburgh Tram without having to continue to Haymarket.

Under EGIP (Edinburgh to Glasgow Improvement Project), the other routes in Central Scotland, from Edinburgh and Glasgow to Alloa and Dunblane, and from Edinburgh to Glasgow via Shotts will all have been electrified by the end of the decade, making diesel-powered trains the exception in Waverley rather than the rule. It appears that EGIP (Edinburgh to Glasgow Improvement Project) will come in more or less on time, and approximately on budget, though timing and outlays have both been somewhat de-scoped. Network Rail has just published its plans for Scotland’s railways post 2020 which include further electrification and investment to add capacity and flexibility, much of it work removed from EGIP when it was de-scoped in 2013!

The Borders Railway opened to passengers on 6 September 2015, with a visit from H M the Queen, and, immediately cofounded the conservative passenger forecasts. Abellio, operator of the ScotRail franchise, appeared to have taken insufficient regard for the needs of the Borders Railway when planning their train fleet. As a result, trains ran late, often because of excessive dwell times at stations as passengers tried, and failed, to find space to board the train. Because of the de-scoping of the project to keep it with budget, the Borders Railway is capable of running only a single timetable, with one train every thirty minutes. Should one train deviate from this timetable by as

little as a couple of minutes, the entire timetable is thrown out of joint, with effects that often spread well beyond the Borders Railway itself.

Edinburgh Trams has completed another year of successful operation, continuing to exceed traffic forecasts, and, generally, keeping out of the headlines in the local press (only bad news sells newspapers!). The case for extending the line from York Place to Leith has been presented to City of Edinburgh council (CEC), but, other than approving continued work on detailed design, CEC has postponed any further decisions until after the Holyrood elections in May 2016.

One surprise has been the breadth of the adoption, by leading MSPs, by the head of the ScotRail Alliance, and by other bodies, of the idea of “tram-trains” on Edinburgh’s South Suburban. Tram-trains are vehicles resembling trams that are suited to running jointly with “heavy rail” trains, and drawing power from overhead wires at much higher voltages than our tram project. This could offer a means of offering more capacity for rail transport into Edinburgh without running into the bottlenecks at both the eastern and the western approaches to Waverley. A tram-train pilot scheme, first proposed in 2009, will start in Sheffield in 2017. Tram-trains have been operating successfully in several Continental cities following their first introduction in Karlsruhe in 1992.

Another development due in December 2016 is the opening of the Queensferry Crossing, the new cable-stayed bridge now taking shape just to the west of the Forth Road Bridge, the latter now showing its age after just over half a century.

Edinburgh’s cycling infrastructure has benefitted from several major investments in 2015, all with the intention of creating cycle routes largely segregated from normal traffic. Several aspects of the proposal for a cycle route from Roseburn to Leith Walk attracted strong criticism, prompting some major rethought. Unfortunately, ScotRail is drawing criticism from cyclists on several fronts, surprising for a company owned by the Dutch national railways.

Edinburgh, with its generally dense population and walkable distances, could be a European exemplar of a pedestrian-friendly city. But the many sensible walking-related policies of the City of Edinburgh Council too often don’t translate in practice into a safe and attractive walking environment on the streets – notably the generally poor state of pavements and the all-too-brief ‘green man’ phases at many road crossings.

Yet walking is arguably still the most important transport mode in the city, since over half of all journeys by Edinburgh residents are made either entirely on foot (35%) or by bus (18%), the latter involving a walking stage. It is also the most socially inclusive mode – it’s as natural as breathing – and is critical to the city’s economy, including the important tourist sector.

The Council needs to devote more resources to inspecting, monitoring and improving the pedestrian environment; to ensure that cycling improvements are not gained at the expense of pedestrian safety and comfort; to better co-ordinate between council departments impacting on the pedestrian environment; and to ensure that the welcome introduction of wide 20 mph limits is robustly enforced.

The Transport Committee met three times in 2015 – rather less than our plan of meeting every two months – and discussed a wide range of topics, covering both strategic issues and observations on current issues.

We welcomed Professor Tom Rye, Director of the Transport Research Institute at Napier University as a member of the committee. He brings a valued perspective to our discussions, from his academic role, and from the time he spent as Professor of Transport at Lund University in Sweden.

Early in 2016 John Fleming stood down as Chairman of the Committee and James Cook agreed to take on this role. Over the course of the next 12 months it is intended that each meeting of the Committee will focus on one major transport issue, an approach which is consistent with the Cockburn Association's general approach of doing less but more in depth. It is also hoped to strengthen the Committee by appointing additional members.