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Cambridge and District Citizen's Advice Focus Group report

Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) Making Connections consultation

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Background

Commissioned by the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP), Cambridge and District Citizens Advice held a focus group to hear from people on low incomes on their views of the GCP's *Making Connections* proposals.

Cambridge Citizens Advice helps people from all walks of life, many of them on lower incomes who often rely on public transport as their means of getting around the city.

Methodology

Recruitment and selection

We reached out to clients within the Cambridge and District (City and South Cambridgeshire Districts) area as well as those serviced by Citizen's Advice Rural Cambs (East Cambridgeshire, Fenland and Huntingdonshire districts). Clients were identified for having used our services for:

- support with budgeting,
- debt management or
- needing charitable support due to being on lower income and not being able to afford household necessities.

Participants were recruited via email, explaining that we would be holding a focus group via Zoom to discuss a consultation covering proposals to change transport around Cambridge.

Seven of those contacted accepted and were interested in attending, with 5 of those 7 attending the meeting virtually.

Each participant received a £50 supermarket voucher for their attendance.

The Zoom meeting took place on Friday 10th December, starting at 1pm and finishing at 2:30pm.

A representative of GCP made a presentation on the proposals and took clarification questions, before leaving to enable a candid discussion between participants and Citizen's Advice staff only.

Summary of Participants

Participant A, 21, Cherry Hinton, unemployed: Cycles almost everywhere. Prefers not to use buses due to overcrowding and the price. Participant A is currently seeking paid employment.

Participant B, 66, Arbury, part-time employee (up to 30hrs week): Uses a mixture of all transport systems, but also believes the price to travel around Cambridge, including the bus fare, is too high.

Participant C, 56, Little Shelford, employed (47.5hrs week): Cycles a lot of the time, and uses the bus for essential journeys such as grocery shopping. Again, this participant agreed the bus fares were being charged at too high a rate.

Participant D, 27, Cottenham, cares for disabled daughter: Living in a village has difficulties getting around by bus. The route into Cambridge for this participant involves taking two bus journeys, making travel difficult and the bus fare high. As a result, the participant is hoping to drive soon due to these difficulties getting around.

Participant E, 41, Arbury/Kings Hedges, single mother looking after three children: Has a car, but only uses this for taking children to school and for grocery shopping. Prefers to use the bus to get into the centre of town as it is easier than trying to find a place to park and sitting in traffic. However, this participant had recently moved from Hertfordshire, and found the bus fares in Cambridge extremely high in comparison.

Summary of key points and findings

Overall

- Participants were happy with the idea of cutting the cost of bus fares and improving the system. They felt they would make use of the bus networks more frequently if the price were lower.
- All participants agreed that some form of charge on parking or the use of private vehicles would have to come into force to enable the proposed cheaper bus fares and increased services.
- There was also consensus that those who pollute more should pay more, though it could be unfair on people on low incomes who run cheaper/older cars and cannot afford to upgrade.
- All participants were worried that charging for use of private vehicles would negatively affect them, being on lower incomes, with the view that any charge would have to come with an exemption, such as those with blue badges or not applied to those living within the charged zone and therefore having to use

streets to park outside their homes.

- Participants liked the idea of this extra money to fund the bus network improvements coming from Workplace Parking Levy and to charge businesses or regular car commuters more.
- Participants felt there would need to be an exemption for those living in Cambridge, so they can use residents parking and not have to pay a congestion charge simply because they happen to live within the congestion zone.
- European infrastructure was a popular theme of discussion, for both bus networks and the talk of tram networks. Consideration was also given to some European countries that have better cycle ways, giving more priority to cyclist, which we have started to see the emergence of in Cambridge with the Dutch roundabout.
- Participants felt more could be done to take advantage of trains – noting also that the cost was significantly higher than the bus and with the added journeys (and cost) at either end to get to and from stations.

Buses

- Cost: All participants agreed the bus fares were too high in comparison to other areas where participants previously lived (Hertfordshire and Essex).
- Congestion: Traffic congestion and slow journeys were highlighted as a reason to walk, cycle or drive instead of use the bus.
- Routes: For those who lived further out in surrounding villages, the lack of a direct route to the city was a barrier to using the bus network, as it was difficult managing the change of bus with children, as well as increasing the cost having to pay for two bus fares.
- Crowding: The buses being overcrowded at times was highlighted as an issue to some participants in accessing the services, especially for those with children, shopping or mobility aids. Proposals to increase services and frequency were welcomed to ease crowding.
- Safety: All participants felt a sense of unease travelling at night alone or with children. This was particularly felt for women, with the comparison being made to train travel where there are often staff present, increasing the sense of safety.
- Park and Ride: Rural participants felt that the Park and Rides were no more convenient than driving into the city centre.

Cycling

- Participants who cycled regularly agreed the cycle network had good connections, such as Histon Road roundabout, but some of the roads gave more priority to motor-vehicles, making it unsafe to cycle.

Driving

- Some participants felt the cost of parking was already high, and this along with the traffic was a deterrent driving into the city.
- Cars were highlighted as useful for transporting children and shopping, compared to other modes. They were also seen as safer at night when buses and public footpaths feel dark, unsupervised, and unsafe.
- All participants recognised there was a congestion issue, and this results in impacting on the buses making them unreliable.
- Therefore, any improvements to decrease the congestion from private vehicles was welcomed by the participants if it were to result in improving the bus networks.
- However, they felt certain groups would need exemptions for it to be fair, for example blue badge holders and residents within a charging zone.

Detailed Discussion

The proposals

Greater Cambridge Partnership Making Connections Consultation

Looking at the transport connections within Cambridge, and how improvements can be made for the future, starting by looking at issues the region faces:

- Congestion
- Limited choice to travel by public transport
- Poor air quality and worsening (air quality zone in the centre of Cambridge)
- Car dominated city, so encouraging use of public transport
- Difficulty accessing opportunities to those reliant on public transport – due to funding cuts
- High car carbon emissions due to car use, contributing to climate change

Three key proposals for making better connections

1. *Transforming the bus network*
 - a. More frequent services
 - b. Longer operating hours
 - c. New express services
 - d. New connections in the centre and surrounding villages
 - e. Hourly rural services
 - f. Faster journey times
 - g. Lower fares
2. *Improving cycle, walking and public space*
 - a. Freeing up road space to allow the buses to get in and out of the city
 - b. Utilising the free road space for pedestrians and leisure activities such as restaurants and café culture.
3. *Introducing new road user charging scheme to free up road space and improve air quality and to fund the above changes*

Delivering these improvements

- There is a need for less traffic to allow buses to run faster and more reliably in their service.
- Reducing bus fares to make them more accessible and attractive. This transformation will cost around £40 million per year.
- The need to cut congestion and free up road space to allow these greater bus connections to be made.
- Making walking and cycling in public space also more attractive. Again, this

would involve lowering traffic levels, widening pavements and claiming back some road space.

Creating space and revenue – proposals

- Parking charges e.g., charging more streets, Workplace Parking Levy and higher charges to existing parking all with the aim of discouraging private vehicles, to free up roads, ease congestion and improve air quality.
- Pollution based Charge for cars not meeting certain emission levels, so the most polluting vehicles within a certain zone, must pay to drive there.
- Flexible charge – charging all private vehicles to drive in the area. Could be varying charges by times of day / day of the week.

Goals

Overall, these proposals and the work of this consultation, aims to help move towards net zero carbon emissions, making greater Cambridge a more pleasant place to live, work and access health, education and leisure facilities.

Focus group Discussion

1. Initial remarks

After the GCP proposals and goals had been put to the clients, participant B was interested in firstly asking, what do we want Cambridge to be in the future. This was asked because the participant was conscious that if parking was reduced or made more expensive, people may just decide to shop and move their businesses out of the city centre. Therefore, we would lose the economic hub that is Cambridge.

The same participant also noted that he had seen Cambridge itself change over the past 15 years, and how it has become a place for research and science, and as a result, traveling into Cambridge has become more difficult.

2. European infrastructure – prioritising non-car users

Participant A and C heavily rely on cycling around Cambridge, with participant A using a bike for most travel, and participant C using a mixture of bike, and the bus network for essential travel such as grocery shopping. This participant himself believes the bus network needs an “overhaul.” Part of his reasoning for this was the need to get carbon emissions under control, and that we are “pushing our limits too far,” as this change needs to happen soon to allow for carbon emissions to be reduced by 2030.

Participant D who had moved into a village, agreed that she now does notice the air pollution in Cambridge, and that the air around where she lives now, is significantly better.

Participant C was keen on a bigger network of buses, frequently referring to Europe and how many countries have Bus and Tram networks which are cheap or often free. Participant C also addressed the idea of Hydrogen power, and how Technology is changing, hoping that this may have an impact sometime in the future.

This opened the discussion of some of Cambridge's European-like infrastructure, such as the 'Dutch-style' roundabout on Fendon Road, which gives more priority to cyclist and walkers. Participant C was keen on taking ideas from these European countries and implementing better bus networks and infrastructure that will give priority to people getting around the city without a car.

Participant C also mentioned how busy the roundabout was out the front of Addenbrookes Hospital, with its many roads leading into and out of Cambridge becoming busy and dangerous at rush hour times. Congestion can also often cause problems with ambulances trying to get through the traffic. In general, Participant C felt there was need to lower congestion and to give more priority to those traveling around Cambridge on foot or bike.

3. Why would you choose to not travel by bus?

We asked the participants what currently puts them off travelling by bus to see if the proposed changes to the bus network would make the participants more likely to choose to travel by bus.

All participants said the current price is too high, so the proposal to make bus travel cheaper was welcomed by the participants. However, the buses still face the problem of getting through much of the traffic along with the cars, so many participants felt that there would need to be less cars on the road to allow for the buses to operate better, and to allow for an increase in service.

This was particularly important to participant A, who explained he struggles to get on buses when they are overcrowded. So, an increase in the number of buses running would mean people are spread out across more buses, and those with pushchairs, shopping or mobility aids have the room they need.

There was also the consensus that the participants, particularly the single mothers, avoided using the bus networks when it was dark or later at night. Many felt uneasy when alone, as unlike train stations, there is no support staff patrolling the bus

stations. A lack of police in the Cambridge area also did not help the participants in feeling safe when using public transport at night.

One suggestion by a participant is to adapt buses to have an entrance and exit door. This would stop people trying to get in and out of the same door and help ease congestion within the bus.

Creating space and revenue

4. Increased parking charges

These improvements and what the GCP is proposing, comes down to finding a way to fund the projects, so the focus of the discussion was then steered towards what clients' thoughts of discouragement of the use of private vehicles by introducing a higher charge to park in Cambridge. In turn, this would provide funds to improve the bus network, take cars off the road so to free up space for additional bus services, and help improve the air quality of Cambridge.

Participant D agreed there is a need to improve the bus networks, and that she would benefit from more direct routes from surrounding villages into Cambridge. However, as the mother of two young children, one of which has disabilities, she finds it increasingly more difficult to get around by bus and increasing parking charges would make it more financially difficult for the participant to get and run a car. As a suggestion, the participant agreed that increasing parking charges would be a good idea, if there was an exemption to the rule, such as those with blue badges do not have to pay the increased price. This was the consensus of the participants, that if there was to be an increase on the price of parking, there would have to be some form of exemption so those who rely on driving, such as adapted vehicles, are not penalised for this.

Overall, participant D said she would make use of the bus networks if there was a more direct route, meaning the participant would not have to use two buses to get into the centre of town and pay a double fare due to the zoning of the bus networks.

Participant D felt there is a strong need to connect the villages with the city centre better, and to improve the bus routes to and from surrounding villages. Participant D stated that if more direct and frequent routes were in place, she would not feel the need so strongly to get a car.

Participant B felt that the Park and Ride facilities were so close to Cambridge, that by the time you had driven and parked, you may as well have just driven into the city centre. He believed that if there was an increased charge on parking, it may push people into using the buses more, as they would not want to pay for the parking

charge, whereas now, this does not happen due to the closeness of the park and ride centres and convenience of driving the whole way into the city centre.

Participant D tends not to drive in the centre of Cambridge already, due to the cost of parking, so an increased parking charge would not affect her, but allow her to make use of the resulting subsidised bus network.

Who can afford the increase parking charges?

Participant B, however, stated that those with higher incomes may just decide to pay the increased cost of parking due to convenience, and even still, those who currently use park and ride tend to be those on higher incomes as well. Participant B felt that the cost of the bus was still too expensive and out of means for many people. As a result, participant B stated that the increased parking charge would be a good idea, however it needs to be fair for everyone. He felt that whenever changes within society and the community are made, it always affects those on lower incomes worse than anyone else.

5. Workplace Parking Levy (WPL)

One way that increasing the cost of parking could be made fairer, and not impact those on lower incomes so negatively, is to put in place the WPL. Participants agreed that this would be a suitable alternative to increasing parking costs for everyone, and that they felt businesses should be paying more for their employees to park. Participants believed most of those driving into Cambridge are doing so to reach their place of work, many of which work for large companies who can afford to pay more for the benefit of parking nearby, and it would only be a positive for this money to go towards the community.

6. Flexible or pollution-base charge

There was also consensus that those who pollute more, should pay more, so those who are commuting into Cambridge for work. However, there was discussion that often those who can afford to pollute more i.e., those with larger cars carrying only one person, or those driving to their office every day, are the ones who can afford to pay congestion charges or increased parking charges or switch to electric vehicles. This would leave those on lower incomes who cannot afford these things no alternative. For example, Participant B stated he has a small car, but it is old, and he cannot afford to change it, but it would likely be considered a highly polluting car due to its age.

There was also talk that those who were travelling alone, but in large vehicles would have to pay congestion charges, whereas those with two or more people in the car would not have to, as this would be more environmentally friendly, sharing lifts or making one journey for multiple people.

However, a concern among the participants in relation to congestion charges, was that the zone might start small, but gradually increase, and then people would be being charged just to drive out of their homes.

Participants said there would need to be an exemption for those living in Cambridge, so they can use residents parking and not have to pay a congestion charge simply because they happen to live within the congestion zone.

7. Other ways to pay for the proposals

One participant mentioned the idea of car sharing, and how some businesses could bring in car sharing schemes to encourage employees to travel together.

8. Other modes of transport

Taxis

When comparing other modes of transport, it was clear that all clients thought there was a problem in terms of the volume of traffic. As participant D stated, she avoids using Taxis often as you end up “paying to sit in traffic”.

Participant E who is a single parent of three children also discussed the use of Taxis. This participant has a car and uses it to take her children to school and to go grocery shopping, but avoids driving in the centre of Cambridge. She also explained that Taxis are just as bad as using her own car, as journey times are getting longer due to congestion, and the price is too high.

E-scooters and bikes

Participant A used to live in Essex, so has experience travelling into Cambridge, as well as now living in Cambridge and the transport around the city. Where Participant A used to live, there is no direct route into Cambridge, and this participant would have to get two buses and a train to get into Cambridge city centre, despite living only 25 minutes from Cambridge. However, the participant has found that the best mode of transport since living in Cambridge, is cycling.

Participant A also referred to the E-scooters that have been introduced to

Cambridge. He recognised that this is a positive thing, however they are too dangerous due to their speed and weight, as well as people not using them for the correct reason. He said people tend to just use the scooters for fun, and you often get two people riding on one, rather than using them for their intended purpose of getting around the city quicker. Participant A therefore suggested that it would be a better option to have bikes around the city, as these are less dangerous, and people can handle them better. This would look something like the Santander Cycles in London.

Trains

Participant A has had lots of previous experience travelling into Cambridge by train, but the prices to travel by train are just as unaffordable for those on lower incomes as the bus networks. To get into Cambridge from a surrounding village can be up to the price of £7.20, plus parking at the station or bus fare to the station, and an additional spend to get from Cambridge rail station, into town.

Participant C lives near Great Shelford train station, and explained it is a great station and the train is quick and easy to use, however the cost is still high.

Cambridge already has many great rail connections, so there was consensus that there was room to utilise this infrastructure better, as it is already there. This could be in the form of free parking and lowering train fares.

Walking and cycling

All participants often get around by foot and welcomed the idea of wider foot paths and cycle lanes. Participant C commented on a particular footbridge over the river Cam and how it comes to several junctions with lots of traffic lights, lanes and traffic cutting across, as an example of where improved infrastructure for those on foot or cycling could be a good idea.

Participant A also mentioned that to encourage him to walk more, it would be a good idea to increase the outdoor lighting along footpaths and open green spaces. This participant mentioned areas such as Arbury, Kings Hedges and Coleridge Park as all being areas poorly lit, allowing for crime to take place, making it unsafe for people to walk after dark. The participant said that these areas need to be safe if the aim is to increase the number of people walking and cycling around the city. Similarly, Participant E lives around the Arbury area, and chooses to use her own private car when it is dark, or simply avoids going out.

Overall, all participants agreed Cambridge has a good cycle network, there are just some places that cycling is dangerous, where more priority is given to drivers.

In terms of security, some participants welcomed the idea of increased CCTV, which would encourage them to walk more. Participant D, who has recently moved from the city centre to a village, explained she felt a lot safer in the village in comparison, and that she personally would feel safer knowing there was cameras around.

Some felt increased CCTV would make them feel they are being watched but agreed that in all kinds of shops there are cameras, so as long as you are doing nothing wrong, there should be no problem with increasing the amount of surveillance. Participant C explained that you can use such surveillance to your advantage, such as if you were accused of something, or lost something, you can ask the shop to check their camera footage, therefore he explained it is about looking at it in a positive way.