



Public Consultation

Sustainable
Public Transport
and the re-introduction
of Bus Lanes



Years of
Local Councils

30 Sena ta' Kunsilli Lokali

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Preamble | 04 |
| Introduction | 05 |
| Walking and Accessibility | 06 |
| How can we expect the residents to use public transport when they do not feel safe to walk from their door step to the nearest Bus Shelter? | 07 |
| How to start planning for walkability? | 07 |
| Last Mile Transportation | 09 |
| Shared Transport | 10 |
| Bus Lanes | 12 |
| The Case for Bus Lane | 13 |
| Connections | 14 |
| Route | 15 |
| Stops | |
| Congestion | 16 |
| What would make people choose the bus? | 17 |
| Research & Consultation | 18 |
| Conclusion | 19 |



Preamble

The public transport industry all over the world, has experienced an unprecedented level of development in recent years, due to a varying number of factors – whether it be the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate change emergency or, more recently, the energy and cost-of-living crises. In response to these events, in addition to many other influences, the industry has made a conscious effort to continuously innovate in order to best support and serve its passengers and also to increase the number of users. Malta is no exception, and we welcome this consultation process in this regard.



Introduction

Our Country must reduce its greenhouse gas emissions from transport faster to reach its climate goals and air pollution targets. One of several measures is the use of Public Transport.

For this to happen we must have the right infrastructure across our towns and cities. This will encourage the residents to change their mobility habits. Local Councils may contribute to reaching climate goals as well as increasing social and economic sustainability.

For this to be achieved we need to increase the availability of and providing safer infrastructure for more diverse multi-modality.

These include also walking, the use of micro-mobility, cycling and public transport and also a shift to private electric vehicles on the roads.

A well-planned infrastructure requires significant public financial investment in tandem with quality urban planning.

We believe that before we can discuss the introduction of Bus Lanes, firstly we have to address;

- Walkability
- Last Mile Transportation
- Shared Transport
- Electric Vehicles
- Infrastructure



Walking and Accessibility

Walking and cycling provide an alternative and sustainable method for travel beyond driving. We primarily walk in our streets, which are primary open public spaces right outside our doorstep.

Today, the overbearing and increasing presence of vehicles has replaced the much-needed space for pavements, trees and leisure spaces, leaving an urban environment that is disconnected, visually unpleasant and unsafe for those outside the car.

There is a fundamental need for change in the way streets and public spaces are designed and constructed in order to promote walking and reclaim space for people, especially the elderly, children and people with reduced mobility.



How can we expect the residents to use public transport when they do not feel safe to walk from their door step to the nearest Bus Shelter?

A 'pedestrian' is not just a person on foot, but it can also be someone equipped with wheels that is not a vehicle, such as a person pushing a pram, a person on a scooter, or a person in a wheelchair.

Planning for walkability is part of a larger vision and strategy, which also plans for sustainable alternative modes of transport, shared transport, parking management and open space networks. They are all interlinked and should be studied together for better, sustainable city planning.

How to start planning for walkability?

The very first step is acknowledging the importance of walking and providing good walking environments, and be willing to share that knowledge with your local community.

It is important to note that walkability cannot be achieved in a week. Rather it is a long term complex process that is based on a change in lifestyle.



Last Mile Transportation

The 'last mile' is a universally agreed term that refers to the movement of people and goods from an origin - usually a hub - to a final destination.

Within a journey, the last mile has been studied to be the least efficient stage as it comprises a relatively large percentage of cost and time. This gap opens up opportunities for shared and alternative modes of transport, such as bikes and electric scooters, as preferred solutions.

A sustainable image of the future involves better sharing of resources and fewer personal cars. Car sharing rides are a good alternative to private vehicles, however cycling and new micro mobility options result in less carbon emission, require less space in our localities, and offer physical benefits to the community. Local councils should develop

more holistic sustainable transport development plans, rather than Traffic Management Plans, which tend to be somewhat limited in scope and more focused on vehicular circulation, with an emphasis on private vehicles.

Local councils should be forerunners in encouraging more sustainable modes of transportation in their respective localities, with a focus on improving the infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists, increasing the provision for intermodality (provide an efficient and wide selection of different modes) and framing movement strategies in view of wider environmental targets

Shared Transport

More people are adopting the mentality of sharing different modes of transportation, so as to reduce the negative impacts on the environment (most notably due to traffic congestion) while simultaneously reducing personal costs.

If provided with proper alternatives, more people would be encouraged to leave their cars at home, generating less traffic on the roads that may give back valuable urban space to pedestrians and cyclists.

Sustainable and inclusive localities depend on transportation that facilitates the safe, efficient, and pollution-free flow of people and goods, while also providing affordable and accessible mobility for all.





Bus Lanes

When bus Lanes were introduced back in November 2004, we were told that 'Bus Lanes are here to stay'. We all know what actually happened and why.

The first Bus Lanes that was introduced by MTA was a 1 KM stretch in Aldo Moro, Marsa. Another one was introduced a few months later in Mriehel, Mdina Road.

While the Mriehel Bus Lane was timed, the Marsa Bus Lane was not timed, maybe because Aldo Moro had four carriageway and bus frequency is high compared to Mdina Road.

Both Bus Lanes were used by all classes of public transport vehicles. i.e. mini buses, taxis and route buses.

Even though back in 2004 we had fewer cars on the road and less population, many were those who expressed their anger in this regard. We all remember long queues and traffic congestion in Aldo Moro whilst the Bus Lane is empty.

Dedicated Bus Lanes and other transit priority treatments are a cost-effective way to improve transit speed and reliability only when we have the right infrastructure in place. Limiting stretches of road to specific vehicles decreases the total road space that was previously available. This results in increased waiting times for car drivers, and potentially higher emissions due to the increased congestion that results.

The efficacy and viability of Bus Lanes should depend on varying factors in the area leading to a particular town or village concerned. These should include the level of public demand for bus travel in the area, the nature of the existing infrastructure, and the exact location in which the lanes are sited.

Priority lanes situated too close to junctions may prove to be counter-productive, due to increased queues of non-priority traffic ahead of the junction. Sam can be said to certain bottle necks in various roads around the island.



The Case for Bus Lane

Common sense' intuition says that bus lanes can make a large difference to bus journey times, and make taking the bus significantly more attractive to car drivers.

- If cars are moving at just 5mph, then a bus travelling at 30mph along a mile of uninterrupted bus lane will be 10 minutes faster. But is that 'best case scenario' typical?
- Is saving five minutes on the morning commute the critical determinant in whether someone drives or takes the bus?
- What would make bus travel more attractive
We must consider the entire journey, door to door, not just the time spent sitting on a bus.



Connections

The journey to and from a bus stop, and the wait there, is often discounted by those who don't use buses. But the time, convenience, comfort and safety (real and perceived) of this part of the journey is a key part of the (potential) bus user's experience.

- Provide direct and safe (i.e. well-lit and open) walking routes to bus stops and hubs, including pedestrian crossings of any non-residential roads.
- Provide safe cycling routes to bus stops and hubs.
- Having to change to another service en route can add significantly to the total journey time, especially if the change has to be made in the city centre, or the connecting service runs infrequently.
- Run services along circular routes, serving more destinations. (This has the added benefit of minimising dwell time in the city centre, reducing pollution and freeing up space at Drummer Street bus station.)
- Schedule interchanges to other destinations at suburban hubs (such as park-and-ride sites), obviating the need to travel into the city centre to make a connection.

Route

Buses typically follow an indirect route in order to pass close to as many homes and amenities as possible, lengthening the journey time significantly.

- Run more express (limited stop) services along direct routes.

Stops

Each stop can add minutes to the journey time, often unpredictably. Unloading can hold up loading, especially when the bus has only one door. People paying with cash, or needing assistance or information from the driver can add delay.

A stopped bus can delay other buses. This is especially true in a bus lane at peak times, when the main carriageway is densely packed, providing little opportunity for the bus behind to overtake.



Congestion

Congestion typically lengthens journey times at peak times, but it can add considerable uncertainty to journey times at any time of day.

There are techniques that may be highly effective at reducing congestion and pollution in the city, without severely inconveniencing other motor vehicles, and without losing green space within the city:

- Optimise traffic light sequencing to facilitate free flow of all traffic, and manage the impact of traffic incidents efficiently.
- Implement bus priority at all junctions, to minimise the wait time for buses at traffic lights.

Parked or unloading vehicles obstructing the carriageway can create significant delays.

- Ban parking, waiting and loading during peak hours, and enforce infractions promptly.

Turning vehicles can block a carriageway while they wait for a gap in the oncoming traffic.

- Limit access to and from side roads, thereby reducing the number of vehicle manoeuvres that will hold up buses.

Impatient or unobservant drivers can prevent a bus from pulling out from a stop.

- Consider introducing a by-law to make it an offence for a road user to begin to overtake a bus that is indicating to pull out.

Cyclists, typically travelling at around 10mph, can hold up buses. This can be a particular problem when both are using a bus lane: at peak times, when the main carriageway is densely packed, the bus driver will struggle to overtake cyclists safely.

- Provide segregated cycle paths and 'floating' bus stops to remove conflict between buses and cycles.



What would make people choose the bus?

Just providing a good alternative is not enough to change people's minds: after all that's why multinationals spend billions on advertising, market research and focus groups.

Once someone has made a decision (e.g. to drive to work), she typically does not continually re-evaluate it over. A well-studied psychological phenomenon that almost everyone will recognise in themselves suggests that we pay selective attention to evidence that supports our decision, and ignore evidence to the contrary. So if a driver sees the bus overtake her in the bus lane, she is unlikely to register it as evidence that she has made the wrong decision to drive. (In fact she's more likely to feel angry that she could be moving faster if

only the bus lane were available to all vehicles.) But when she sees the bus snarled up in congestion at the end of the bus lane, or she overtakes it at a bus stop, that will reinforce her confidence that driving was the right decision.

The most successful efforts to change people's travel habits involve detailed research, consultation and education /marketing. If we can help people at a point in their life when they are making travel choices, for instance, just after they've moved house or changed job, that's when we can have the greatest chance of persuading them to choose public transport. Local Councils should be engaged to lead the way in this kind of work, to help and assist residents to re-think their decisions.

Research & Consultation

Some of the questions we should be asking of a wide range of people include:

- Why do you choose to drive rather than take the bus?
- What needs to change for you to revisit your choice?
- Rank a list of disadvantages of bus travel in order of importance.
- If you previously drove and now take the bus, what made you change your mind?
- If you previously took the bus and now drive, what made you change your mind?
- What do you think you will always use/need a car for?
- Would you like to be able to manage without a car (or with one less car)?

With better understanding of people's needs and priorities, we can prioritise measures to enhance the attractiveness of bus travel, and we can tailor our education / marketing messages to what we know people are most receptive to.



Conclusion

We are not claiming that bus lanes are always ineffective, only that their benefit is typically marginal, difficult to predict reliably from theoretical modelling, and not necessarily relevant to why people choose to drive rather than take the bus.

A bus lane can, at best, save a few minutes on a relatively short part of an entire journey. Door to door, taking the bus will always have time penalties compared with driving; focusing too closely on beating cars for a small part of the journey misses other ways in which buses can be made more attractive.

There is a wealth of measures to enhance the attractiveness of bus travel. These can be implemented or trialled relatively cheaply and quickly, and they are all likely to be more cost-effective, sustainable, and easier to trial than widening city roads. Slow Streets is a good example of this.

Only if those measures fail to deliver a significant modal shift, and if modelling with high quality data provides a very high degree of confidence that bus lanes will achieve that shift, only then should we contemplate taking urban green space or green field land to create new road capacity.

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