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## **Bristol Civic Society's comments on the draft Nelson Street public realm strategy**

### Introduction and summary

The Society welcomes this strategy document as a design framework for an important part of Bristol city centre. It is a quality design document, and we agree with the design principles in it. We strongly support the council's approach to reducing the impact of motor traffic in and around the Old City area, decluttering, and improving the quality of materials used. Nevertheless we have suggestions for improvement and more emphasis, and we have concerns about the deliverability of any changes.

Whilst we recognise that recent and imminent developments – new buildings, a new student population, Metrobus changes in the Centre - will have a major impact on Nelson Street, it will remain a traffic route dominated by buses and other vehicles. This acceptance of a continuing high volume of through traffic will not improve Nelson Street as public realm. We are not convinced that the resulting street character has been reflected in the consultation document. While the potential for active frontages will be limited, there will be an increased footfall through the area. While there are no obvious quick-wins, the route needs to be reclaimed as a credible link from Harbourside and the Centre Promenade to the retail centre and the Old City. It is difficult to see sources of financial interest for improving the street unless a stronger case can be made for this strategic link in the city public space network.

In general, we would like to see changes to the document to make it more visionary and action-oriented, not merely aspirational. The document needs to assist and encourage others to contribute, so it needs less 'principle' and more 'specifics'.

We attach a map which is annotated with some of the key issues to which we draw attention in our response.

### Detailed comments

The Society has the following specific comments:

- 1) A better link to Christmas Steps.

The strategy document should give more weight to the statement in the Public Realm and Movement Framework that at paragraph 3C – *Repairing severance and poor environment from post-war development* – says, “*Improve access to linked streets many of which are medieval.*” The PRMF classifies Christmas Steps as a secondary pedestrian route. It is one of the broken links to which the statement refers. It is as an historic north/south pedestrian link from the Park Row, Queen's Road, St Michael's Hill and BRI areas to the Old City area via Christmas Steps. It extends and encourages pedestrians to visit independent shops and forms

an important part of a pedestrian-friendly network. Nelson Street should not be considered in isolation from the opportunities it creates for cross links.

A shortest-distance crossing to the bottom of Christmas Steps is the first preference. If a direct crossing to the bottom of Christmas Steps is ruled out by the bus turn into Christmas Street, consideration should be given to building out the pavement outside St Bartholomew's House, to be implemented as part of the Metrobus scheme. This would make the route to Christmas Steps much more visible.

At the very least, it is important to ensure prominent signage of the route to Christmas Steps, and emphasize the pedestrian crossing of Rupert Street and Lewins Mead - making it wide and using a coloured non-skid surface to give it emphasis.

Consideration could also be given to improving the space in front of Hotel Du Vin, which is currently dead space.

## 2) Enhancing St John's church and extending the public realm improvements into Old City.

The public realm improvement strategy could be extended into Old City as follows:

- under the St John's arch into Broad Street, creating a new 'square' extending from Christmas Street through the arch, marked by signboards, street map etc.
- along the lanes inside following the route of the mediaeval city wall, the area within NatWest Court, St John's churchyard (although this requires the redevelopment of NatWest Court to make it attractive).

The public space in Nelson Street should improve the setting of St John's church, and its crypt entrance. The geometry of vehicle movement needs to respect this important gateway to the Old City and arguably, this cross over should mark a distinctive change in character, extending as a shared surface, along Quay Street to Small Street. The tower and gateway could be floodlit.

The burial ground off John Street should be made accessible as a 'pocket park', being virtually the only green space in Old City. The Society recognises that this suggestion would require permission to rearrange the memorials and to break a new entrance into the boundary wall. The future maintenance of the park is also a requirement. There should be a medium term strategy to link the park with the space outside the Bank Tavern to create a larger and more useful 'pocket park'.

One quick improvement for the public space outside the Bank Tavern would be a proper defined smokers' area paid for by the pub.

## 3) Vehicular movement

We support the proposed additional traffic restrictions, barring traffic going north along Bridewell Street (option 1) and directing traffic across Nelson Street to All Saints' Street instead of Fairfax Street (option 2).

The proposals for restricting vehicular movement should be emphasised more as follows:

- The reference on page 21 to the pedestrianisation of Corn Street as “an aspiration” should be strengthened, in line with BCAAP, which says the “The impact of traffic *will* be reduced ..”. The map of vehicular movement should also show the planning policy requirement, not just the existing permitted movements. The service requirements for the area can accommodate vehicles that service the Crown Court.
- It is important that, post Metrobus and the reopening of Christmas Street, Quay Street is used by court vehicles and taxis only, not general traffic, and the document could emphasise this more. The detailed street design, surface treatment and signage must ensure that the route through Old City is not used by general traffic. The map should make this clear.

The Society accepts that the short-term possibilities for restricting motor traffic in the Nelson Street area are limited, but considers that it would be worth discussing changes that could be delivered in the medium term. The Council should over time seek to eliminate all through-traffic movements in the area, and should look into how this could best be achieved and enforced. We would like to see a ‘spur system’ of access-only entry/exit points. Vehicles would be permitted to enter for the servicing of premises at restricted hours. This policy has been successful in other cities. The Society will produce a separate note discussing this in more detail.

#### 4) Place-making at the Broadmead end of Nelson Street

If the direction of traffic across Nelson Street to All Saints’ Street instead of Fairfax Street (option 2) is accepted, more emphasis should be given to place-making on the stretch of Nelson Street east of the junction towards Broadmead.

#### 5) Public art currently being delivered through existing s106 agreements

The Society requests that the proposals currently being discussed between developers and the council over the delivery of s106 agreements for public art are made public and comments invited. It is important that there is public acceptance of what is delivered, and consultation might improve the result. It is possible that other things should take priority over public art – for instance, place-making at Bridewell St/Nelson St and at Christmas St/Quay St; and/or quality street furniture.

### Omissions

#### 5) Access needs

There is insufficient discussion in the document of the relevant access needs for Old City, Broadmead and the Galleries, which would enable the access proposals to be evaluated. For instance, vehicle routes, services access, parking access, emergency escape, fire routes and refuse storage and collection.

#### 6) Public Art

There could be included in the strategy something on public art and the approach to art on buildings, following the recent spate of new developments. The graffiti that has been part of See No Evil is less appropriate now that new buildings have been built, and is probably

inconsistent with the rest of the design objectives. (for altering space and character through light and display )

#### 7) Lighting

The night economy in this area may suggest the opportunity to include in the strategy something on lighting and how it could enhance the night-time streetscape.

#### 8) Street activity

There could be included in the strategy something on possible strategies to increase the level of street activity.

#### 9) Incorporation of latest public realm changes

It is recognised that the document has to record the position at a point in time. However, the in-progress more or less wholesale redevelopment of the north side of the street will have a huge impact and without this incorporated into the drawings in the document it is difficult to comment. It is suggested that the latest changes, showing building footprint, points of access, intended groundfloor uses and associated site works, are incorporated in the final version of the document.

#### 10) More detailed design

It is recognised that the approach that sets out high-level principles, character zones, and a materials palette for paving and street furniture may be more credible than to provide detailed designs of public space areas, which will inevitably be over-ridden by the designs done when the actual changes take place. However, this risks providing generalised intentions without explicit vision of what the spaces might look like. Such a vision, with artist's impressions, is useful as a source of inspiration and spur to action, even if it does not represent a final design.

For instance, the north side will remain sunnier and the detailed design of the external spaces will be critical.

### Delivery

#### 11) Plan of action

The document represents a good design framework, bringing together a number of connected issues. Whilst recognising the dependency on funding, the design framework needs supplementing by a clearer, more focused explanation of the proposed action. If the City Design department does not see that as part of its role, it could at least outline the future council process for defining a plan of action.

#### 12) Sponsor group

The responsibility for driving change and delivering improvements should not rest solely with the council. It would help if there was a suitable group of local interests to oversee action, like the Harbourside Forum or a Business Improvement District, both for Nelson Street and other

areas of public realm development like Castle Park. Bristol Civic Society would be keen to play a role in such a group.

However, the main action group for the area looks likely to be a new BID for the Old City/Centre Promenade/Park Street area, and its area of scope may not incorporate Nelson Street if there are not many potential BID levy-payers in the street. Even if Nelson Street is within its geographical scope, it may not lie in the BID partners' chosen priorities for action.

## 12) Funding

The Society is concerned that reduced s106 contributions, and CIL siphoned off to Metrobus, will limit the scope for funding and delivery, although the second round of Cycle City Ambition Grants may help provide some funding for a segregated cycleway.

## 13) NatWest Court

Recognising the impact of the current dead frontage of NatWest Court on Nelson Street, and the potential to improve north/south permeability through it, a key part of any action plan should be to write a planning brief for the NatWest Court site and to engage with the owners. This would seem a high-priority action for the council to initiate.

### Responses to online consultation survey questions

7 Do you agree or disagree that it is important to improve the quality of the public realm in and around Nelson Street?

**Agree**

8 Do you think we have chosen the right design principles for Nelson Street?

**Yes**

9 Should we create a segregated cycle route along Nelson Street from Christmas Street to Union Street?

**Yes**

10 Should we remove some parking in front of Old Bridewell police station and in Bridewell Street to improve footways, allow space for tables and chairs, and create a good cycling route?

**Yes**

11 Should Bridewell Street become one way (with contraflow cycle lane) in from Rupert Street to Nelson Street?

**Yes (but see our comments above )**

Do you have any comments on this proposal?

**We suggest Bridewell Street is closed to motor traffic both ways except for access**

12 Should traffic go straight ahead from Bridewell Street to All Saints Street as shown in option 2, rather than left, then right down Fairfax Street as now?

**Don't know. Regardless of whether the crossing of Nelson Street is a dog-leg into Fairfax Street or straight over into All Saints Street, the flow of cross-over traffic adversely affects the pedestrian experience and is a danger to the two-way cycle traffic. So we would like to see the crossing of Nelson Street closed completely to motor traffic except for access. (but see our comments above)**

13 The Pithay is now one way down only at the top. Do you think it should be one way all the way down?

**Yes. We would like to see the Pithay is closed to motor traffic both ways except for access. (but see our comments above)**

14 Are there any other public realm issues in the Nelson Street area that you think need further consideration?

**Yes**

If yes, what are they?:

**See Bristol Civic Society response above**