

My name is Hussein Patwa, a subject matter specialist appointed by the Disability Equity Partnership, a former Scottish Government appointee to the Mobility & Access Committee for Scotland (MACS) and a self-employed accessibility consultant.

I am here today to present a deputation on behalf of Katrina Michie (Acting chair) of the Disability Equity Partnership and its external members (hereinafter referred to as 'the parties'), and I thank you for the opportunity to do so.

This deputation covers the future of our City Centre and in particular the discrimination, exclusion, and resulting hardship which will be faced by disabled people if the recommendations in the report are accepted. May I reiterate something which I said at a previous deputation, disabled people, those with reduced mobility and others are not against change, or the idea of progress. We only ask that these changes, and ideas for progress are inclusive, that our needs are taken into account, that they are responded to by incorporation into the design and as part of an iterative process without unduly disenfranchising whole sections of our society, now and over the long term.

The report being presented to you today, and its numerous appendices may be within the letter of the Council instruction given in February but it isn't in the spirit of that instruction. Nor indeed does DEP feel that the engagement was carried out in good faith. There have been a great many meetings, but at no time was the intention of officers made clear, DEP was kept under the impression that their concerns would be valued and addressed and that the process and options were open to change. This was clearly never the case and the original option preferred by the previous administration was always going to be presented as the best deal for the city. DEP would argue that this is not the case for the reasons contained in the documentation which has been provided to Council along with this deputation.

From the "sifted" options, options 1 and 4 were never going to be viable options as one was no change with a bit of a tidy up and the other would make the usability for all worse than doing nothing, which begs the question why were they presented to us for discussion? All that remained was option 2 which is incorrectly being called pedestrianisation and option 3 which has buses, taxis and private hire vehicles operating in the central section.

As stated in the report, option 3 is the only option which is acceptable to DEP and NESS as it is the only one which affords anything close to equality of access to the city centre for disabled and elderly people. Option 3 causes no material harm to the general public, unlike option 2 which causes great harm to our most vulnerable and marginalised citizens.

There are overarching themes which must be addressed prior to any decision being made:

Access to the area by Bus and Taxi/private hire is non negotiable, There is no other way that those who need to be dropped off in close proximity to their destination could possibly navigate the space.

The infrastructure that goes along with buses must also be in place, if the current versions cannot be accommodated, then different styles can be procured.

The Blue Badge criteria as set by the Government is clear, in order to qualify for a Blue Badge, applicants must only be able to travel 50m unaided. This isn't guidance, it's a material fact. To put the ramifications of this into perspective, the central section of Union Street is approximately 350m long, seven times longer than blue badge holders can travel. It's equivalent to asking an average person to walk 11Km (7 miles). These numbers are based on a poll carried out by Cancer Research

UK. Many of the people who use public transport or taxis/private hire vehicles meet the qualifying criteria for a Blue Badge. The Systra plan which shows the 50m isochrones where Blue Badge spaces are currently and where proposed spaces might be created left large gaps in the central section of Union Street, making any businesses or services located in these areas unreachable by a disabled driver.

Arguments have been made that under option 3 the stopping areas for buses would be overcrowded. This may well be the case if the current under worked design for option 3 is used, however there are many places throughout the city where several buses use the same stop, and this will most certainly be the case if option 2 is pursued, the only difference being that they will be crowded and also in the wrong place.

Servicing times proposed have heavy vehicles in the area at the busiest times of the day, 6pm (when people are leaving work) and before 10am (when people are going to work and school) this makes the area its most dangerous for everyone, but especially disabled people, just when most people want to use it.

NESS have said: For many of the people DEP represents access does mean for all transport modes, as different people will have different needs for support with their mobility. Restricting two of the main modes of (buses and Taxis) therefore restricts access. Our greatest concern is that without buses travelling the length of Uno Street, people who have mobility difficulties, for a variety of reasons, including people who are visually impaired, will find travelling the longer distances difficult and will therefore stop coming to the city centre. DEP concurs with this, as this is a painful lesson learned from Broad Street.

This is the 3rd time DEP has been in the situation of having to prepare a deputation, at very short notice, to Council regarding this issue, the facts have not changed, the solutions and mitigations promised have not been delivered, creating detriment to those we represent.

In our view, this recommendation doesn't fulfil Councils responsibility under the Public Sector Equality Duty, the process didn't meet the engagement criteria laid down in the Scottish Approach to Service Delivery, will not make Aberdeen a better place for people to live, work, raise a family (especially disabled parents or disabled children) or visit, will increase travel times and therefore the cost adding to the cost of living crisis, is not open to all or inclusive, reduces peoples opportunities and choices, is unsafe and is not in keeping with the clear intentions set out in the Partnership document.

We ask that proper attention and thought is given to option 3 which not only benefits disabled and elderly people but will standardise the layout and the look of the whole of Union Street when the time comes to look at improvement to the east and west of this section, giving consistency and the clarity needed by those we represent in order for them to remain as independent and active as possible for longer.

The 'A Vibrant City' section of the Partnership agreement confirmed by council leadership specifically opposes the implementation of any new shared space zones within the city. Although some officers have previously denoted the recommended Option 2 as a pedestrianised area, this is a misnomer. Best practice and evidence from a number of large local and national stakeholders, as well as statutory transport bodies, recognise that any space used by both pedestrians and non-stationary objects (e.g. bicycles or servicing vehicles) are correctly referred to as shared spaces, and thus contrary to the council's partnership agreement.

Finally, the content relating to this specific agenda item in the papers before you today is voluminous. However, we are perturbed and disappointed that despite the significant investment in time and effort with officers, their representatives and consultants over the previous months, including our provision of written responses to questions and issues raised in various meetings, today's papers provide only a cursory mention of our view in inexplicably vague terms, without the evidence base, context and rationale needed to ensure a just and balanced representation of the engagement and its outcome. We have attempted to mitigate this by providing copies of this feedback as part of the written deputation submission, however we would respectfully submit that less than 24 hours provides wholly insufficient time for anyone, council or public, to assimilate, interrogate or audit the important detail contained therein.

The decisions you will reach will have long-lasting implications for all within our city. They must be accountable, audited and be evidenced with reference to specific stakeholder comment to avoid the need for retrospective recursion; something which we respectfully submit would be both counter-productive, politically, financially and morally challenging.

We wholeheartedly agree with the exigent need for certainty over the future design, infrastructure and operation of our city for those in business, tourists, residents other users and, for those we represent and as seems increasingly likely, to plan the future logistics of their lives by ensuring continued access to inclusive services and resources outside the city centre, should this be their only option. Further delay and uncertainty does not benefit anyone however, nor does a decision taken without complete oversight of all pertinent evidence and supporting detail, as should have been the case today. We therefore ask that Council instruct officers to provide complete and unredacted copies of all meeting and engagement notes, responses from DEP and associated references in good time before a final decision is taken with the explanations and full consideration it merits. Such a decision could be taken in August to both allow it to be undertaken judiciously and to minimise further disruption to the overall city centre masterplan timeline. Until then, we ask that the decision to accept or reject the recommendation before you today is deferred pending remediation of the incongruences cited earlier.