QUEEN STREET ACCESS FOR EVERYONE PILOT

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Over the past year Auckland Transport and Auckland Council have been developing an innovative pilot project on Auckland's premier street as part of testing the Access for Everyone (A4E) concept – creating additional pedestrian space in a move towards a new, sustainable transport system. This is leading towards a future light rail system along Queen St and a Zero Emissions Area in the Queen St valley.

The pilot has undertaken an innovative co-design process with Queen St stakeholders – including using the Covid-19 physical distancing situation that arose mid-project – to develop trial tactical urbanism concepts. These will bring immediate benefits and inform future city centre investments. This pilot has involved careful management of public transport and traffic network operations, safety, logistics (servicing and loading), urban design and engagement processes, and has wide application to other town centre or city centre projects.

This paper will cover the scope of the pilot, key lessons learnt and where to next for future pilots and A4E.

INTRODUCTION

Queen St in central Auckland is known as the key commercial, retail and civic street for the region. For decades the street has been the centre for the development of the Auckland region, as it transitioned from a small coastal trading hub to a thriving commercial centre serving over 1.7 million people.

The Auckland Council's City Centre Masterplan 2020 (CCMP) states that since March 2018, more people have travelled to the city centre in the morning peak (7-9am) by public transport than by private vehicle, and there has been a slow decline in the number of private vehicles entering the city centre. In March 2019, the NZ Herald reported that private vehicle mode share into the city centre in the morning peak was 43%, compared to 48% for public transport and 9% for active travel modes. (Note: this data is pre COVID-19 and the impacts of COVID-19 on mode share are being closely monitored).

There has long been a strong public and political desire to see Queen St become more focused upon pedestrian amenity (ultimately resulting in pedestrianisation, or close to it). This paper will expand upon recent events in the development of Queen St and the transport lessons learnt.

CONTEXT

Since the early 1970s, success investigations have been made into various ways of reducing traffic or closing Queen St to traffic, either as a standalone project or part of other projects (e.g. a component of delivering light rail on Queen St). In 2018, at the Mayor's request, a study was undertaken into closing the northern section of Queen St to traffic but found difficulties in accommodating buses, servicing and loading activity.

In March 2020, the Auckland Council's Planning Committee adopted a refreshed version of the CCMP, the visionary plan to guide the city centre's development for the next 20 years. It sets out the strategic direction for the city centre *"…to ensure the heart of our city remains a vibrant, bountiful place for everyone".*

A key part of the CCMP is Access for Everyone (A4E), a concept that redefines the use of street space in the city centre to provide a friendlier pedestrian environment and prioritises space-efficient modes of transport whilst enabling deliveries and access for emergency services.

As part of this, the Committee requested that a Queen St pilot be undertaken by March 2021 as a test of A4E principles. The pilot was to focus on creating additional pedestrian space in a move towards a new, sustainable transport system. This was to lead towards a future light rail system along Queen St and a Zero Emissions Area (ZEA) in the Queen St valley. This was to be achieved by removing unnecessary traffic and freeing up road space for public transport, deliveries, emergency services and for people with limited mobility.

The aim is to deliver a vibrant pedestrian-priority shopping street at the heart of the Queen St valley, which would support centre-running transit, whether bus, light rail, or any other mode.

The timing of the pilot was determined by the construction schedule for City Rail Link (CRL)'s new underground station at Aotea. To build this station, Victoria Street will be closed to all vehicles at its junction with Albert St from mid-2021 until the end of 2022, which will require a number of city centre network changes. The pilot was intended to establish changes to the layout of Queen St prior to this closure.

CRL construction requires AT to divert many city centre buses via Queen St in order to maintain access to and through the city centre. During this time, Queen St will need to accommodate almost one bus per minute per direction at peak times and it will be important for them to have reliable travel times for the thousands of people using them.

From March 2020, a working group, led at the time by AT as the road controlling authority, began to scope up the elements which might be involved in the pilot.

TIMELINE OF ACTIONS

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic quickly changed those initial plans. From ANZAC weekend 2020, AT undertook a range of emergency works (directly funded by Waka Kotahi) across the region to enable physical distancing for walking and cycling. At the time, such actions were occurring around the world and were based on the expectation that transport agencies needed to provide more footpath space to people.

Along Queen St, between Customs St and Mayoral Dr, this involved converting a kerbside lane into additional footpath space (using road cones and temporary signage, as shown in Figure 1 below). Loading zones and bus stops were retained, with asphalt platforms added at bus stops.

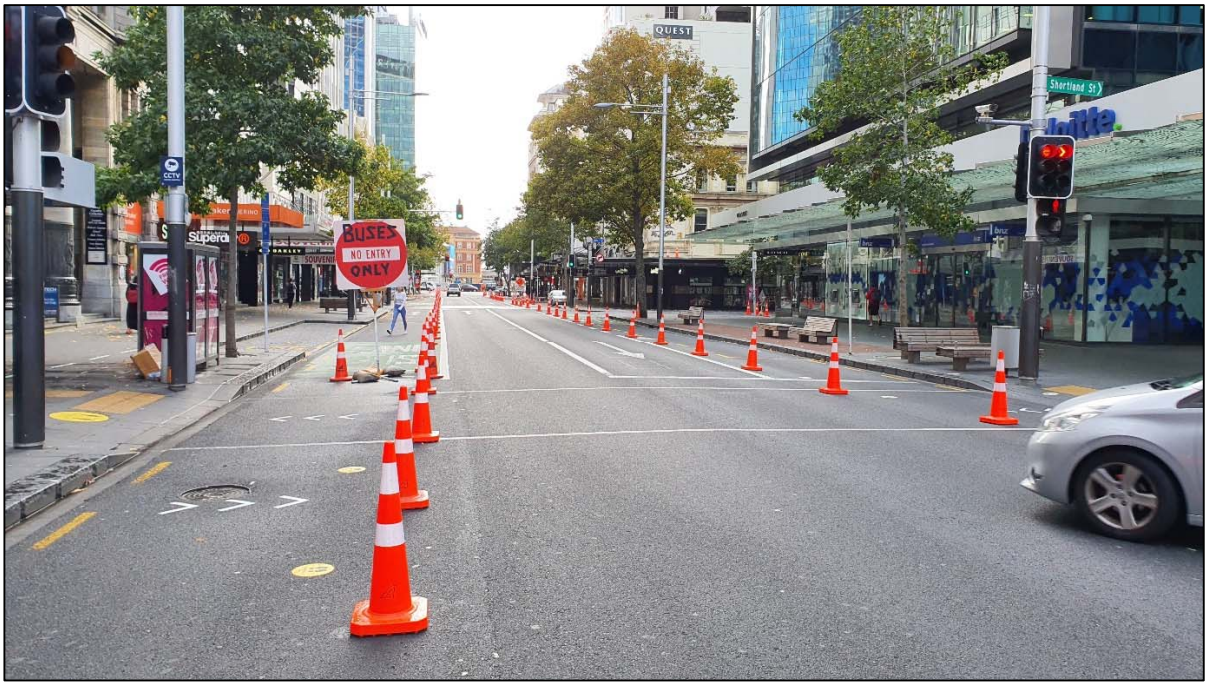

Figure 1: Queen St COVID-19 arrangement soon after implementation in April 2020

This work included closing off the intersection of Queen St and Fort St, as shown in Figure 2. Initially no use was made of the space, as it was intended to simply be used for additional physical distancing space for pedestrians.

Figure 2: Queen St COVID-19 layout at Fort St in April 2020

This temporary arrangement was not anticipated when the pilot team was formed, however it quickly became clear that the situation provided an unprecedented opportunity to gain feedback on the spatial layout, operational matters and genuine user experiences. This feedback could then feed directly into the pilot development as a trial-through-experience, rather than discussing abstract concepts and renderings with stakeholders.

The immediate response from stakeholders was that the many road cones made the street look like a construction site, and some users (especially tradespeople) took to moving the cones so they could park in the new pedestrian space. An early decision was thus made to replace the road cones with plastic posts. These were fixed to the carriageway such that they could be easily removed or moved if necessary (as shown in Figure 3) and included a thin white edgeline.

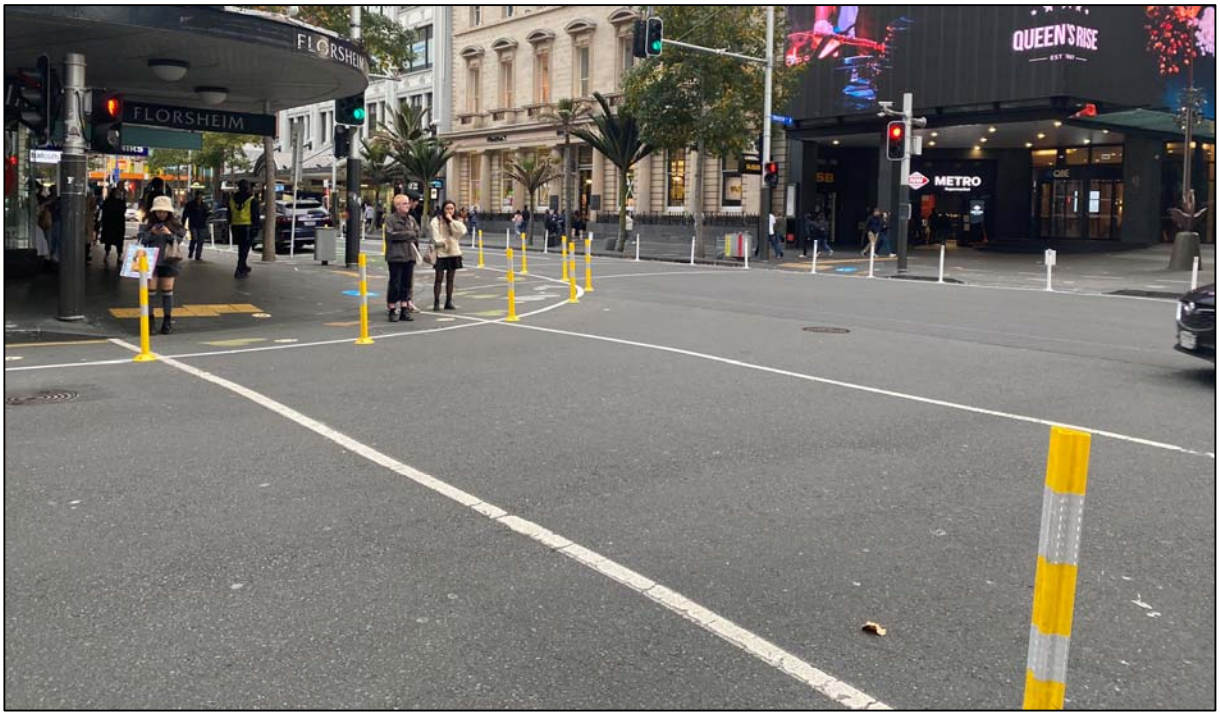

Figure 3: Plastic posts used for next iteration of layout in May 2020

Although an improvement to the original treatment, it was noted that pedestrians were not walking within the newly created space. Chalk drawings and tailored decals advising pedestrians to 'Wait Here" at intersections did not make a meaningful difference, so AT installed coloured surfacing to the new spaces. The new raised bus boarders were also painted in bright colours (Figure 4) to address concerns that they presented a trip hazard.

Figure 4: Coloured surfacing to delineate space for people in July 2020

Around the same time, it was decided that the attractiveness of the space to pedestrians (to linger) and to stakeholders (in terms of starkness) could be improved through the use of tactical urbanism PlaceKit. This consisted of plastic block containers as seats or planters (as shown in Figure 5, at the Fort St intersection where e-scooter parking was also provided). These had the additional benefit of helping prevent illegal car parking in the pedestrian areas, which was still occurring despite the plastic posts.

Figure 5: PlaceKit used to improve street attractiveness in August 2020

These larger features helped but had a transient 'cheap and cheerful' form which stakeholders felt diminished the quality sought for Queen St's environment. So more substantial concrete blocks and planters were installed (see Figure 6) – replacing the plastic elements – although even these did not always stand up to damage from passing vehicles, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 6: Concrete planters in August 2020

Figure 7: Concrete materials damaged in August 2020

This work had all been undertaken by the pilot team as an emergency response without public or stakeholder engagement.

FROM COVID EMERGENCY TO CO-DESIGN

This changed with the launch of the Queen St Valley Pilot programme in mid-2020. From the outset, the pilot team used an innovative co-design process with Queen St stakeholders – using

the COVID-19 physical distancing layout as a base – to develop plans for more tailored tactical urbanism concepts that came from the community themselves.

The co-design process was shaped by a reference group of key partners who represent the Queen Street community in a series of three co-design workshops. This engagement delivered a range of issues and themes for the pilot team to take forward. These are currently being developed and formally consulted upon [An update on latest progress will be made at the conference].

SYSTEM-WIDE ACTIONS

As well as physical changes, the pilot includes changes to traffic network operations management. The pilot team has developed a proposal for traffic network changes that creates two bus-only sections on Queen St. This prioritises bus operations, pedestrian amenity and local loading zone access, but prevents end-to-end through traffic. At time of writing, this proposal was still to complete consultation processes and be formally approved.

The pilot team are also investigating trials for changes to the Queen St logistics (e.g. servicing and loading), to further reduce traffic volumes whilst still supporting business operations. This may include trialling the use of electric delivery vehicles, consolidated delivery hubs and amended delivery times to less busy periods.

FUNDING AND MONITORING

$600,000 in funding for the pilot has been provided by the Auckland City Centre Advisory Board from the 20/21 Targeted Rate budget. Up to $900,000 is also provided via Waka Kotahi's Innovating Streets contestable fund.

The pilot team has been working since February 2020 on monitoring baseline data. This includes customer experience surveys and the monitoring of bus, traffic and pedestrian flows. The pilot team is also monitoring air quality measures and retail spend over time.

LESSONS LEARNED SO FAR

The clearest lesson learnt by the pilot team is the need for dedicated, clear, consistent and continuous engagement with key city centre stakeholders. This lack of consultation and engagement for the initial COVID-19 works resulted from their implementation as emergency measures. This meant that usual opportunities for stakeholder involvement did not occur. This undermined stakeholder support for the pilot once it began, and there was a lack of clarity as to whether the COVID-19 works were to be removed before the pilot was begun, or to be used as a base.

Another lesson was that a complex, evolving location such as a city centre is never able to cleanly separate project impacts from other overlapping projects. The city centre is currently heavily affected by major construction works for City Rail Link, the Downtown Programme and Karangahape Rd upgrade. Within this context it has been difficult to isolate the impacts of the emerging pilot works, in terms of traffic impacts, user sentiment or retail spend.

As a follow-on from this, it has also been unclear how many of the metrics monitored for the pilot are in fact affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, retail spending is down in the Queen St area (and slightly more than the regional average) but it is unclear if this is due solely to the pilot or wider impacts of the pandemic on economic activity n the city centre. Ultimately this will undermine the certainty of any pilot results.

We also learned how the look and feel of public space influences people's behaviours. Pedestrians did not immediately use the newly created space but continued to walk on the existing footway because the new space simply looked like carriageway space (so was perceived as for vehicles). It wasn't until coloured surfacing and additional materials were used that people felt more comfortable using the space.

A final lesson was that unresolved maintenance matters held back some decision-making, as there was reluctance to invest the full budget whilst future funding for maintenance and replacements was unclear. This situation was due in part to the speedy and unique nature of the Innovating Streets programme, but also because the long-term management of tactical urbanism features is not clearly dealt with in current asset management plans.

NEXT STEPS

At time of writing, the pilot team is consulting the community on network changes and preparing for further streetscape upgrades following the co-design process. Substantial tactical urbanism enhancements in Queen Street will be installed from March 2021. The Innovating Streets funding ceases at the end of July 2021 and the project team are preparing monitoring reports and ongoing plans into the future. A full update will be provided at the conference presentation.

REFERENCES

Auckland Council, (2020) *City Centre Masterplan*, Auckland

NZ Herald (2019) *Half of all March commuters into Auckland CBD jumped on public transport: AT*. Retrieved April 2021. *https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/half-of-all-march-commuters-into-auckland-cbd-jumped-on-public-transport-at/SKT3LEDZ3AMRTPAA56EM2YQAFU/*