

Contemporary Leeds: an attractive core surrounded by a ring of dismal townscape dominated by dual carriageways, motorway slip roads and speeding traffic

Leeds Liveable City Here's a plan for Eastside

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Jones the Planner

The newcomer to Leeds is struck by its very obvious contradictions. Here is a dynamic, cosmopolitan, confident, innovative city. The centre boasts great shopping and nightlife and lots of culture with many fine buildings and a huge range of facilities and institutions. The largely pedestrianised centre is a model for the enjoyable and civilized city. But this attractive core is surrounded by a ring of dismal townscape dominated by dual carriageways, motorway slip roads and speeding traffic, the legacy of the city's car centric policies that made Leeds the 'Motorway City of the Seventies'. It is here in this peripheral ring of fractured and incoherent no-mans-land that the buoyant city centre is expanding with a staggering amount of new development underway or planned. In Eastside alone planning permission has been granted for nearly 3,000 new apartments – equivalent to a new town a population of 4 or 5,000. With a few notable exceptions, the massive new complexes in the peripheral ring are piss-poor; brash, inward looking, uncouth. It is not just a problem of buildings themselves – there is no urban context to work with, no sense of place, no conventional streets, no overall planning or urban design framework.



Motorway City of the Seventies and new developments



Leeds can do this: walkable streets along The Calls



Not a people friendly place – Marsh Lane

Leeds can and should do much better than this. The city should be in the forefront of good urban design and sustainable transport planning. Its policies actually promise the right things; it has declared a 'climate emergency' and measures are planned to tackle air pollution and congestion, promote walking and cycling and improve public transport so that Leeds becomes 'a city where you don't need a car'. The *Connecting Leeds* strategy is beginning to put some of these ambitions into practice whilst *Leeds Our Spaces* provides an imaginative overall vision for the public realm and green space. But these are headline strategies. They are not yet being translated into decisive action with holistic plans for specific places.

At present, Eastside is not somewhere that connects the city centre with the inner city but a hostile barrier between them completely dominated by highways and traffic with little or no consideration for pedestrians, connectivity, sense of place or quality of the environment. And yet it contains some of Leeds's greatest tourism and cultural assets, like the Playhouse and cultural quarter and historic Kirkgate, the Minster and the Calls. It is also a key point of arrival with the bus and coach station.

Eastside has lots of potential. This is a plan to help realise that potential.

At present other than a few isolated exceptions such as St Peters Square Eastside is just not a people friendly place. The streets are completely given over to traffic. And 80% of this traffic is not bound for Eastside or the city centre at all but cutting through between North and South Leeds and the motorways. It is obvious that creating a more people friendly and environmentally sustainable Eastside requires a very big reduction in traffic. This cannot be achieved by tinkering around at the edges. A new Movement Plan is required.



The Calls – needs connecting with the rest of Eastside



Kirkgate: this historic street deserves better



Crown Point Road: doesn't need through traffic

Movement Plan

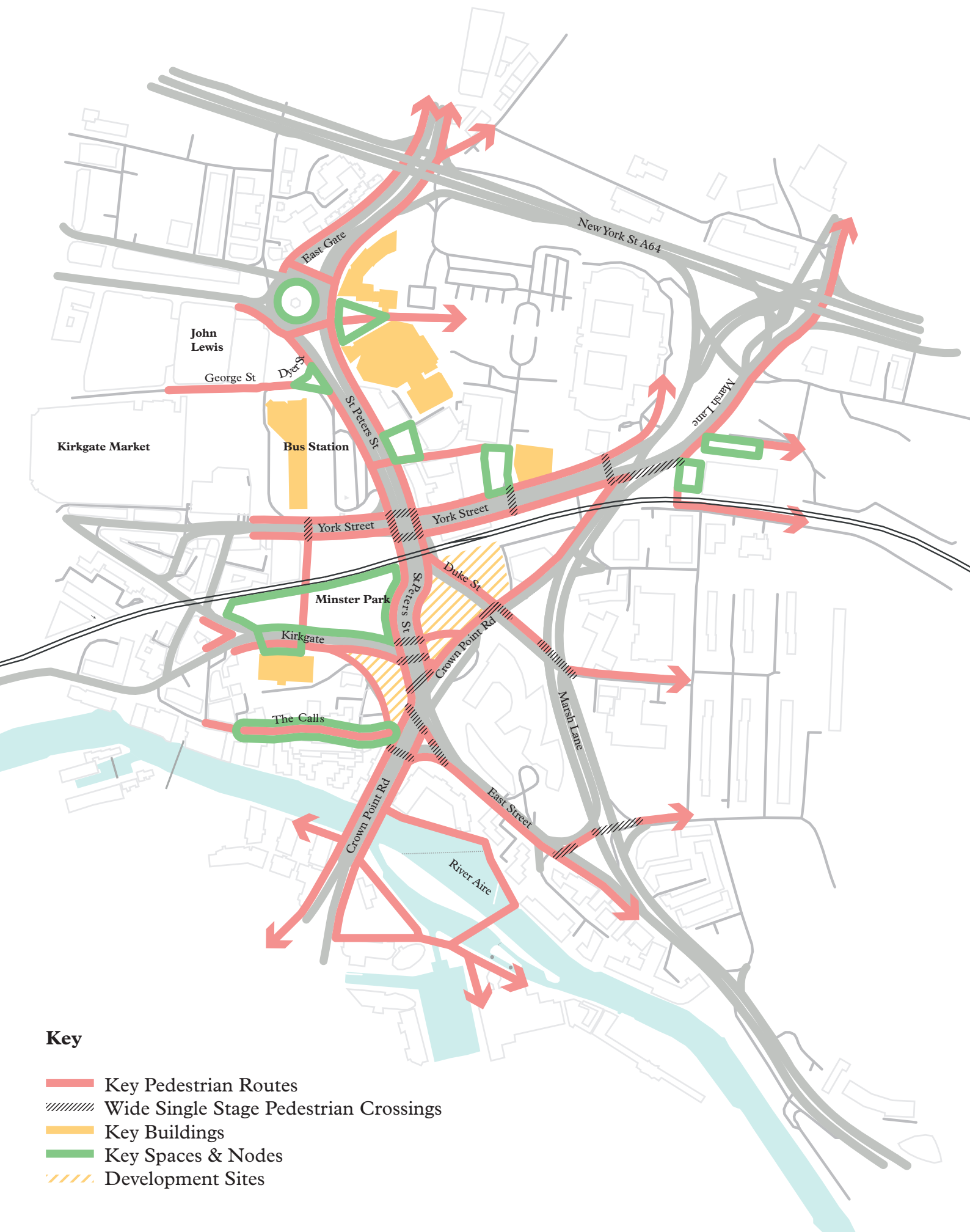
The starting point of the plan has to be to put pedestrians first and create much better, direct pedestrian routes across Eastside linking Burmantofts, Quarry Hill, Richmond Hill, Saxton Gardens, East End Park and Leeds Waterside with the central core of the city. These key pedestrian routes must have wider pavements and short, direct, desire-line pedestrian crossings with more time to cross. Some would parallel the recently introduced super cycle lanes which should be linked into a wider network of cycle priorities. The new movement plan will also need to provide for bus lanes and bus priorities including access to a reconfigured bus station and potentially for new tram routes as part of the developing Metro proposals. Local traffic access will also need to be maintained including access to the Markets and Victoria Gate car parks.

To achieve these objectives there will have to be a big reduction in through traffic and the existing road layout needs to be significantly redesigned. Leeds has a target of reducing overall traffic in the city by 15%, but much bigger reductions in traffic volume will be required here, probably in the order of 50%. This will be a radical change, but other cities like Birmingham are already planning to remove all through traffic from its city centre.

The essence of the proposed traffic plan is to take through traffic out of Eastgate, St Peters St, Duke St, Kirkgate and Crown Point Road so that they can be transformed into a 'City Boulevard'. This will have wide pavements, trees, cycle and bus lanes and local traffic access only. The City Boulevard concept has already been adopted in the City's new plans for the South Bank. It is founded on the principle of creating an integrated and connected city with a strong identity and sense of place. It rebalances the use of the street away from movement to the creation of 'place'.

Pedestrian Plan

Leeds Eastside

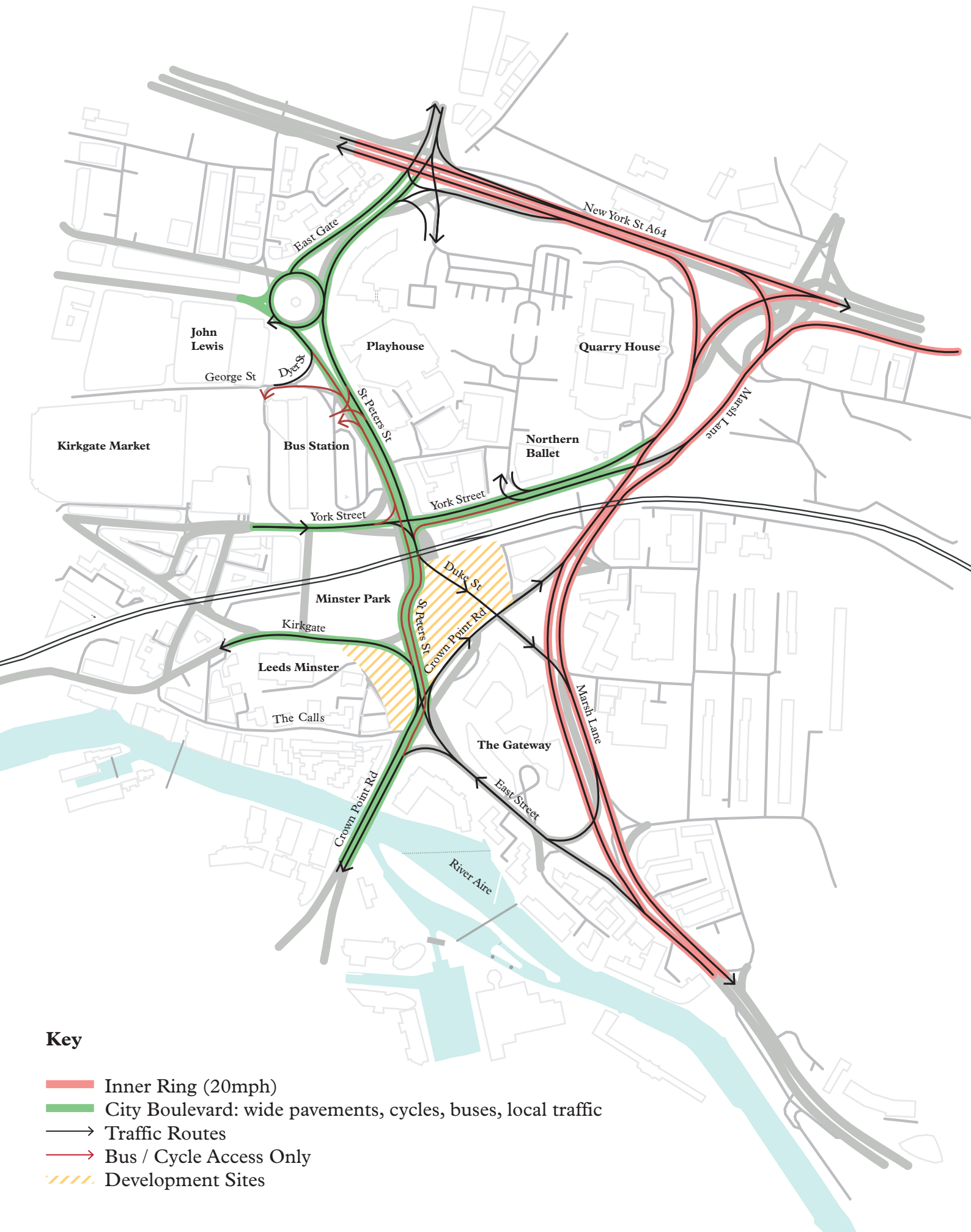


Key

- Key Pedestrian Routes
- Wide Single Stage Pedestrian Crossings
- Key Buildings
- Key Spaces & Nodes
- Development Sites

Traffic Plan

Leeds Eastside



Key

- ▬ Inner Ring (20mph)
- ▬ City Boulevard: wide pavements, cycles, buses, local traffic
- Traffic Routes
- Bus / Cycle Access Only
- ▨ Development Sites



St Peters Street – a possible City Boulevard



A64(M) – for through traffic



Marsh Lane: its environmental impact can be reduced

However, to create the City Boulevard and prioritise pedestrians, cycles, public transport and create a sense of place the existing complex traffic system needs to be simplified. At present Eastgate and St Peters St have 5 traffic lanes and Duke St has 8 lanes. Access to the bus station is also very complex. The number of traffic lanes needs to be drastically reduced. In particular highway space needs to be squeezed down at junctions with turning movements reduced to allow shorter pedestrian crossings and to give pedestrians more time.

A major opportunity comes with the imminent closure of City Square, which will sever the City Centre Loop and so reduce circulating traffic. However radically reducing traffic capacity on Eastgate/St Peters St/Duke St also requires diverting through traffic between Regent St (A61) and South Leeds/M1/M62 which is currently signed via this route. Some traffic will find alternative routes (or modes) and residual through traffic can use the parallel Marsh Lane route. For northbound traffic a new right turn from the York Road inner ring slip road to Regent St will be required. A redesign of this complex junction also enables a new broad, direct and landscaped pedestrian and cycle route from the creative quarter of Mabgate along Eastgate to St Peters St.

Marsh Lane will remain a busy dual carriageway linking the inner ring road with the motorways but its severance effect and environmental impact can be significantly reduced. The plan is to:

- Introduce a 20mph limit as has been done on city centre dual carriageways elsewhere, most recently in central London. The road layout is currently designed for 40mph traffic.
- Redesign junctions to prioritise direct, single stage pedestrian crossings. At present there are complex junction slip roads designed for fast traffic through which pedestrians are threaded by awkward staged crossings. These must be reconfigured as simple junctions with direct desire line pedestrian crossings e.g. at Shannon St, York St, Saxton Lane, Mill St, Richmond St.
- Pavement widening wherever possible and street tree planting and landscaping.



St Peters St/Duke St: remove northbound traffic



Townscape potential – Kirkgate towards the Minster



Metropolitan potential – York Street

To enable the creation of a City Boulevard on the parallel St Peters St/Duke St dual carriageway the following traffic changes are also required:

- Northbound traffic removed from Duke St and St Peters St, except for buses and cycles.
- Southbound traffic retained for local access but the route towards Crown Point Bridge and Kirkgate will be via the East St gyratory.
- This allows for a new two-way bus only link from St Peters St and York St to Kirkgate and Crown Point Bridge. It also allows Crown Point Rd (north of the bridge) to be one way northbound only.
- The new bus only link also enables a westbound bus priority route from the bus station via Kirkgate and Swinegate towards City Square. Importantly this alternative bus route would mean upper Kirkgate (north of the viaduct) can be pedestrianised to create a key pedestrian and visual link between Kirkgate Market and the Minster.

York St is also an important west-east pedestrian, cycle and bus route. It is the obvious link between planned major new residential developments like Leeds City Village, Shannon St and Saxton Lane and the city centre. However, the pedestrian crossings at Marsh Lane are complex and forbidding. The junction with St Peters St is also unpleasant and inconvenient for pedestrians and is an accident blackspot. The area around the pedestrian entrance to the bus station is unattractive and confused.

York St should also be redesigned as a City Boulevard. It is wide enough to allow for substantial pavement widening, tree planting and landscaping to make it an attractive walking route as well as a super cycleway. There is also an opportunity to transform St Peters Place adjacent to Northern Ballet into a new landscaped square for the Cultural Quarter. To simplify conflicting traffic movements and allow for much better pedestrian crossings York St should be one way eastbound to St Peters St. The Market car park would be accessed via Kirkgate as presently proposed.



East St Gateway, designed for cars, not pedestrians



East Street: an over-engineered highway



'Left over space' near the Minster

Urban Design & Planning Opportunities

The Liveable City is about creating attractive, people friendly streets, spaces and places. The traffic changes proposed help achieve this but the issue is as much about the buildings and their relationship to the streets and to each other as it is about the design of the streetscape and public realm. And it is about mixed uses and activities which can help animate streets and create people friendly places.




But at present Eastside largely does not have conventional city streets. The 'islands' between the dual carriageways and slip roads have mostly been redeveloped with large scale, brash, inward looking complexes surrounded by landscaping and usually dominated by car access, like East St Gateway. This is in part a response to the hostile context created by over-engineered highways and fast traffic. Reducing traffic, widening pavements and introducing street trees, landscaping and direct desire line pedestrian crossings will improve the situation. However, to recreate an attractive urban structure the buildings need to relate to the pedestrian environment with active frontages to animate them. This is not always going to be possible but should be the case for all new developments.

The traffic changes proposed will release significant areas of highway land and 'left over space' which could be used for new development. (See plans.) These new development sites are owned by the City Council and WYCA, so here the City has an important opportunity to set the agenda for exemplar sustainable development and design quality. These new developments could radically improve the context of the historic Minster and The Calls and the cultural quarter at St Peters St.

The following sets out proposed parameters for this development of these sites.

St Peters St Plan Leeds Eastside

Key

-  Main Pedestrian Routes
-  Segregated Cycle Routes
-  Pedestrian Street
-  Green Space
-  New Mixed Use Development
-  1 Bus Station Concourse
-  2 Bus Bays
-  3 Layover Bays
-  4 New Entrance
-  5 Shops & Cafes
-  6 Prominent Corner Building



The Bus Station: needs reconfiguring

St Peters St & the Bus Station

The bus station is an important facility but as currently configured forms a significant barrier and blank presence between the city centre and the cultural quarter. The west side of St Peters St is fronted by a bus layover park with the street layout dominated by multiple bus entries and exits. St Peters St itself is excessively wide particularly at junctions like York St. If St Peters St was redesigned as a 'City Boulevard', with two very wide pavements incorporating generous tree planting and landscaping, two-way bike lanes and bus lanes and one southbound lane from local traffic, the street only needs to be 30m wide on the adopted South Bank design guidance.



St Peters St towards Dyer St: traffic is too dominating



Improving connections to the Playhouse



Eastgate and St Peters St: excessively wide for traffic

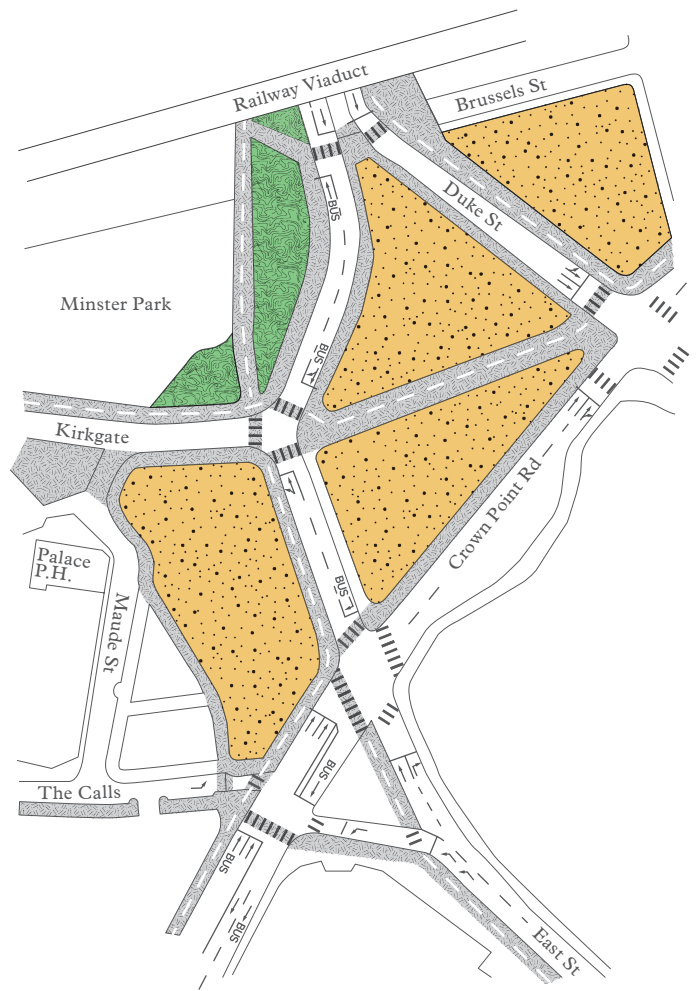
A new building is proposed providing a new street frontage along St Peters St utilising the redundant highway land and part of the underused bus layover area. The existing bus station concourse and platforms would be retained and refurbished with bus access rationalised to a single entry and exit, in conjunction with new bus lanes on St Peters St. The new development is proposed in a U plan turning the corners to York St and Dyer St. The narrowing of the York St junction will enable a prominent corner building and the new development would incorporate a larger, more prominent and expansive pedestrian entrance to the bus station from York St. The junction of St Peters Gate with Dyer St would also be modified to reduce highway dominance and provide a prominent corner opposite the Playhouse crossing, together with an improved pedestrian entrance to the bus station from Dyer St.

The new development will introduce active uses along St Peters St and York St with restaurants and cafés spilling out onto the wide tree lined pavement facing the Cultural Quarter and the attractive St Peters Square. In terms of height and massing it should not compete with taller buildings in the vicinity but could be 5 or 6 stories, possibly taking its design inspiration as a continuation of the linear formality of the Headrow. The corners to York St and Dyer St should be significant nodes or features in the townscape. The bus entrance/exit would be bridged over to provide visual continuity whilst the adjacent coach station would essentially remain as at present.

Kirkgate Plan Leeds Eastside

Key

-  Main Pedestrian Routes
-  Segregated Cycle Routes
-  New Sites for Development
-  Extension to Park



Historic streets adjacent to The Calls should not be so isolated

Leeds Minster & environs

The Minster is a key building in the history and townscape of Leeds. It is adjacent to The Calls conservation area but in an exposed position facing the City Centre Loop road (Kirkgate) and the very run-down open space of Penny Pocket Park. There is little sense of enclosure or its historic context. The traffic changes proposed will release significant areas of highway land and 'left over space' to the east of the Minster. This could be made into more coherent green space. However, a landscaped area would provide little enclosure and its context would be big anonymous complexes such as East St Gateway. A large City Park is being created nearby across Crown Point Bridge whilst the existing adjacent Penny Pocket Park is badly in need of imaginative landscape restoration. This should be the priority.

It is therefore proposed that the land released by highway changes should largely be redeveloped at high density but with low rise buildings in order to extend the urban form of the Calls and create a more appropriate context and enclosure for Leeds Minster. The development should include the Council's surface car park at East St.



Towards Maude Street and the unnecessary surface car park



The Minster: lost amid heavy road engineering



Potential: the triangular site near the Minster

The development at East St/Maude St would be mixed use but primarily housing suitable for long term occupancy, principally family housing as opposed to the prevalent apartment complexes nearby. Buildings on Maude St are late Victorian, 3/4 storey in red brick. The Palace PH is earlier and rendered. The informal square next to the Palace is paved in setts with an excellent view of Minster and this provides an obvious focus for the development. New buildings need to provide enclosure east of the Minster to enhance its urban setting. They should be of similar height to Maude St and with traditional narrow frontages and replicate the tight, back of pavement building form. Along East St buildings could have varied heights up to 5 storeys but with the narrow frontages of more traditional buildings. Ground floor shops/cafes could be appropriate here. Car parking within the development should be minimal but some on street parking would be useful and help reduce traffic speeds.

The triangular site between East St, Duke St and Crown Point Rd is opposite the very large 'Gateway' development. Although traffic on the surrounding roads will be much reduced these will still be important thoroughfares. The site is bisected by the super cycle way and parallel pedestrian route from Kirkgate to Duke St. It is proposed that this becomes a formal landscaped axis for the development framing views of the Minster.

A mixed use predominately housing for long term occupation is proposed. Shops and cafes at ground floor would be most suitable along East St and Kirkgate to the north as this is likely to be the main pedestrian flow.

Buildings should be back of pavement to provide street enclosure and with narrow frontages and traditional vertical emphasis. Building heights should be varied, matching the scale of the west side of East St but could build in height towards the viaduct and on Crown Point Road opposite The Gateway. The form of development must emphasise traditional urban street structure and provide a foil to the very large-scale atomised developments to the east. Parking should be very limited and not dominate the rhythm of street frontages. The development site east of Duke St could also be extended as a result of modifying the existing junction at Crown Point Rd, and should be redeveloped along similar principles.



Minster Park – a big opportunity ...



... not being realised



Deserves a better urban setting

Minster Park

The setting of the Minster will also be enhanced by landscape and paving redesign so that the wide roadway of Kirkgate and the Park to the north becomes a unified space focused on the historic church. Upper Kirkgate should be pedestrianised and this route needs to be reinforced visually by continuity of pedestrian paving and priority

The reduction in traffic on Duke St allows for much wider pavements alongside the existing park and flowing through the railway arches linking the open space north and south of the railway. Re-imagining and redesigning these open spaces as a coherent whole will be a big opportunity but also a challenge. A landscape design competition is required to make the most of this opportunity. This could potentially look at wider opportunities for Green Streets and improving visual way finding including pedestrian routes to and along the adjacent but largely hidden Waterside.



Will Leeds tackle the issue of traffic domination?



Leeds could learn from Goldsmith Street, Norwich

Conclusions

This is an ambitious plan for change in Eastside but it is a practical one. The fundamental question is whether Leeds is going to tackle the issue of traffic domination and its direct impact on climate change and air quality but also its indirect impact in making more sustainable alternatives like walking, cycling and public transport much less attractive. The impact of traffic domination on street life, social life and the quality of architecture and townscape is also fundamental. Many other cities are tackling these problems in imaginative ways. Birmingham, like Leeds, was a 'motorway city' but is now leading the way in change. Leeds has the ambition to be 'the best city in the UK'. Well, transforming Eastside would be a very good start.

Images

Quite a few of the images are now out of date as we were prevented from taking new photographs due to the pandemic. All photographs are by Adrian Jones & Chris Matthews except Goldsmith Street (courtesy London Road, Flickr) and Leeds Playhouse (courtesy Google Street View).