



↑ Motorised vehicles are seldom seen travelling through the historic centre of Ghent JERROEN WILLEMS

No way through for motorists in Ghent

Through traffic has been banished from the centre of Belgium's third largest city in an effort to relieve congestion. Could such a radical measure work in the UK?

First time visitors to the medieval city of Ghent cannot fail to notice the impressive Gothic architecture of several imposing buildings such as Saint Bavo Cathedral and Saint Nicholas' Church. But something else, not so obvious at first glance, marks this place out from most other cities: there is next to no traffic throughout much of the centre.

It is nearly a year since the City of Ghent authority introduced a 'Circulation Plan' which makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to drive through the city from one side to the other. Ghent has been divided into six districts that surround the historic centre and are collectively circled by a ring road, 11km in circumference.

Motorists are free to enter any of the six districts from the ring road and leave the same way, but are generally not permitted to drive from one district to another unless they have special

dispensation. Thirty two cameras track vehicles passing between districts, with a €55 fine levied at motorists without authority to do so.

Restricting movement across the city is aimed at preventing longer distance traffic from entering and congesting Ghent, but it seems also to have dramatically reduced shorter journeys by vehicles inside the conurbation. Transfer between two districts has also been made harder following the introduction of several 'cuts' to key routes, prohibiting all motorised traffic from passing.

"Before the Circulation Plan was introduced, around 40% of the traffic in Ghent was not heading to a destination in the city; now those vehicles have gone," says the city's mobility director Frank Vanden Bulcke. "We have also found that cutting the city up into 'pizza slices' has removed a lot of local traffic and there is better accessibility

for vehicles which have an end point within Ghent."

He adds that the plan has helped public transport to circulate more freely and claims there are now almost no traffic jams in the city centre. "Keeping private vehicles out of the centre helps to keep the city alive; our goal is to make Ghent more accessible, sustainable and liveable. The car is no longer the preferred mode of transportation in the city."

Additional changes recently implemented include increasing the size of the city's pedestrian only areas from 35ha to 51ha, reducing speed limits across the city to 30km/h and increasing the price of parking a vehicle on the street or in an underground car park by a factor of at least two.

An extra 2400 extra parking spaces have been created outside of the city, with a dedicated shuttle bus providing access to the centre. And an electric people mover known as a Wandlebus provides free travel within the larger pedestrian only zones to frail persons or those with young children.

Cycle infrastructure has also been improved, with more dedicated routes created. Journeys by bike currently account for around 30% of all movements, and the city authority aims to increase this figure to 35% by 2030. >



"Keeping private vehicles out of the centre keeps the city alive."

Frank Vanden Bulcke



Evolution of radical city thinking

Ghent may only have 259,000 inhabitants but in the 14th Century was one of the largest cities in Europe. With industrialisation 500 years later the city became a centre for the cotton industry.

As the city evolved, the population spread out over a wide area and today its ring road encompasses a notably large area for the size of conurbation.

Twenty years ago Ghent introduced a pedestrian zone, banning through traffic from the historic centre. "It was a huge success, despite some shopkeepers not agreeing at the beginning," says the city's strategic mobility planner Jan Gheldof. "But a couple of years ago we noticed a problem with through traffic and the Mayor decided it was time for a rethink in terms of how traffic is regulated."

This rethink led to the introduction of Ghent's

Circulation Plan last April, when the city centre was divided into six sectors to manage traffic movement and the pedestrianised zones were doubled in size.

At one important intersection beside a canal in the city – previously popular with both cars and cyclists – access for private vehicles has now been banned. Up to 800 cars used to pass through the intersection each hour, but now as many as 1400 bikes an hour ride through the area every morning and evening. Red lines painted on the road remind approaching motorists that they are no longer allowed to pass that point.

Motorists who live in a pedestrianised area are permitted to drive to their homes. But some residents have started to display a sticker in their windscreens to deflect unwarranted criticism from other road users that they may

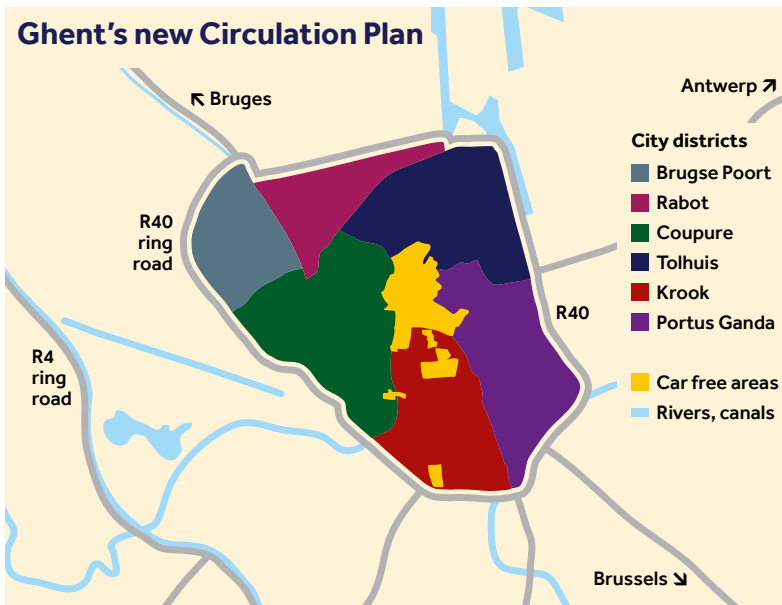


↑ Ghent champions tranquil living JERROEN WILLEMS

be breaking the rules when behind the wheel in a pedestrian zone.

Elsewhere in the city, junction priorities have changed to favour the movement of cycles over cars. Cycling through the city in December, TP noticed how easy it was to get around by bike. But cobbled streets in the centre were slippery in the rain and care had to be taken to avoid getting your front wheel lodged in one of many tram lines.

Ghent's new Circulation Plan



> Ghent's mobility team is confident that the Circulation Plan has notably reduced vehicle movements and claims also that bus patronage has risen by around 10% since last spring.

But it will not know for sure how successful it has been in cutting traffic until this April, when a set of data is published to mark the end of the plan's first year of implementation.

But while vehicle use within the central cordon is likely to have dropped, the city authority recognises also that some routes providing access to and from the ring road may have seen an increase in traffic.

Overall, the city is pleased with how the Circulation Plan has performed. But can a ban on vehicles travelling through an urban centre work only

for relatively small cities, like Ghent? Frank Vanden Bulcke does not think so. "Most of the things we are doing could be exported to little cities, but also to big cities too," he says.



↑ More than a third of journeys in the city are made by bike JERROEN WILLEMS

Could a circulation plan, like that seen in Ghent, work in large towns and cities in the UK?



Laura Peacock
Innovation manager
Oxfordshire County Council

This is a very interesting proposal. Whether something similar would work in Oxford requires more detailed consideration and technical work, not least an understanding of the impact on the Oxford 'Ring Road' which already carries large volumes of traffic and the A34 for a significant section.

We are actively exploring options for further demand management in Oxford city to stop general traffic moving through the centre. This includes consideration of a congestion charge and workplace parking levy, which would support and complement proposals for bus rapid transit, a step change in cycling and public realm and a city wide zero emission zone.

The Council is also collaborating with data aggregation and communication innovators to explore how we combine these new methods with demand management.



Tony Ciaburro **FCIHT**
Chief executive, SOCIETAL and former
Northamptonshire County Council director

Northampton's central area has evolved around an ancient street layout and is extremely sensitive to even the most minor incident or change in travel patterns.

We have what could once have been described as an 'Inner Ring Road' but decades of sporadic development has been such that it is now the key distributor road for most traffic entering or leaving the central area and the town.

It is already at capacity most of the time and is fed by a number of heavily congested radial routes. For many motorists there is very little opportunity to vary their routes.

Preventing traffic from travelling between local districts would have little effect on the central area congestion. However, radical solutions such as Ghent's are heading in the right direction and remind us that we have to be bold in our thinking.