NTBCC Comments on the Improving Charlotte Square Project.

Executive Summary

The New Town and Broughton Community Council (NTBCC) has significant concerns regarding the Improving Charlotte Square Project and specifically the Phase 3 Preliminary Designs, as follows:

1. **Unclear Project Needs and Goals**: We question the overall purpose of the project beyond enhancing cycling infrastructure. We believe that additional clarity is required on the specific outcomes with a detailed cost breakdown to ensure value for Edinburgh's residents.

2. **Insufficient Community Engagement**: We are concerned at the limited community engagement in the decision-making process and call for wider consultation before the project is further progressed.

3. **Limited Design Options**: We advocate for exploring a cycling route on the south side of Charlotte Square to mitigate potential conflicts and reduce costs.

4. **Pedestrian Safety**: We question the design and location of the pedestrian crossings especially the non-signalised crossing on the south side of Charlotte Square, which raises significant safety concerns.

5. **Heritage Considerations**: We believe that there are good reasons for restoring the setted road surface where possible to enhance the heritage value of the square, rather than opting for tarmac.

6. **Project and Funding Prioritization**: We are concerned that this project is being prioritised over others in the City Mobility Plan and question the validity of its ranking and anticipated impact on public realm.

7. **Scope and Impact on Related Projects**: We consider that the impact on tourist coach parking and overall traffic management in light of future projects both need to be thoroughly reconsidered.

Detailed Concerns

While the New Town and Broughton Community Council (NTBCC) understand and support the desire to improve the accessibility of this important area of the city centre and the need for a better cycling link with the existing CCWEL infrastructure, we have some significant concerns about this project overall and specifically about the Phase 3 Preliminary Designs.

1. **Unclear Project Needs and Goals**
   Having read the various documentation on the Council's website, we remain uncertain about the overall purpose of the project and apart from the improved link for cyclists what needs it is designed to meet. This particularly relates to the so-called upgrades to the public realm. Given that this project contains a number of distinct outcomes, there should be a clear description of each of these elements and a detailed breakdown of the overall costs. This would provide greater clarity on the cost of delivering each element and thus whether the project is delivering best value for Edinburgh's council tax payers.

2. **Insufficient Community Engagement**
   We are concerned about the lack of broader engagement in the formal decision-making process. We understand that the level of engagement was determined by the Council's Consultation Advisory Panel. We strongly believe that the plans for Charlotte Square should be subject to wider consultation with key stakeholders and the general public. The outcome of that consultation as well as the results of an Integrated Impact Assessment, Heritage Impact Assessment and Road Safety Audits (Stage 2 and 3) should be included in a full report to the Transport and Environment Committee before further funds or other resources are committed to this project.

   Clearly, this project is intended to be a significant element in the transformation of the City Centre at an important location in the UNESCO World Heritage Site. We therefore do not understand why this project has not been subject to the normal consultation processes for projects of this nature and cost. Broader consultation involving all of the active travel, accessibility and heritage groups would ensure that there is clearer buy-in from the whole community and not just from a limited number of designated key stakeholders.

3. **Limited Design Options**

There is very little difference in the two Phase 3 preliminary design proposals contained within the Engagement report. The only material difference appears to be exact location of the cycle path on the north side of Charlotte Square. These are not conceptual designs but instead two very similar approaches to a single design which reflects the lack of any proper engagement with the wider community.

Given the importance of this project to cycling infrastructure in the city centre, we do not understand why only a cycling route on the north side of the square is being considered. Having the only cycling route on this side of the square raises concerns about the shared use of the planned public realm and also the potential for conflict with the security demands of Bute House. We believe that further consideration should be given to the alternative of a cycling route on the south side of Charlotte Square. This option would be more straightforward and could be achieved without the other significant changes planned for the square thus reducing the cost and time required to deliver this critical link to the city centre cycling network. Access to the north side could then be restricted to authorised vehicles and allow this space to be developed as public realm primarily as a pedestrian area without also having to meet the needs of cyclists.

It is not clear from the information provided how the different levels around the Square will be addressed although this appears to be one of the aims of the project. Is this a realistic aim or should the design recognise the topography and instead create the means to move between the different levels with pathways of a suitable gradient for wheelchair users rather than eliminate these height differences? Once the cost breakdown of the different elements of this project are known, the need to flatten the whole site should be reconsidered.

4. **Pedestrian Safety**

Based on feedback from Living Streets, we believe that the pedestrian crossings from George Street to Charlotte Square should be further assessed. Currently, the locations of these crossings do not meet desire lines and therefore there is a risk that pedestrians will use other means to cross Charlotte Street. How have the

locations for the planned pedestrian crossings been selected? Do the crossings meet the latest national design guidance for such infrastructure? Has any modelling of pedestrian footfall been undertaken to confirm that the crossing space is adequate? Based on our recent discussions, we are concerned also about the plans for the planned pedestrian crossing on the south side of Charlotte Square. We understand that it is currently planned to install a non-signalised crossing. Given the traffic volumes, the proximity to the junction with Hope Street and the width of the road we strongly believe that this decision should be revisited on the grounds of pedestrian safety.

5. **Heritage Considerations**
   We note that in the latest designs, the roads around the square retain a tarmac surface. This is surely a missed opportunity to reinstate the setted road surface on the north and west side of the square where traffic levels will be lowest. Restoration of the setted road surface would have a significant positive impact on the heritage of this important New Town square and thus enhance its value as public realm. As noted earlier, a Heritage Impact Assessment should be published showing the impact of the proposed changes and if required any mitigations.

6. **Project and Funding Prioritization**
   We understand that the council will be seeking external funding for this project but are dismayed that this search for funds is being given priority over the cross streets on George Street. This project should not be prioritised at the expense of many other City Mobility Plan projects. At the time the Engagement report was published, the George Street and Meadows to George Street projects were expected to be at least started by 2025/26. Neither of these projects have the necessary approvals or funding in place. Any consideration of this project should not assume that these projects will be proceeding and as such the merits of this project should be assessed independently of them.

   Within the CMP Capital Investment Prioritisation report, this project was ranked 30th overall with a score of 22 points but this includes a number of questionable sub-scores. For example, the maximum of 3 points for impact on walkers and wheelers. As this is not a high footfall area or with known road safety concerns this score is very

surprising. We know from discussions with Living Streets that they do not consider this to be a high priority project compared to the many other pedestrian improvement projects included in the CMP. How has this score been justified?

The report states that the project will result in a significant positive impact on the public realm, but it is not clear how the maximum score of 3 will be achieved. Closing the north side of the square to all but authorised traffic would allow increased pedestrian use of this space without the need for the significant landscaping and the levelling of the site that is proposed. Charlotte Square is a private square with very little public access. While there are benefits to the owners of this space and to visitors to Edinburgh, there is very little to be gained for most residents. Decisions on the use of scarce Council funds should take account of this limited value for Council tax payers.

7. **Scope and Impact on Related Projects**
   We understand that the plans shown on your website have been updated to take account of additional feedback from Lothian Buses and residents of Glenfinlas Street. We welcome the decision to remove the planned bus stops from Charlotte Square as this would have increased the conflict with the space requirements of other users. We are concerned though that there has been insufficient attention given to where tourist coaches will park while their passengers are visiting Charlotte Square especially given the changes that are being made to access to the north side of the Square. It was suggested that they could wait in the limited loading areas on the west of the Square but given their size and the limited space for turning this issue surely requires further consideration. We understand that you have changed the design to retain the closure of Glenfinlas Street at its junction with St Colme Street to take account of concerns raised by residents that this street would become a parking area for vehicles including coaches visiting the Square. We look forward to seeing the final plans for this street so that we can fully consider their impact on the overall project.

   Given the possibility of a future tram project closing access for most vehicles to North Bridge and with the potential impact of the Meadows to George Street project on traffic on The Mound, Lothian Road may become the sole north-south route in the city centre. If so,

what impact will this have on traffic volumes and congestion on Charlotte Street? What will the impact be on Hope Street? Reducing the roadway widths on what may be primary routes for vehicles may be a short sighted and unrealistic choice. Has any modelling been undertaken of traffic flows on Charlotte Street based on these other projects proceeding? Does this modelling show that traffic flows remain at acceptable levels without significant congestion?

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