



All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group

House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA
Ref: LR Applg Winter 09 v.1

Light Rail & Trams, Affordable & Sustainable Transport



Tuesday 23rd February 2010,
Grand Committee Room,
Westminster Hall,

The Level Playing Fields for Trams are here. (Report - Light Rail & the City Regions Inquiry 2009)

Meeting Overview

During the Autumn of 2009, the Group held a Select Committee-style inquiry, inviting interested parties to provide written submissions, of which there were 37 from organisations and individuals. This process was followed by the holding of three live sessions (27th October, 3rd and 25th November 2009) at which a total of 25 witnesses gave further evidence and responded to questions from a panel of six. The panel consisted of Paul Rowen MP (Chairman), Tom Harris MP, Graham Stringer MP, Clive Betts MP, Earl John Attlee and Baroness Hanham..

The objective was to consider progress in developing modern trams and Light Rail in the UK. To examine how barriers to tram scheme developments and implementation could be tackled. The starting point was the report presented on 3rd April 2005 by the Transport Select Committee "Integrated Transport: The Future of Light Rail and Modern Trams in the United Kingdom" [HC 378, two volumes]. This report had in turn been triggered by the rejection in 2004 by the then Transport Secretary Alistair Darling, of four tramway projects (Leeds, Liverpool, South Hants, and Manchester).

The meeting launched the Group's own report "Light Rail & the City Regions Inquiry" and was supported heavily in this venture by pteg (Passenger Transport Executive Group).

The meeting commenced at 15.00 hours with the Chairman, **Paul Rowen MP** (Lib.Dem., Rochdale), supported by Graham Stringer MP (Labour, Manchester Blackley) and Clive Betts MP (Labour, Sheffield Attercliffe), welcoming about 41 delegates who were present. He expressed his personal thanks to all those who had made written submissions and provided oral evidence, which, he said "had considerably helped us". He also thanked pteg, and especially Matt Brunt, for servicing the Group during the period of the Inquiry.

The Group had decided to take the Select Committee Report of 2005 as its base, and to ascertain what had happened since that time, and whether the recommendations and points made by that Report were still valid. The Government had since then invested in Light Rail schemes, but many difficulties still hindered progress. It had been decided, in the run-up to a General Election [due within about three months] to discover what were the policies and views of the three main parties about tramways, and to send the resultant Report to all candidates. Mr Rowen summarised the chapters of the Report and indicated that an important dialogue should be undertaken, both with those who had submitted material and with other involved parties. "We were particularly struck that, in comparison to bus schemes, promoters must pay a much higher proportion of utilities' betterment costs" he said. Encouragingly, Lord Adonis (Secretary of State for Transport) had described the post-war abandonment of tramways as a "serious mistake...none of those European countries which had kept their trams regret doing so". (Mr Rowen then temporarily left the meeting to attend the House).

This meeting by invitation only, where MPs, Stakeholders etc., within the Light Rail industry and invited members of the Public will have a chance to discuss debate and raise questions concerning Light Rail.

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Light Rail (UK) Ltd
Warrington, Cheshire, England,
United Kingdom WA2 8TX

Tel 01925 243500, Fax 01925 243000, 07721378223

Mr Jim Harkins FCILT

Email lightrailuk@aol.com www.lightrailuk.com





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At this point **Graham Stringer MP** (Manchester Blackley) took the Chairmanship of the meeting, and reviewed the history of modern tramway development in the UK, referring briefly to the Select Committee's reports of 1996 and 2005, before moving on to Mr Alistair Darling's refusal (as the then Secretary of State for Transport) to finance several schemes, thus apparently killing off Light Rail and tramway development in the UK.

This resulted in street demonstrations and an internal Labour Party feud, and gave rise to intense lobbying. The 2005 Report recommended ways by which the path of tramway promotion might be eased, and the Labour manifesto of that year pledged around £0.5bn towards extending the Metrolink system – an expansion now in progress.

However, he was slightly depressed to find that many of the shortcomings and deficiencies within the Department for Transport (DfT) were still in evidence, and especially that there was no “champion” or Light Rail department within the DfT who could advise, guide and facilitate those cities and towns wishing to consider tramways and Light Rail.

Mr **Clive Betts MP** (Sheffield Attercliffe) then indicated they were trying to ascertain the role of Light Rail. Where they had been built in the UK they had been a success, but this had not been followed up by way of system expansions.

The DfT had both bus and rail functions, but there was no dedicated mechanism for Light Rail, which thus fell between two stools. An example of things going awry was the instance of promoters drawing up schemes in line with DfT requirements, only for these requirements then to be changed; he exemplified the Sheffield (Meadowhall) – Rotherham extension of Supertram. This was a natural and logical extension of the tram line, and was planned accordingly (and showed a favourable cost/benefit outcome). Upon its submission, the DfT asked whether a guided bus scheme would not be preferable – did this mean, he asked, that they wanted a modal interchange at Meadowhall, or a wastefully competing guided bus through-route from Sheffield to Rotherham?

The concept of a seamless journey by tram (half of which had existed for around 15 years) seemed to have escaped the DfT. Clearly, DfT thinking was flawed.

At 15.25 hours, the meeting was opened to questions and comments from those attending.

Mr **Geoff Inskip** (CENTRO and UKTram) welcomed the report, but wondered how the Group saw the way forward now that its report was in the public domain. Mr Stringer thought that political parties would be more likely to have a positive attitude whilst seeking votes at an election than when they were in Government (and facing economic stringency). He saw the report as a strong opportunity to change party thinking during the coming weeks. Mr Betts took this further by expressing the sentiment [much repeated throughout the rest of the meeting] that success for cities and towns in establishing tramways lay in handing decision-making powers back to local communities – “localism”.

Mr **Nigel Foster** (Arup) emphasised the need for the Government to send out positive signals to the market and to industry, neither of whom could forge ahead without such assurances. This would probably need major institutional changes within the department. Mr Stringer supported this, and believed that the modern European urban image was of a tramway running down the city and town streets. Mr Rowen (having now returned to chair the meeting again) said that the Government supported UK Tram (morally and partially financially) and he saw this as a portal to progress, but said the DfT still needed a “champion”, although its assessments were now faster compared to previous performance.

Mr **Kelvin Hopkins MP** (Luton North) came out with a blunt assertion that various Governments had “got it wrong” over more than 50 years, telling the public that they all wanted cars rather than socially unacceptable buses and trains. Such progress as had been made was usually driven by industry, which needed to push the inert politicians. He described London as the fourth worst world city for transport. Mr Stringer, in agreeing, added that in Lord Adonis the Government now had an enthusiastic supporter of transport, whose leadership would revolutionise the department. Mr Betts cautioned that the next Government,

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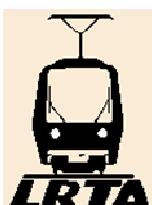
United Kingdom WA2 8TX

Tel 01925 243500, Fax 01925 243000, 07721378223

Mr Jim Harkins FCILT

Email lightrailuk@aol.com www.lightrailuk.com

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faced with economic challenges which would militate against the long-term transport investment that was needed, should not be deflected. Mr Rowen opined that giving powers both of decision-making and of raising capital for investment to local authorities (who were best suited to know what was best locally) was key to the whole problem. He suggested something similar to the Victorian concept of local authority bonds, financed locally (and also not so locally) through the marketplace, rather than being tied to the apron-strings of Treasury formulæ.

Mr Steve Barber (Nottingham City Councillor) prefaced his comments with the remark that they had spent ten long years battling for their tramway, and that finance and politics were now a problem – a work-place parking levy (about £1 per space per day) had incurred immense local opposition, and that the newly-Conservative controlled County Council (a partner in the scheme, and one in whose territory part of the tramway would run) had pulled the plug in their own role; Manchester had also “come a cropper” over road pricing. He said that the parking levy would now proceed in any case, and the Conservatives had indicated they would not oppose the scheme if they were in Government. But residents (especially in the county, the people who would be most hit by the parking levy) still opposed the concept. In reply, Mr Rowen suggested the use of European modes of finance rather than by using specific taxes and levies. Mr Betts, however, thought that local financial powers might come with an electoral risk.

Mr Neil Anderson (a consultant) explained that he had been advocating the use of Light Rail for freight purposes, and saw an attractive proposition in the regular arrival of freight-carrying trams outside city supermarkets and stores. However, Light Rail authorities saw it as a goods haulage matter, and hauliers saw it as a Light Rail operations matter. He felt the retail trade would welcome such a development.

Mr Andy Cooper (a campaigner for Nottingham tramways, phase III) wondered whether looking at the feasibility of using available redundant track bed infrastructures would help keep down costs, and Mr Rowen pointed out that all the current UK Light Rail systems had utilised railway formations. He also thought that it would be easier for existing systems to be expanded cheaply than for new ones to be created, through the use of old railways as well as the use of TramTrains. Density of population and availability of old formations were two serious factors (this from Mr Stringer)

Mr Howard Johnston (Editor-in-Chief, *Tramways & Urban Transit*, LRTA) saw the damnation of the DfT in the Report, but could only see two references to the Treasury – he asked how the Group proposed to “beat up” the Treasury. Mr Stringer said the background had been (a) Mr Darling’s opposition to steel wheel on steel rail, and (b) Lord Adonis’ switch of ideas and emphases; he thought the three political parties were now all facing in the same (and correct) direction. Mr Rowen said the economic situation would be challenging, but increased investment would still be vital (especially as oil prices increased and “peak oil” approached) and the Treasury would need to face up squarely in order to cope, and not to halt investment whilst public finances were being balanced.

Mr Jim Harkins (Light Rail (UK) Ltd) touched upon the cost of air quality (report, p15) and the need to use this factor as the “Glasgow Kiss” upon the Treasury. Mr Rowen referred to the requirement to reduce health budgets by 10-20% (whilst cost-saving was a problem for PCTs) and agreed that the Treasury needed to seek ways of reducing, at source, demands upon the health services, pollution being one of them. Mr Harkins’ argument would save money without cutting front-line services, which was a much-peddled public objective.

Dr Elsa Woodward, High Wycombe Society, Leader of Transport Group a lady amongst the delegates referred to Ultra Light Rail (mentioned in *Tramways & Urban Transit*) but saw no reference in the Group’s report. She felt that a few new systems of this kind could give a lead. Mr Rowen replied that this aspect had been looked at, but there seemed to be no-one in the UK willing to take the initiative on an untried technology. This, however, could be something for a “localist” authority, armed with suitable powers and a sense of initiative.

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Dr David Walmsley of the Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT) said it represented the industry to a degree (it had a fixed-track section), and welcomed the Report. He referred to the role of the transport operators vis-à-vis the utilities, and Mr Rowen opined that the UK tended to militate against co-operation – the various sectors did not seem to talk together in any constructive manner.

Speaking on behalf of the Light Rapid Transit Forum (a constituent member of UK Tram), **Mary Bonar** described the Report as “a useful tool in making progress”. She felt that the application of locally raised financial contributions had the tendency to bring about a balancing reduction in central Government funding, and Mr Rowen responded that Government funding was allocated by regional bodies, who were responsible for the decisions; he repeated that city regions should have the powers to raise capital funding in the marketplace, as well as to benefit from taxation revenue (as now).

Mr Andrew Braddock (Vice-Chairman, Light Rail Transit Association) averred that local levies were commonplace in Europe and America, but that the UK had managed to kick off on the wrong foot, thus engendering much public opposition. Local development funding, and small local purchase and employment taxation were frequent overseas sources of finance, but needed to follow after the introduction of trams and Light Rail, rather than to precede (as was often the proposal in the UK). Mr Stringer followed with a comment that there was less raised now in local taxation which was also spent locally than at any time previously.

Reference had already been made during the meeting to the historic visionary and strong leadership in the large cities, which got things done; **Mr Steve Barber** of Nottingham added his view that nowadays strong and visionary political leadership was required, but that this was often lacking.

Mr Stringer disagreed – a solid political base was helpful, but things could also be accomplished where authorities were divided politically, but with talking and agreement. Paul Rowen supported this contention by saying that the Manchester Region had a long history of joint working between about ten councils which were spread across the spectrum of the three main parties: “It can be done.”

Mr Tony Young, a well-known independent transport consultant who hailed from Rochdale, complimented the Group upon its Report, and hoped it would be widely circulated and read.

He believed that the 2005 Select Committee Report had been sound, but had anything been done?

Would the Group’s Report therefore be monitored to ensure it was continually hitting home in the future? How would this be done? In response, Mr Rowen outlined ideas and plans to drive movement and progress. He felt that the Group’s existence had “warmed” the DfT to some degree, although they had been too reticent to attend the present meeting [representatives of the DfT had given oral evidence to the Inquiry panel –Secretariat note]. He declared that localism had to be the key – that relying on the DfT alone would not be the answer.

Mr Rowen then concluded by thanking all for their attendance, and he looked forward “to meeting you all shortly after the General Election!”.

The meeting closed at 16.27 hours.

“Light Rail & the City Regions Inquiry” – Final Report, February 2010, is jointly published by the All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group (APPGLR) and the Passenger Transport Executive Group (PTEG).

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The Final Report is available on www.pteg.net/PolicyCentre/LRInquiry/ along with transcripts of the oral evidence and associated documents. Other pteg publications on the subject of Light Rail and tramways can be found on www.pteg.net/PolicyCentre/LightRail/

For more information and a hard copy of the report, please call the pteg Support unit on 0113 251 7204, or at info@pteg.net.
The Secretariat can be contacted at 01925 243500 or lightrailuk@aol.com

James Harkins
Secretariat
Applrg

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