

Metro link-reality behind the hype. Why residents pay heavy price for Light Rail:

I am grateful for having this opportunity to address the All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group even though it is rather daunting.

I have never been politically motivated and slightly bemused how I find myself in this position today. But it probably says everything about how strong my feelings are about Metrolink and the treatment of residents affected by its arrival that I am speaking this afternoon.

I am also not an orator and as a journalist my chosen subject is the written word not the spoken word. So, please forgive any stumblings, hesitancy etc.

Before I start, I'd like you to take a look at the cuttings provided for your perusal to get a flavour of my argument. They are of course a one-side look at Metrolink and Transport for Greater Manchester.

But as biased as this bundle may seem, it is also highly representative of the mood of Mancunians towards Metrolink and the inability of Transport for Greater Manchester and its partners to deliver anything like a successful and reliable service.

I could have provided samples of spin from TfGM. But there is a huge difference between what they say and claim and the reality of the service they provide.

I am not a Luddite and I am not against a need for a vast improvement in public transport. Neither have I anything to gain from my attempts to highlight the various injustices involved.

But Metrolink is one huge smoke and mirrors exercise that doesn't do what it says on the tin. It's unreliable, it's expensive, it hasn't reduced congestion in Greater Manchester and in my view has provided no noticeable or significant economic benefits.

Indeed, I have asked my local council leader to outline the “massive benefits” Metrolink will bring to my home town. I am still waiting for an answer. I posted a comment on his Leader’s Blog over his jaundiced view-as permitted to do so.

It was never appeared on site. Indeed, the comment facility has since been withdrawn from all his postings.

This is how democracy works in Tameside and how residents’ concerns are treated.

Indeed, my last public speaking engagement at a Tameside Speakers’ Panel meeting ended with the threat of eviction by security for daring to question the validity of the meeting.

Residents opposing a whole raft of Traffic Regulation Orders were given five minutes to address their concerns. Tameside officials and TfGM officials were allowed to speak for as long as they wanted. Councillors refused to even consider or discuss the need for a site visit and I was told to sit down or be thrown out when I asked for the same courtesy afforded to officials.

Indeed, my wife fears I might end up in the Tower tonight if I have the temerity to speak out of turn.

I have tried to obtain a meeting with Tameside Council’s Chef Executive, Steven Pleasant to discuss my grievances. My long suffering MP, Andrew Gwynne, even asked on my behalf. Mr Pleasant has refused all requests over a two year period and refuses to even acknowledge why he won’t meet.

As I say I am grateful for today’s opportunity but it could easily have never come to fruition. I wrote to your chairman, John Leech, with my concerns in early 2012 and asked to see him to air my grievances

I was told I wasn't a member of his constituency and basically to go away. O didn't take 'no' for an answer!

The same response came from Councillor Andrew Fender, chairman of Transport for Greater Manchester.

Again, I was told I wasn't a member of his Old Moat constituency and that he wouldn't meet me. I told him I was a resident of Greater Manchester and that a Metrolink line was ripping my home town to bits and had concerns over what was happening. Mr Gwynne again tried to intervene on my behalf but again to no avail.

The same happened with former TfGM chief executive David Leather. Point blank refusal and no courtesy letter to explain why. If you look at some of the cuttings, I am not alone in TfGM's treatment of the great unwashed.

Before they returned to the private sector recently, Mr Leather and another high ranking official, Phillip Purdy, enjoyed a combined annual yearly salary of nearly £0.5 million.

During their time in office they presided over the construction of the expansion on line 3A and the line to Oldham and Rochdale. Both lines were delayed by 12 months.

To put down 3.8 miles of track from Piccadilly to Droylsden in Tameside took four years. Four years.

For the vast majority of that period my home town was absolutely blitzed. Devastated, torn apart, decimated, ruined. For what? For a scheme that Greater Manchester residents actually voted against in 2008.

Mr Leech was among the politicians in favour of a congestion charge being imposed on Mancunians. We were told a 'No' vote would also result in the loss of Metrolink's Big Bang expansion.

Needless to say residents overwhelmingly rejected the congestion charge and Metrolink. We didn't get the congestion charge but we still got the 'Big Bang'. More like small pop!

As a selling point and sweetener, we were told trams would run every six minutes at peak times, 12 minutes off peak. Every public meeting, every piece of correspondence spoke of six minute trams.

Instead, when trams finally started running, they did so every 12 minutes at peak times. Councillor Fender says it was always the case that frequency would be based on patronage. Funny, that it was never mentioned before TfGM finally realised what they couldn't deliver their promises on a route few people are using.

At best TfGM misled the public with their claims-and presumably the Government when asking for money. At worst, they blatantly lied.

On closer inspection, it is my understanding that not one Metrolink line, offers a regular six minute service, even the much vaunted Altrincham-Bury line that has been open 21 years.

Our local bus service, which in the main is exemplary, offers a 10 minute service at peak times. It takes the same length of time to get into Manchester as the tram.

When 3B opens later this year, it will take 40-50 minutes to go from Ashton to Manchester. 13 stops. Or you could take the train from Ashton to Manchester. 9 minutes. No stops.

You could also take trains from two other local train stations-Guide Bridge and Fairfield; 2-3 stops, 10-12 minutes.

TfGM boast of 22 million passenger journeys a year. What they neglect to mention is that millions of people used practically the same routes when trains ran instead of trams. So, the actual increase in new patronage is minimal.

The Manchester to Oldham/Rochdale line follows the route of a former train line. For nearly four years, users had to take a bus or use their cars when the line was closed for construction work. With a couple of additional stations, the 'new' Metrolink line is an 'old' train line. Emperor's new clothes or more TfGM spin and hype.

Yes, but car usage and traffic congestion will be less. Actually, 'no' Greater Manchester's roads are more traffic clogged than they have ever been. Even TfGM's own figures for my area show an increase in car usage from 2009 when work started to 2013. And those projections continue to rise.

TfGM's other great claim is that property prices will increase for people living in the vicinity of Metrolink stops. I don't have figures to prove this either way.

I do know, however, that Metrolink construction work and the uncertainty caused by a scheme that may or may not happen devalues property prices adjacent to work sites.

So, if you want to sell during that period you do so at a loss. The Land Compensation Act 1973 seemingly makes provision for residents in this position. However, legislation, as it stands, says you can only make a Part One claim a year and a day after construction finishes.

So, 3A was 12 months behind schedule and took four years to build. Residents currently blighted by 3B also live in the vicinity of and were affected directly by construction work for 3A. 3B isn't due for completion until the winter of 2013/2014. So, that's five and a half years of construction plus a year and a day for legislation to be applicable.

So, for the absolute minimum of six and a half years, if you sell your house in that time, you risk making a significant loss. Yet, residents are restricted by an Act passed when there was no Light Rail in operation-unless you class Blackpool trams! How can this be fair?

Yet local and national politicians refuse to address the situation- probably because it is not a sexy topic. Please tell me if this isn't a legitimate problem?

tfGM actually delight in insisting they don't pay out compensation. Businesses have closed in Droylsden because of the chaos caused by Metrolink construction yet nothing is done to help. No rebates in Council Tax or business rate rebates are offered-certainly not by Tameside Council.

Yet, we are told Metrolink is good for business and local prosperity.

A person in this room, who shall remain nameless, recently told me after using 3A for the first time:"Droylsden is dead."

I asked what he meant. 'The tram, it's dead. No one is using it.' But the Rochdale line is quite busy though," he added.

Funny that-a line no one wanted and serves no useful purpose is not being used. Yet a service which once carried passengers in trains for years and years, is now carrying passengers in trams....at a cost of hundreds of millions of pounds and four years of needless congestion, dirt and noise pollution.

Be careful what you wish for!

ENDS....