

## A bad track record: How the promise of light rail transport systems has been forgotten



Manchester is one of few cities in the UK with a thriving light rail system (Alamy)

**The government has promised to look at how light rail can give commuters around the country reliable and clean transport options. But a new scheme hasn't opened since 2004. Rob Merrick explains why we can't get them up and running**

"We are analysing your feedback," says the Department for Transport webpage about its call for evidence on ways to "harness the opportunities" offered by light rail, promising to announce results "soon".

It seems reasonable enough – until one realises the words were posted in May 2019, four years and three prime ministers ago. Anyone hoping for an update will search in vain.

This deafening silence – branded "a farce" by one rapid transit expert – appears to epitomise how a technology long seen as the future has been shunted into a forgotten siding of transport policy.

Across the rest of Europe, passengers glide to work and to shop on reliable and non-polluting tram networks found in 28 cities in France and 49 in Germany.

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In contrast, in the United Kingdom, the list of cities where tram dreams died – Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, Portsmouth, Tees Valley – is almost as long as of the eight built over 50 years. No new scheme has opened in England since Nottingham's in 2004.

It is a tale of chronic short-termism, Treasury “bean counters”, disinterested ministers and the power of the road lobby, say weary insiders, but also of weak local leadership and a failure to find imaginative sources of finance.

And there is a sting in that tale, the government is being warned, because of the new power for the victims of toxic air to sue those responsible for failing to clean it up.

It was all going to be so different when John Prescott unveiled his 10-year Transport Plan in July 2000, vowing: “Light rail can transform our cities. We are going to provide resources for up to 25 new light rail projects in our major cities.” So, what went wrong?

Looking back, the seeds of failure were sown from the start with no less than one-third of the plan's £180bn budget earmarked for road schemes – despite its stated central aim being to cut congestion.

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Local councils would use “the proceeds of local congestion charging schemes” to build tramlines, but those schemes – pay-as-you-drive into city centres, or workplace parking levies – were never implemented as a motorists' backlash cowed local leaders.

The fuel protests of 2000, when angry protests over rising prices rocked the Blair government and brought the country to a near standstill, were seared on the memory of any politician contemplating any action deemed “anti-car”.

In the years that followed, proposed tram schemes were axed in Bristol and South Hampshire (in 2004), followed by Leeds and Liverpool (in 2005) and finally Tees Valley (in 2010).

The scars have not healed judging from the words of Mike Storey, Liverpool’s Liberal Democrat council leader two decades ago, who says the city’s residents look enviously at the thriving Metrolink scheme just 30 miles away in Manchester.

“Liverpool has some of the worst air pollution of any city in the country. Just imagine what a tram system could have done to improve that!” says Lord Storey, now a Lib Dem peer. “It would have been ground breaking for regeneration.”

Rows between councils of different political colours, and over where the first Merseytram line should be built, made it easy for the Labour government to pull the plug – over a paltry £30m grant request.

In Bristol, the then-Lib Dem council leader Barbara Janke blames the Treasury’s blinkered mindset for the failure to build a £200m 10-mile Supertram, linking the city with its expanding northern suburbs.

The city council explored raising its own finance through issuing a local government bond – winning the backing of outside financial experts – but soon realised the idea was doomed.

“We thought a city of half a million people should be able to raise its own finance and not have to queue for central government funding, just as European cities are able to,” Baroness Janke explains.

“It could have been a popular investment for local people, charities and businesses – to buy shares in a bond for transport – but the advice was the Treasury would not allow it.”

Nothing has changed, according to Jim Harkins, managing director of not-for-profit consultancy Light Rail UK and technical adviser to the All-Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group, which is about to be relaunched.

Asked who he blames for the lack of UK schemes, Mr Harkins replies: “In one word – Treasury. It is in thrall to the bean counters and goes for the cheaper option of buses, even though you don’t get the modal shift and buses are polluters.

“The Treasury ignores the soft benefits of better connectivity, regeneration and air quality, which are all of value. We also don’t seem to have the statesmen we used to have for projects that take 10 to 15 years, which is more than two parliaments.”

Asked if there is any prospect of a light rail revival, Mr Harkins replies: “From our perspective, no.” Indeed, the only mooted project is a Very Light Rail (VLR) system being tested in Coventry.

It has not all been doom and gloom since Labour wielded the axe and Norman Baker, transport minister in the post-2010 Coalition government, is keen to defend its record.

After 2010, existing schemes in Manchester, the West Midlands and Nottingham were extended significantly, allowing the total number of annual light rail journeys to leap by around 50 per cent over the next decade.

But Baker admits he “didn’t have any money” for new schemes in the age of austerity, also pointing to “no appetite” in town halls. “Local leaders had their fingers burned spending money working up schemes, only for Labour to pull the plug on them,” he explains.

A key weakness, says the former minister, has been the failure to devise ways for business to share the costs, by dangling the rewards of future economic growth – the key to expansion in France. The approach also built Crossrail.

So, what has happened to that 2019 call for evidence and can the Department for Transport (DfT) offer any hope to the likes of Leeds, the largest city in Europe without a light rail system?

A spokesperson insisted the consultation has not been abandoned, pointing to the “impact” of Covid as the reason for delay, adding: “Officials are now assessing post-pandemic travel patterns, current inflationary pressures on light rail systems, and responses received.”

However, the DfT made clear its role is hands-off, saying: “It is for local authorities to choose whether to develop light rail schemes.” They must also ensure they are “affordable”.

“It’s a farce,” says Harkins of the four-year hold-up, pointing to suspicions that a £3bn pot to rescue and expand bus services, unveiled in March 2021, pinched cash earmarked for light rail.

With air pollution now recognised as the world’s gravest environmental health risk – blamed for up to 40,000 early deaths every year in the UK – cities have already been warned of legal action if they fail to act.

Significantly, a car emits 168 grammes of CO2 for each passenger kilometre and a bus 102 grammes – but light rail just 28 grammes, according to the industry body UKTram.

Harkins likens the situation to the asbestos scandal, saying: “It’s now possible to sue a local authority for failing to provide clean air. The country is going to pay the price, as environmental laws bite.”

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