

LIGHT RAIL'S ROLE IN OUR CHANGING TOWNS AND CITIES

Minister of State for Transport Jesse Norman MP outlines the UK Government's latest 'Call for Evidence' on transforming urban mobility.

As the Minister with responsibility for local transport, including light rail and other forms of urban transit outside London, I am focused on how we can build a modern and sustainable local transport system that will help connect our communities, support our economy and protect our environment.

Mobility is changing, and at a rapid pace. Social and economic trends are influencing people's behaviour and attitudes and the digital revolution, the growth of smart cities and places, and a greater emphasis on sustainability and environmentally-friendly ways of travel all create new challenges and opportunities.

There are currently eight light rail systems operating in England and National Statistics prove that these forms of transport are popular, with more than 267m passenger journeys made in 2017-18. Indeed, 3% of all transport journeys in England are made on a light rail system and all eight networks have been supported by public funding. The Government has also made significant investments in recent years to extend existing systems, including those in Nottingham, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands.

Over the next few years, however, we will see radical changes to the mobility services offered in our towns and cities. I believe that light rail and new forms of rapid transit solutions can continue to play a very useful role – and I would like to see that role expanded.

This is why in February the Department published a 'Call for Evidence' to invite views on how the Government and the private sector can work together to harness the opportunities for light rail and other rapid transit systems. We also want to consider how we can build our manufacturing and engineering capacity for a new generation of systems in the UK, in line with the Government's Industrial Strategy.

We want this Call for Evidence to act as a stimulus for new ideas, and as a means to gather input from a wide range of stakeholders – including readers of *Tramways & Urban Transit*. We want to hear what they think, and what you think, about the scale of the opportunity for light rail and similar rapid transit solutions and how we can build on the success of existing systems and technologies.

That is why the time is now right for us to consider how such systems could be incorporated into the transport networks of the future, and how they will help to complement and integrate with new modes and trends. That means autonomous vehicles, car- and bike-sharing and initiatives that offer Mobility As A Service, in addition to rail, buses, cycling and walking. We also want to ensure that we build not only on successes here in the UK, but around the world also. What can we learn from other systems?

I have been fortunate enough to see light rail in action overseas. Last year I visited the French cities of Besançon and Lyon, and it was fascinating to see two successful systems interacting very effectively with the other transport modes. There is much we can

learn from the experience of other countries, and I hope we will see that experience reflected in the consultation responses.

Another important element is the need to look at how we can build industrial capacity in the UK. This will form an important part of our work on the Future of Mobility Grand Challenge and on 'smart places', which considers the use, value and deployment of emerging transport technologies and services.

The Call for Evidence also highlights the opportunities for new types of rapid transit to benefit local economies sustainably across the UK. Solutions such as Very Light Rail, Ultra Light Rail, Personal and Group Rapid Transit or Autonomous Guideway Networks, as well as concepts such as trackless trams may all have a part to play so we want to hear from their developers and promoters.

Public transport and a wide range of mobility options are crucial parts of a modern transport system, which must exist side-by-side

and be supplemented by intelligently-linked information and innovative services. Travel support systems will also aid passengers in selecting modes of transport, guide them on optimal fares and signpost alternative services in the event of disruption or delays. Operators will be able to reach more passengers through the selective dissemination of data, information and advertising.

We also want the sector and others to consider a more cross-modal approach to the provision of local transport services in our conurbations, and how they can link with new developments and tie leisure, housing and workplaces together. That means neighbourhoods themselves becoming destinations with low congestion, and attractive and greener urban environments that offer a higher quality of life. This has the added value of attracting inward investment and growth.

Evidence and research to date demonstrates that effective public transport can alleviate the challenges posed by rapid urbanisation, leading to more liveable and sustainable communities. These types of initiatives have the potential to stimulate investment – such as urban renewal

projects and residential and commercial development – often in areas that were previously inaccessible or unviable. They can also help to link to wider transport modes through integrated hubs.

The longevity, durability and branding appeal of this type of infrastructure sends a positive message to planners and developers, making such areas vibrant and attractive places to work and live. There is clear scope for our towns and cities to leverage greater private sector participation, including funding, and to adopt financing models which take into account new developments.

We hugely welcome the interest of *Tramways & Urban Transit* readers – I look forward to receiving your responses! **TAUT**

> For further details on the UK Department for Transport's Call for Evidence, visit www.gov.uk/government/consultations/light-rail-and-other-rapid-transit-solutions-in-cities-and-towns-call-for-evidence. The closing date for submissions is 19 May 2019.



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