

Light Rail (UK)

# All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group

House of Commons  
London SW1A 0AA

*Trams, a catalyst for Clean Air, Connectivity, Jobs & Growth*



## All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group Minutes

Meeting held via Zoom.

Wednesday 13 January 2021, 1500h-1700h

### Chair

Andy Carter MP, Chair APPLRG

### Speakers

George Lowder MBE, Chair UK Tram

Sam Tarry MP (Labour, Ilford South), Shadow Minister for Local Transport

Baroness Randerson (Welsh Liberal Democrat)

The meeting was attended by a maximum of 25 people.

**Andy Carter** welcomed the participants to the meeting and introduced the speakers. He said that the purpose of these sessions was to inform members of the House of Commons and House of Lords of issues pertaining to the light rail sector. He asked the participants to encourage their local MPs to join APPLRG as MPs value feedback from their constituents on issues which are relevant to them.

**George Lowder** began by thanking the Government for the support given to the light rail industry to keep services running in these times. He outlined the work of UK Tram as the authoritative voice of the industry to support best practice and to represent the industry to both the UK and devolved governments. Currently there are 11 operators as members, with Tyne and Wear likely to re-join shortly and 8 local authorities, going up to 10 shortly. UK Tram is also in touch with the authorities in a number of areas that are considering light rail systems.

The COVID situation has presented a number of opportunities for UK Tram. Early on it reinforced the need to corral the views of the industry and feed them into DfT. It became evident that light rail was a key component in travel demand management and providing a service for essential workers and there was a need to understand best practice in providing those services safely, in terms of deep cleaning, managing surfaces and social distancing, and enforcing regulations and guidance as they came out. In the early days regulations and guidance evolved and it evolved in consultation with UK Tram and others. It was useful to be in this enforced communication with DfT, Transport for Scotland and others as a conduit towards developing guidance.

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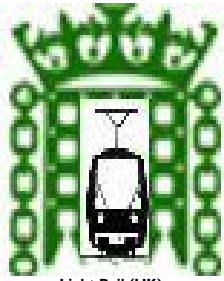
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In summer last year there was some relaxation of the regulations and more people were travelling, which brought a new set of challenges such as staff absence and UK Tram continued to be the conduit between the industry and DfT and Transport for Scotland to develop guidance and regulation. Later in the year with further lockdown, patronage has fallen again, often below the level seen in March and April, due to harsher regulation and guidance, closure of hospitality and non-essential retail. During all this there has been the question of financial support which UK Tram has already achieved to some extent but continues lobbying for a settlement beyond the end of the financial year. COVID has caused UK Tram to have a much more frequent and detailed dialogue with DfT as well as with its members. It is necessary to make the best of a crisis and as an organisation UK Tram has done that.

It is to the credit of the UK Tram team that, whilst they have been coping with the additional COVID-related work and organisation, other elements of work have continued with people working largely from home. This tested UK Tram's business resilience procedures which proved to be effective. Work has continued on innovation projects, especially the Driver Innovation Safety Challenge which comes out of the Croydon disaster and the subsequent ORR recommendations and which develops a pro-active way of intervening to prevent future accidents. Procurement is being done in a novel and incremental way in association with the industry to send real time information on the well-being of a driver to the control room so that they can get in touch with the driver and check they are well enough to be driving. There is a pilot project running now which will produce a significant piece of pro-active kit which will reduce accidents in the future. There is other work in the innovation sphere around digitisation, standardising training, and apprenticeship, on promotion of light rail and how it is presented, with a whole new light rail strategy in development. The Light Rail Safety and Standards Board has a new Chair, Sue Byrne, as well as a new Chief Executive, Carl Williams. A lot of work has been going on around standardisation, best practice policy and safety guidance, which has all been done remotely during the past year. Great credit is due to the team that they have managed that.

UK Tram agreed with the DfT that it would be helpful if the industry contributed to a refresh of the light rail strategy. Cities are growing apace and much of this country's population live in cities. The government has set demanding carbon reduction targets. UK Tram is absolutely convinced that light rail can play a part in this – a clean, mass transit, cost-effective mode. A national strategy is needed that outlines this and explains the case for light rail. A first draft has been prepared and the case argued for light rail as part of an integrated transport network. There will be further detailed discussions with DfT through to early summer prior to issuing the final version by the middle of the year. Local authorities will then be able to use the strategy to develop new systems and lines across the UK.

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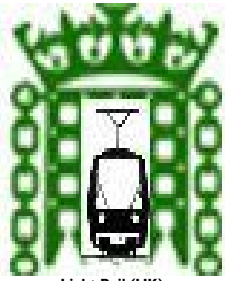
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**Email [jimh@jimmyharkins.com](mailto:jimh@jimmyharkins.com)**

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## Questions and discussion

**Andy Carter** asked whether an appetite has been detected in DfT for smaller scale light rail systems or are they still only looking at major city schemes.

**George Lowder** thought that there is definitely an appetite for bigger schemes and the expansion of existing systems. There are many places that against the background of challenging climate targets are looking at schemes and UK Tram aims to be the single point of contact for advice and guidance on how to best argue the case for light rail even if it is not a major scheme. There are a number of possibilities on the table that are being considered. Of course, COVID has put every local authority under considerable fiscal pressure, so progress may take longer.

**Reg Harman** said that Webtag does not cover things like pollution reduction, carbon reduction etc. It is very operational, and numbers based. Does UK Tram seek to get the appraisal system changed to bring in these factors?

**George Lowder:** Yes. As part of making the case for light rail, UK Tram has looked at cities where transport systems are collecting evidence that can be used for this. There is not yet a uniform method of calculating the benefit of trams in reducing pollution. A way is needed of empirically capturing the benefits and presenting that as evidence rather than generalities. Progress is being made and systems are beginning to capture relevant data. UK Tram is working hard to identify what those quantifiable criteria would be and to establish a uniform way of capturing the data across the industry.

**Christopher Maltin** asked how contributions could be made to the UK Tram/DfT consultations. The government appear to be obsessed with hydrogen as a fuel and to have missed alternative fuels such as biomethane.

**George Lowder** said that UK Tram is currently discussing a timeframe for the strategy with DfT and there will subsequently be widespread consultation. James Hammet, the UKT MD, is putting together a programme for the progression of the strategy.

**Jim Harkins** said that there is a reluctance to tackle the problem caused by non-exhaust emissions (NEEs) by cars and buses, which, according to Defra, are among the most significant pollutants.

**George Lowder** said UK Tram has considered this and it forms part of the answer to why trams should be adopted and is one of the advantages of tram over bus. Local authorities recognise that there are some very challenging targets but there is no silver bullet so it is necessary to have as many measures as can be brought to bear, including reducing the number of rubber-tired vehicles in city centres. All cities are moving in this direction, though at different speeds, and UK Tram does not detect any lack of appetite amongst local authorities to pursue policies to this end.

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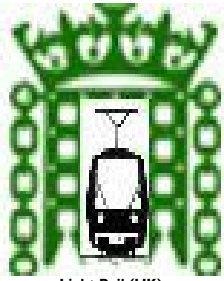
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**Dave Andrews** asked whether UK Tram has had any contact with WECA.

**George Lowder** replied that they have heard from them and they have expressed interest.

**James Hammet** agreed that UK Tram have been in contact with WECA and other groups in the Bristol area.

**George Lowder** summed up by saying that UK Tram is keen to continue to build on the frequent contacts with both UK and devolved governments that have developed during COVID. The future discussions about strategy are going to be really important to build a consensus on the argument for light rail and UK Tram is there to discuss any questions parliamentarians may have.

**Sam Tarry** said this is his first engagement as Shadow Minister for Local Transport which covers light rail, buses, TfL, taxis etc. Before becoming an MP, he worked eight years for TSSA and so has a wide knowledge of general transport issues.

Labour has been supportive of measures to support transport and had highlighted the disparity between support for heavy and light rail. At the last election Labour had one of the most comprehensive sets of policies on transport, including both heavy and light rail, with a blueprint for the complete redesign of the rail industry. Since then, the huge reduction in usage of public transport has forced the government to adopt some of these steps in terms of public ownership. Labour plans are a guide to how public transport should be rebuilt after the pandemic is over. There is concern over a rise in car use and Labour policy is to get people out of their cars on to light and heavy rail and out of planes and on to trains. Light rail has the advantage of being more affordable and can be built more quickly than heavy rail and it must absolutely be part of the mix as we move towards a more integrated transport system. He said that one of the projects he worked on before becoming an MP was a paper on transport for the quality of life, which looked at the Swiss Takfahrplan model where buses, trams and trains all connect on the same timetable. This may seem a bit far-fetched in a British context but is a means to build real connectivity where all forms of transport interlink rather than compete with each other.

While climate change is a very important topic, what more immediately concerns many people is air pollution, which impacts directly on their health. This is an area where investment in light rail is really crucial. Extending existing systems and investing in new light rail systems is a good and cost-effective way of achieving efficient transport networks. Light rail combines the benefits of a train service with those of a local stopping service, linking direct into town centres. It will be a way of getting people out of their cars once the pandemic is over. The health and welfare of transport workers during and following the pandemic is very important. Close contact between staff and passengers should be reduced without compromising safety, while maintaining sufficient staff to help and guide passengers.

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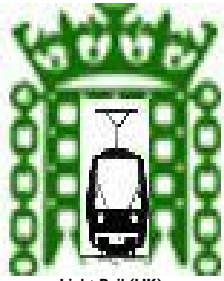
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Another current topic which has been raised by the Transport Select Committee is the powering of rail systems, with hydrogen and batteries being discussed. Hydrogen, although green at point of use, needs a substantial infrastructure to manufacture and supply. We need to evaluate these systems in order to plan future development.

The report that has just come out from Alstom on decarbonising transport provides many ideas for debate which Labour will be examining closely, including the recommendation for development of light rail in a range of areas. Light rail offers a cost-effective way of aiding the economic recovery of city centres by connecting them with suburban areas in a way that is affordable and fast. Compared with schemes like HS2, whose full economic benefits will not be realised for many years, light rail offers a relatively rapid economic return.

Labour is committed to economic growth through the development of green industry, and transport including light rail is at the heart of that ambition.

## Questions and discussion

**Jimmy Madden**, attending on behalf of his son **Luke Madden**, who has put forward proposals for trams in the Eastbourne and Sussex coast area, asked about reopening closed rail lines using light rail vehicles.

**Sam Tarry** said that too many rail lines had been closed in the past and that light rail might be appropriate to reopen some of them, depending on how far the line was still unobstructed by development. Light rail could be more affordable than reopening as heavy rail.

**George Lowder** referred to the current DfT programme for restoring railways which was considering light as well as heavy rail.

In response to a further suggestion **Jimmy Madden** said they had been in contact with both Caroline Ansell, MP for Eastbourne and Maria Caulfield, MP for Lewes, who had been supportive.

**Reg Harman** said that there is often a problem finding a suitable alignment for a new light rail line, but they could use existing roads as there are many roads with relatively low traffic levels and light rail would be just another highway user. He also said that the 1985 Transport Act had been a hindrance in developing integrated transport and should be scrapped, with public transport services run as concessions within an integrated system.

**Sam Tarry** said that bus services are a massively important part of transport provision but lacked integration and fares are too expensive. Integration is key and the current transport system is disjointed. The TfL model may not be perfect but something along those lines is required for the rest of the

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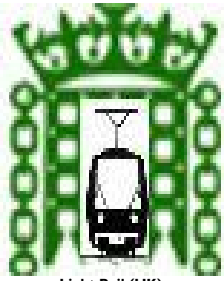
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country, including support for non-commercial but socially necessary services. The pattern of work-related travel may be different post-COVID with more working from home but there will continue to be a demand for travel and transport will be very important. To get people out of their cars requires accessible and affordable transport, where and when people need it. More municipal ownership of bus companies would facilitate this. There are plenty of examples across Europe of better organised and cheaper public transport services.

In response to a question about what Labour plans were to further extend existing systems such as Manchester Metrolink, **Sam Tarry** said that light rail gave the opportunity to expand systems more quickly. Labour will be looking for investment and the devolvement of decision-making to local areas. There is now a need to cater for non-radial journeys within cities, connecting suburbs without in and out journeys via the centre. These journeys are likely to become more important as work patterns change. Transport will certainly form a major part of the manifestos of Labour candidates in the forthcoming local elections. On a national scale there will need to be a major capital investment programme to get us out of the current economic position.

In response to **Jimmy Madden's** earlier comments, **Mike Gibson** spoke about the railcars available for lease from Lightweight Community Transport. This type of vehicle is in operation at Stourbridge. He and Jimmy agreed to further discussions.

In conclusion, **Sam Tarry** said that he is happy to receive queries and suggestions on [sam.tarry.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:sam.tarry.mp@parliament.uk)

**Baroness Randerson** explained that she was the Liberal Democrat spokesperson in the House of Lords for all forms of transport. She said that LibDem transport policy is centred on the environment and passengers and that trams were at the heart of it.

She showed a presentation on the South Wales Metro and explained that although Transport in Wales does not come within the remit of the House of Lords, because she lives there, she had been asked to speak about it. Historically, Wales has poor infrastructure, and this was not helped under devolution with the Welsh government running the transport services but the UK government remaining responsible for infrastructure. This is on top of decades of underinvestment. Wales has 5% of the UK's population, 10% of the rail network and 20% of the level crossings, but in recent years has received only 2% of infrastructure investment. The population is fairly sparse over much of Wales but is concentrated in south Wales which has a complex topography, high levels of social deprivation and slow journey times. As a result of all this, between 2003 and 2017, there was a big increase in reliance on cars (81% of

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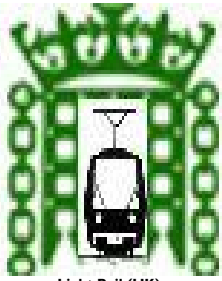
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journeys, up 9%) with a growing proportion of diver-only journeys, a situation which is unsustainable in terms of the environment and congestion. The original answer to the problem was the M4 Relief road which has now been abandoned, but an alternative plan is needed. Over the same period (2003-2017) the share of other modes was: walking 8% (-18%); buses 4% (-7%); train 4% (+212%); cycling 2% (+46%). All modes showed an increase in journey times.

In response to this the Welsh government set up Transport for Wales in 2018, a not-for-profit holding body with responsibility for transport across Wales. The remit for South Wales is to develop a fast, frequent, sustainable, integrated, multi-modal public transport service, known as South Wales Metro. This concept had already been adopted in 2013, which shows how slowly things are progressing, typical of all light and heavy rail development in the UK. It should be possible to deliver these schemes much more quickly.

As part of this plan the Welsh Government took over control of the infrastructure of the Core Valley lines. Initial investment comes from three sources: UK Government £190m; Welsh government £740m and EU £160m (which must be spent by 2022) and will cover 9 lines, 94 stations, 10 council areas and 170km of track, with modernisation of heavy rail, introduction of tram trains and improved rapid bus services, presumably using electric or hydrogen vehicles.

The contract to deliver the South Wales Metro services was awarded to Keolis in 2018. They now have on order, for expected delivery from 2022, 24 Stadler tri-mode heavy rail units and 36 Stadler Citylink 3-car, electric/battery tram trains. The tram trains will run on the Treherbert, Aberdare and Merthyr lines and through central Cardiff to Cardiff Bay. Distance from Merthyr to Cardiff Bay is about 25 miles. There is potential for further tram development in Cardiff including improving Queen Street-Central connection and better service to the new development in the Cardiff Bay area. There is also a separate Cardiff Council light rail project, Cardiff Crossrail, to improve East-West connections with the centre and Cardiff Bay and which will need to be fully integrated with the South Wales Metro. Cardiff now has a population approaching 400,000 with 80,000 daily commuters for work or leisure.

## Questions and discussion

**Andy Carter** asked if there is a date for completion of the Cardiff Crossrail project.

**Baroness Randerson** said she would be more interested in getting a start date. The plan was launched in 2019. There was little progress in 2020 because of the virus. They have to find a way of funding it and

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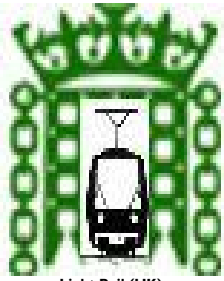
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local authorities are now so financially stretched it is going to hit their ability to look at long-term projects. Cardiff could not do this without funding from the Welsh Government. They have a City Deal, which is funded by the UK Government, and this might help but it is far too early to make any forecast.

**Jim Harkins** asked about the Burns report into alternatives to the cancelled M4 relief road, which, in spite of several pro-tram representations suggesting a tram from east of Newport through to Cardiff, has ignored trams or tram trains in its recommendations. He asked how we might change the emphasis from buses to trams in view of the pollution from toxic non-exhaust emissions which buses generate.

**Baroness Randerson** thought there is scope for local campaigning. There was a very lively campaign on the M4 Relief Road with groups supporting one or other of the alternative routes as well as an anti-road group, so a lot of people are interested in the issue. There is a very good potential light rail route, and it was a surprise that the report did not deal with this given that light rail is an accepted solution in South Wales and is going ahead in Cardiff. She will ask Lord Burns why this solution was not mentioned in the report.

Jim Harkins said Lord Burns should be asked what the environmental impact statement is on air quality from spending on buses.

**Alan Wilkins** added that the report proposed spending around £500m on enhancing the South Wales main line with new stations, though with associated infrastructure the total would be more like £800m. The proposal LRTA and other made was to reinstate trams along the old A48 between the east end of Newport and central Cardiff. Most of the road is four-lane and would take a tram quite easily, though there are one or two pinch points. The Burns report did refer to extending tram train through the Dockland area along the freight line which joins the main line at Pengam and through to the proposed Cardiff Parkway station. The report is disappointing; Lord Burns was presumably looking at capital costs but is the money best spent on reconfiguring the main line? A similar amount of money could fund an effective tram service.

**Andy Carter** thanked the speakers and closed the meeting with a final request for people to speak to their MPs about joining the APPLRG.

The formal meeting closed at 16:35.

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