



Concerns of delay to Coventry VLR due to DfT's sluggish delivery of funds

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A senior Coventry councillor has expressed concern that the city's trailblazing very light railway (VLR) will be delayed because the Department for Transport (DfT) is taking longer than expected to deliver the promised funding.

The city will be the first in the UK to get innovative, affordable battery-powered rail after the [West Midlands Combined Authority \(WMCA\)](#) agreed a [£72M investment in the project](#) through its [£1.05bn of funds from the DfT's City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements](#). This will fund a demonstrator for the VLR; a 2km line between Coventry railway station and Pool Meadow bus station in the city centre.

The WMCA went to the DfT for a “sign-off” on the first £36.8M chunk of the funding in January, but only a small amount has been released so far.

Coventry City Council cabinet member for jobs, regeneration and climate change Jim O'Boyle – who first put forward the VLR project in 2016 – has expressed his frustration at the delay. He told *NCE*: “The issue with the VLR is because we are challenging the industry and because it is a new concept – it’s a new vehicle, a new track – technically, according to the DfT, it doesn’t exist; it’s being regarded as a retained scheme.

“So, we have to prove the concept, because it’s an R&D project in their mind, rather than a transport opportunity.”

The project has commenced thanks to £15M from the WMCA and Coventry City Council, but the DfT funds are needed to make real progress. O'Boyle said that delays to the funding are leaving the council unable to confirm orders for the track, paving and other materials needed for the project. This could see the whole project delivery delayed.

This echoes comments he made to the Transport Select Committee last month, where he said that “a lack of clarity over the final allocation of funding creates delays and disruption”. He added: “Innovation requires ambition – now we need the government to trust us to deliver.”

O'Boyle accused the DfT of “backward thinking”. He told *NCE* that with other metro projects, which cost tens of millions more and require digging up roads, funding is no issue because it has been proven. “Because we are proving a concept [with VLR] – which we know works and will work – it’s a retained scheme and we have to go through their internal bureaucracy,” he said. “That’s why it’s frustrating.” The problem is exacerbated because the DfT hasn’t been clear in what it needs, according to O'Boyle. “Because of the strings that came with the funding, we always we would have to go through this process, but the problem is they don’t outline what the process is – they don’t tell us what they require from us,” he said. “We give them information, they take it away, and then they come back, and they want the information again, or want it in a different form. It’s ridiculous.”

O'Boyle said that he has no clue when the funding from the DfT might materialise. Despite this, O'Boyle is confident that the VLR project will continue. “We will battle through because we’ve battled through to where we are now,” he said. “We’ve got a vehicle that works, we’ve got a track form that is being stress tested at the moment, so all things being equal we will crack on with this.”

The key aim of a VLR system is to reduce the cost of implementation and operation, rather than necessarily the weight or size of the system.

Traditional light rail systems are too expensive to build and operate in places the size of Coventry, which has a population of just 365,000. By redesigning some elements and eliminating others, Coventry VLR's team believes it can cut costs for such a system to around a third of the average for a traditional light rail of £30M per km. It is significantly less expensive than a project like the Midlands Metro extension, which is costing approximately £100M per km.

This past weekend at MotoFest in Coventry was the public's first opportunity to see and step inside the proposed Coventry VLR vehicle, which can hold 56 people, including 20 seated. It was displayed on [the "revolutionary" track form that has been developed for the project](#), which sits just 300mm inside the road surface, minimising cost and disruption.

"We wanted to show people that it's real – because they've only seen graphics

so far – and that there's amazing things going on in Coventry," O'Boyle said. "We wanted to show what we support the green industrial revolution and there are opportunities for other towns and cities like Coventry to build sustainable, affordable transport."

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