

Making the case for light rail

A fringe event was held by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Light Rail at all three party conferences. RTM reports from the event held at Manchester Town Hall during the Labour conference, which heard from Centro and UK Tram chair **Geoff Inskip**, **Stuart Kerr** of Vossloh Kiepe, **Jim Harkins**, who provides secretariat support to the APPG, Labour MPs **Graham Stringer** and **Clive Betts**, and Transport for Greater Manchester chairman **Cllr Andrew Fender**.

At a massively over-subscribed fringe event at the Labour conference, when around 80 people turned up in a room set out for 35, the case for light rail was resoundingly made by speaker after speaker.

The event started with Graham Stringer, Labour MP for Blackley and Broughton, who chaired the meeting, saying he hoped visitors to Manchester had a chance to use Metrolink – though noted that some transport problems on the day slightly undermined that message, as former transport secretary Lord Adonis found when he took to Twitter to praise the system only to be deluged by unhappy commuters.

Admitting that Labour's time in office was hardly a halcyon period for light rail, Stringer said: "In 1997, John Prescott said we would have 20 tram systems: many of us thought that was not enough. And we haven't got anywhere near that. But if we want to invest in good public transport in our local areas, we need only to look to Manchester and Sheffield, which have had enormous success both environmentally and in terms of modal change."

Lack of integration

Clive Betts, MP for Sheffield South East and chair of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee, noted that the sheer number of people at a light rail fringe event was a step change on the situation a decade ago. "Seeing is believing", he said, noting the success of most existing UK tram systems when people had a chance to see them in action and try them out.

He noted that in Sheffield, the trams were always meant to be integrated with the buses, but that over-deregulation meant that competition damaged both modes. He called that situation "an absolute nonsense" and said it was "disastrous" for the Supertram in the early years.

"We should see trams at the heart of a public service – a public transport system, integrating transport, working with the bus services and park and rides and getting people out of their cars."

Trams are the best way to achieve modal shift, he said, adding that some people who may have prejudices about buses and refuse to "be seen dead" on one, are nonetheless happy to try the tram. It's quick, clean, green, and a nice form of transport to use, he said.

The benefits of larger networks

But planning ahead is a key problem, especially since there have been some unenthusiastic

'The DfT has never been comfortable with trams – keep them out of the process'

ministers and officials at DfT, with a lack of long-term thinking. "We need long-term vision and long-term policies to do that."

Every section of tram network extension improves the cost-benefit analysis, he said, since a larger network benefits both new passengers and existing ones.

He added: "One or two home truths: can we get the DfT out of the process as much as possible? It's an obstacle."

He said a classic example was what happened with the original plan to extend Sheffield's tram system to Rotherham, when the DfT announced that guided bus was better value for money. "The only problem was, you'd already got the tram running halfway from Sheffield to Rotherham: so in deciding that a guided bus from Sheffield to Rotherham would be better, were they saying that the guided bus would run all the way and therefore duplicate

the first part of the route of the tram? Or that people should get on the tram from Sheffield, go halfway to Rotherham, then get off and onto the guided bus? They were never too clear about that.

"The DfT has never been comfortable with trams."

Over-engineering

He said the recently announced South Yorkshire tram-train pilot was similar – he noted that the idea was first raised around 2006, but it will be 2015 before the pilot properly begins. "Nine years, to get the first tram running – and on a pilot? Go to Germany, look at them now, they're running and working. We're going to have nine years to actually get a tram on a train track, then three years of evaluation to see if it works."

He also criticised the Sheffield-Penistone pilot plans, saying the proposed diesel vehicle was so over-engineered, it was basically a heavy rail train just with no

toilets.

He criticised the standards and "over-engineering" in UK light rail systems, imported from heavy rail, contrasting them with cities like Amsterdam where trams often run with much less distance between them, he said.

He noted that a major cost of new tram systems is always the utilities works – but said the utilities companies needed to take more responsibility for the costs.



'Just look at Karlsruhe'

Stringer reiterated that point, noting that when he questioned one of Labour's then transport ministers about tram-trains during a Transport Select Committee evidence session, he was told there were two or three years more studies to do. But Stringer had seen them in action himself in Karlsruhe, Germany, more than 20 years earlier.

Cllr Andrew Fender, (*speaking, above*) who chairs the TfGM committee, gave the audience a detailed rundown of the multiple difficulties and setbacks that Manchester and its neighbouring authorities run into in trying to develop and expand the Metrolink scheme.

The journey began back in 1983, he said, with visits by key personnel to some of the best light rail systems in European cities, with the first Metrolink tram running in 1992.

Recounting the drama over the proposed 'big bang' expansion to be funded via congestion charging, defeated in a referendum, then the ways in which funding was found for the major line extensions now underway and coming into service, Cllr Fender said: "We've managed to resurrect Metrolink expansion from near-defeat."

Stringer called it an "extraordinary story" – "so many hoops to jump through, it's quite ridiculous".

Trams are NOT more expensive in the UK

The next speaker was Geoff Inskip, who has multiple roles – chief executive of Centro, and chair of pteg and UK Tram.

"People love trams," he said. "People who use trams can't imagine their lives without them. It's also true to say people want more trams."

Why are we not building more tram systems, he asked, as they are in Europe? "We know what they do in terms of regeneration, we know

what they do in terms of modal shift and we also know they're very expensive – and that's where we have to do something as UK Tram."

But contrary to many reports and conventional wisdom, Inskip said, a new study has shown that it is no more expensive to build and run trams in the UK than Europe.

"As UK Tram, we've gathered the evidence together, we've looked at how much it costs to build trams in Europe, and throughout the rest of the world, and the good news is, it doesn't cost us any more than it does elsewhere."

This evidence will be published in early November.

"We're not being complacent: we do know we can reduce costs through the use of new technologies, and Clive talked about utilities."

He spoke of the need to integrate good-quality light rail systems with HS2. He added: "We need now to start building on the networks we've already got and extending them further."

He also repeated his call, reported in the August/September edition of RTM, to set aside £100m of the £3bn-plus 'McNulty savings' from heavy rail to dedicate to tram-train development.

Work of the APPG

Jim Harkins, who provides secretariat support to the APPG, criticised the Scottish Government for its focus on buses over light rail – although there is obviously a different context following the multiple problems with the Edinburgh trams project.

He praised the work of the APPG in pressing the case for trams and helping set the agenda in Government, for example by taking MPs to see well-regarded systems in action, most recently in Alicante, which has a mixture of tram-train, train-tram and trams as feeder services.

"We're going from strength to strength," he said.

Stuart Kerr, Vossloh Kiepe, also spends a lot of time travelling around Europe, and also contrasted the sheer number of tram systems on the continent, and their rapid expansion, with the UK. "It's very different when [I] come

back home to the UK and see a completely different situation," he said.

He said that despite their one-off expense, rail-based public transport vehicles have the lowest total cost of ownership when all the figures are taken into account, alongside the lowest carbon footprint. "They are economically viable, and they are environmentally viable."

Tearing out the trams

He ran through a long list of all the UK's provincial towns and cities that used to have light rail systems, noting that it was ironically an impressive engineering effort that they were ripped out so quickly.

Over the last 30 years, he said the US – "home of the motor car" – had been reintroducing tram systems at the rate of about one a year, because they make economic sense for urban areas.

Tram-train is a much more viable option in the UK than in many other countries, due to the amount of under-used or derelict heavy rail track in suburban areas and within urban conurbations, like South Yorkshire, he said. "It's very little extra cost to a straight system, but it is extra linkage and extra choice for the customer."

He went on: "If we work as an industry and as a country and have politicians prepared to say 'we're going to do one system a year, every year', there's a secondary benefit: not just the jobs it's going to create, not just the benefits it's going to have for the people travelling on those trams, but there might be a re-creation of an industry base in the UK to support that activity."

Asked by an audience member whether Labour was committed to backing light rail if it wins the next election, the MPs said that this far out, the party wasn't making such manifesto commitments.

Betts said there aren't detailed policies yet, but there is growing "pressure and support" for light rail within the party.

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