

David Holt – Written evidence (TTS0048)

I have had a close interest in tramways throughout my life, with decades of study, hands-on experience and promotional activity. I have given papers at professional conferences, and had a book and numerous articles and letters published. I ended the final ten years of my working life with Network Rail as an S&T technician investigating signalling failures. I am a member of the Light Rail Transit Association's Development Group and the Experts for Trams group hosted by Trams for Bath, though I do not claim that this personal submission necessarily reflects the views of either body. I own a car and an electric bicycle, but try to walk and use public transport whenever possible using my concessionary travel pass.

I'd like at this point to draw attention to the Department of Transport's "A Call for Evidence on the opportunities available to introduce new Light Rail Systems or other rapid transit solutions into towns and cities in England", issued three years ago. I responded comprehensively to that Call for Evidence. My answers together with those of the many other respondents will be relevant now.

In this response, I'll refrain from quoting well-known statistics and figures, because plenty of other respondents will do that. I prefer to delve down looking for root causes and to challenge default perceptions.

1. What are the current and anticipated levels of public transport demand and capacity in towns and cities in England? What influences public transport travel patterns? How does the choice of public transport vary across different demographic groups?

Full employment depends on labour force mobility. The wider the net can be cast for jobseekers and employers, the easier it is to match skills to opportunities. Reliable and affordable public transport is an obvious key to enabling people to substantially widen the area within which they can travel efficiently and affordably to work. This is particularly important for young people just starting out on a life of employment. They are increasingly unable to afford cars of their own, placing them at a very unfair disadvantage in communities or locations heavily reliant on private travel. We must not handicap ourselves in that way.

The same applies to education. Pupils who have travelled to school on public transport rather than in "school-run" seclusion are less likely to be car-obsessed as they enter adulthood. Likewise, the efficient distribution of health services will be assisted by strong public transport provision. Enhanced patient mobility will enable facilities to be concentrated more readily and less controversially, alleviating acute problems with hospital parking and ambulance provision. Queens Medical Centre in Nottingham is a classic example, integrating easy-access, clean, smooth-riding high quality trams directly with the hospital premises.

Student accommodation for universities can be distributed more widely with strong public transport links. The UA92 project in Manchester, for example, will benefit substantially from its closeness to Metrolink's Altrincham line.

In these examples, service to the community can be further enhanced by “park-and-ride” provision.

Cities can be made more vibrant by strong public transport provision led by Light Rail services. Manchester’s nightlife is legendary, which is no coincidence in the city which brought city tramways back to us.

In summary, strong public transport spearheaded by Light Rail (ie trams) ties together a community and brings real financial benefits for everyone.

The elemental, and undoubtedly the crudest, mode of public transport in the UK is the bus, a form of transport so basic that it requires comparatively little effort on the part of those decision-makers who commit to it in preference to modes which they see as being more “difficult to do”. It’s far easier to tick the public transport box by sitting back and letting the bus industry get on with it. That’s where our decision-makers perhaps differ from their more broad-minded mainland European counterparts.

Unfortunately though, perhaps because of the very same primitiveness of buses and the low level of publicly-perceived commitment required to implement them, buses just don’t “cut the mustard” when it comes to tempting people out of their cars. Persuading people to leave their cars at home requires far higher quality and a better image than buses alone can ever provide.

Perception is key. Environmentally, trams are symbolic of a community’s commitment to sustainable transport. They concentrate minds, making a clear statement that high quality public transport has been provided as an alternative to less-sustainable private transport. Street tramways have a positive image making them a true flagship for public transport including buses. By a trickle-down association of ideas, trams uplift the perception of buses in the eyes of the public. The benefits of that are incalculable and immense. I have attempted to provide evidence of those benefits in an illustrated document “Trams - Symbols of Cities - and so much more” which I will submit on request. I was going to attach it to this response but can’t see how to do so.

The dependence on oil which our heavy reliance on buses and cars has caused over the last century or so, has caused immense political upheaval and conflict in the world. The terrible cost thereof needs to be properly taken into account when determining future transport policy. Trams have never contributed to that global turmoil.

Migration to alternatively-powered motor cars will not reduce traffic congestion or cut lethal non-exhaust emissions. Only electrically-propelled steel-on-steel modes can do that.

2. How might public transport travel patterns shift in the next 10 years? What impact could digitalisation and the COVID-19 pandemic have on travel patterns in the long term?

The escalating cost of living, driven by energy costs and other factors, will radically transform economic activity in the very near future. “Working from

home" will become less attractive when escalating daytime home heating costs kick in. That looks likely to cause resumption towards pre-Covid levels of commuting. Fuel pump prices will deter people from driving to work. Public transport needs to be ready to take up the slack.

3. What can be done to improve connectivity across public transport modes? How could better integration be delivered in urban areas outside London?

Encourage the selective re-regulation of buses. Give buses the same livery as local trains and trams, like London's. Introduce seamless ticketing without transfer penalties, or free travel for all. Showcase connectivity by shouting about it, for example at Altrincham near Manchester, state boldly in large letters along the top of the interchange canopy "Buses, Trams and Trains to all parts". That really isn't difficult. Improve signposting and visibility, for example of trams at various locations on Manchester Metrolink where they are at present hidden unnecessarily from public view.

At the same time it must be recognised that existing systems are unlikely to have the capacity to meet a transformational escalation in demand without substantial further investment.

Urban public transport needs to be located on the surface of cities to be at its most attractive to passengers.

4. What are the likely areas of innovation in urban public transport over the next 10 years? How should public policy be shaped considering both incremental and transformational innovations? How could data help transport services meet consumer demand?

Public transport technologies have become so well-established and proven over the last 200 years or so that there's no longer any need to re-invent the wheel by dreaming up alternative "solutions". Solid, reliable, tried and tested modes exist in abundance, and it's only necessary to take them up and run with them. Beware of proprietary modes which tie the client to one manufacturer, such as buses masquerading, in flagrant contravention of trading standards principles, as trams. All unconventional initiatives need to be capable of being easily upgraded to proper proven mainstream tramway technology powered via sensitively-executed overhead wires supplementing the transit presence which is delivered by steel rails.

5. Are local authorities well equipped with appropriate funding and powers to deliver high-quality public transport services? Would further devolution of transport policy contribute to better outcomes?

Not yet, and yes.

6. Could better policy coordination across government departments, and between central and local government, improve public transport outcomes? If so, how can this be achieved?

Yes. As dreadful evidence of the lack of such co-ordination, I would refer to the dogmatic imposition by the Treasury of an untried DBOM form of implementation contract on the pioneering Manchester Metrolink tramway scheme c1990, a slap in the face for the local officers and members who had conceived and developed the scheme on the assumption of retaining a close involvement with its implementation together with the assumed continuation of public transport integration wiped out by Westminster's 1985 Transport Act. The fledgling scheme was severely handicapped by this imposed contamination, directly inflicting at least 30 unnecessary problems on what should have been a thoroughly fine achievement. Most of those problems were the result of "learning on the job" by contractors fresh from bypasses and heavy railways ignoring easily-available overseas and past tramway knowledge such as that diligently gathered by GMPTA/E and its consultants and consultees in the 1980s. That sort of thing must never be allowed to happen again.

7. What are the barriers to improving urban public transport, in terms of delivering the necessary infrastructure, increasing connectivity and improving the consumer experience?

The greatest barrier is the assumption that public transport exists to make profits rather than to contribute to and facilitate economic and environmental well-being. High fares constrain demand and severely throttle the non-user benefits which ought to be delivered to the community in recompense for the cost and disruption of providing services. UK public transport fares are the most expensive in Europe. That is something for us to be thoroughly embarrassed about, for shooting ourselves in the foot so stupidly.

Another barrier is the tramway skills shortage in the UK. Today's civil, mechanical and electrical engineering practitioners would have been familiar in childhood with their parents' cars and with local buses and roads and heavy railways. Trams would have scarcely if ever entered their consciousnesses. They may have gone on to study roads, bridges and heavy railways, but never tramways. It isn't surprising, then, that trams are a somewhat alien concept to most practitioners, who need a high level of open-mindedness to properly embrace tramways as a speciality, rather than trying to force their own narrow preconceptions onto them.

The UK needs to be ready to implement tramways competently and in abundance, guaranteeing consistently high outturn quality. One way forward would be the establishment of a Faculty of Tramway Engineering at a further educational institute.

8. Are there other important changes, not covered elsewhere in these questions, which would improve matters?

Issuing Calls for Evidence at three-yearly intervals is all very well, but that alone isn't going to get us anywhere, other than giving respondents a chance to get things off their chests. The advice obtained needs to be taken properly on board and acted upon. Real open-mindedness and commitment are required if we are to successfully address well-recognised concerns and move forward.
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