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GMEX CENTRE (formally Manchester Central)

The Conference was well attended and many people came to visit for the day lured by the many fringes and other activities that were being held outside the secure area.

We are in Birmingham in 2010 – so if you are free, please think about coming along even if it is only for an afternoon and/or early evening event.

Conference Roundup

Future for Tram-Train

The All Party Parliamentary Light Rail Group kicked off a record number of well-attended transport fringe meetings at this year's party conference in Manchester. Entitled "Making the best of the rail network - what is the future for tram-train?" it brought together local MP Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale), Cllr Ian Macdonald (GMITA vice-chairman), Andrew Coombes from Network Rail, Piers Wood from Alstom and shadow transport minister Stephen Hammond (did he only speak at nine fringe meetings this year?!)

Piers Wood made the point that tram-train works elsewhere in Europe and has good potential in the UK, though several cities/areas coordinating procurement in terms of timing and specification would reduce costs significantly through economies of scale.

Andrew Coombes welcomed the prospect of tram-train and asked the question "high or low platforms at stations?" The UK's phase 1 tram-train trial (Huddersfield to Sheffield) was stalled. The phase 2 trial using electric vehicles instead of diesel was now planned for Sheffield to Rotherham, linking with the Sheffield Tram network.

Ian Macdonald welcomed the increased flexibility of tram-train and highlighted the scope for such services in Greater Manchester (to Marple, Wigan and Atherton?).

Stephen Hammond confirmed the party was committed to encourage light rail where local people wanted it. There should not, however, be a complete reliance on central government funding and a sound business case would also be needed.

Comment: a good start to the fringe meetings at which the speakers addressed the issues.

Peter Wood

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The future of rail in the north

This fringe meeting was sponsored by the Greater Manchester Integrated Transport Authority and Network Rail and chaired by Andy Crane a Northern TV presenter. Andy advised that the meeting would be about the Manchester Hub. It was reported that Manchester is a rail hub for services throughout the North and from elsewhere but was also a rail bottleneck. A Northern Way study had identified that the economy could be boosted by £12 - £16bn if the bottleneck was eased and services improved.

Councillor Ian Macdonald vice-chairman of the GMITA hastened to add that transport in the whole of the North would be improved by this work. Long distance services passed through the hub from Cumbria, Scotland and the North East to Manchester Airport and from Liverpool to Leeds and Nottingham. Manchester was a main commuting centre but the separation of services to Victoria and Piccadilly caused problems. There was a need for a greater intensity of services overall.

Edward Timpson MP agreed and stated that he would back the project. As MP for Crewe, itself a bottleneck on the West Coast mainline he was aware this line was approaching capacity and more investment was needed.

Paul Plummer a Director of Network Rail advised that some improvement was already underway with electrification from Liverpool – Manchester in hand. Network Rail was studying the Manchester Hub and a report of their findings would be available in December.

Stephen Hammond, Shadow Transport Minister, pointed out that a Conservative Govt. would construct a high-speed line from London to Manchester and Leeds but this would take until 2020 or 2025. They would also extend franchises and give more freedom to operators to order what carriages they needed. Micro-management by the DfT would be ended: a Conservative Government would take the overall decision on a project such as the Manchester Hub and allow Network Rail and local interests to design and implement the detail.

The speakers did not go entirely unchallenged. At question time up sprang Cllr Roger Bingham of Cumbria County Council who declared that work was needed beyond the Manchester Hub. He cited that the Cross Pennine lines from East Lancashire; North Lancashire, and Carlisle all needed investment and better services, whilst the economy of the Western Lake District could be improved by better services on the West Cumbrian Coast line.

Comment: The Manchester Hub Fringe has now toured all three party conferences. What Manchester and their partners have realised, perhaps as a result of past disappointments, is that a project will not come alive spontaneously just because there is a public need but that a case needs to be proven, all stakeholders must be aboard and supportive, and the issue well publicised. Now this is happening I will be surprised if work is not carried out on the Manchester Hub. Perhaps other campaigners can learn from Manchester's effort.

Richard Rollins

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Transport in the cities

Conference fringe sponsored by pteg the Passenger Transport Executive Group that is the driving force behind the development of public transport in 6 city regions chaired by Philip Davies MP for Shipley.

This wide ranging well attended fringe at which the speakers were, Neil Scales, Chairman of pteg, Paul Leer, Director of Policy at the Greater London Authority, Simon Moppett, Chairman of the Conservative Transport Group, Stephen Joseph, Campaign for Better Transport and Stephen Hammond the shadow minister of Transport made the following points:

- there was a role for national government and the PTE's working together
- national concessionary fares had been a great success
- process for appraising tram schemes should be streamlined while recognising that they are an expensive option
- bus franchises as in London would be beneficial
- London Borough had been given 5 key areas as asked to come up with specific projects to more sharply focus improvements
- Smoothing traffic flow was a key objective in London and was being achieved
- Cycling was seen as a way of strengthening local communities
- Tram schemes were popular and brought benefits to business communities.
- Oyster card was a great success and its use should be extended
- Co-operation in Hertfordshire between operators had run into Competition Commission problems and issues like this should be reported to the shadow team
- An alternative form of bus franchising must be possible that puts the private sector in control but meets local authority needs.
- In Kent real time information about trains were being built into new housing schemes
- Land use planning should be used to reduce the need to travel

Stephen Hammond acknowledged the useful role of pteg. He said

- there was room for investment in city regions
- supportive of the northern hub
- Network Rail would be made more accountable
- There would be longer franchises
- The OFT would be strengthened
- Not persuaded about Quality Contracts for buses which would be abolished.

Patricia Steel

Stagecoach Manchester bus depot - visit

The bus left Deansgate/Peter street junction at 14.15 on its journey to the Stagecoach bus depot at Hyde Road, Ardwick with 18 hardy souls. It was more than they expected - but they were ready for us with tea and cakes.

Mark Threapleton, managing director at Stagecoach Manchester, gave a presentation on Stagecoach on the south side of the city. He discussed the age of the fleet, marketing and magic bus. Also the problems with congestion on the bus corridors and a more detailed look at the 192 route from Manchester - Longsight - Levenshulme - Stockport - Hazel Grove and the bus lanes and the political nature of providing bus services without them being slowed up by the rest of the traffic. We also talked about the duty on fuel. (NB see Mark Threapleton's article in the Newsletter).

Graham Fenton

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Do passengers need more government involvement or less in bus and rail services?

Sponsored by Passenger Focus

Chaired by Colin Foxall CBE, Passenger Focus Chairman

Speakers were Anthony Smith Passenger Focus, Iain Coucher Network Rail, Keith Whitmore GMITA, Nicola Shaw Bus-UK, Stephen Hammond shadow transport minister

The meeting competed with the CCF service in Manchester Town Hall which filled the air with sounds of praise. With the door shut an excellent panel debated this interesting question. Government involvement is good, but only so far seemed to be the answer on the night. The framework of national planning has to be put in place, but when it comes to running public transport, the operators need less micro-management from government and to allow entrepreneurial skills to shine through.

Graham Fenton

The Problem with Congestion

Speakers included Theresa Villiers

A packed meeting with people overflowing into the corridor – and they were rewarded with a very interesting discussion on congestion. Not only was there talk about the loss to the ‘British Economy’ of the supply chain and business being held up by congestion but also the changes that would help solve it if a Conservative Government was elected. Theresa Villiers spoke in favour of a possible rail hub at Heathrow, of high speed rail and of investment in roads at the pinch points to speed traffic up and maintain the flow. Ian MacGregor gave a very good presentation on the use of technology in aiding the flow of traffic which led to many questions from the audience.

Graham Fenton

Future Transport Investment

Jim Steer, Managing Director, Strategic Planning at the SRA

Jim Steer started his presentation by explaining that a much higher proportion of trips are by car and that this invited the question of whether rail transport was getting too much money. He suggested that we think very carefully about transport investment and that we must plan for growth in the economy.

We should be planning well ahead for a national high-speed rail network. We will soon hit a rail capacity problem for which it is no longer cost effective to increase the capacity of the existing network. The Regional Development Agencies see high-speed rail as a generator of economic development and whilst a high-speed rail network will cost £69 billion, it will generate 3.5 times its cost in economic development gains.

To finance high-speed rail, the private finance initiative will not work in its present form and no single financial organisation is large enough to underwrite the financial risk of funding high-speed rail.

Jim suggested that we first need a company to build the high-speed rail routes. This company would become an asset owner. Whilst a high part of the £6 billion per year cost of building the high-speed network will be underwritten by Government, the company would generate rail user

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charges of £2 billion a year. With this level of income generation, the high-speed rail company would be able to borrow from financial institutions as per the Network Rail model.

Tim Green, Director of the Road Users' Alliance

Tim Green introduced the Road Users' Alliance, which was formed in 2002 after the British Roads Federation had been shut down. He highlighted the very high congestion on our roads and stated that British motorists are the most heavily taxed in Europe. He pointed out that car ownership is not influenced by the availability of roads, but by GDP, so restricting road building would not limit car ownership.

Tim Green suggested that we needed a "strategic road authority" that could charge for road use and use the income stream to develop the road network. This would not only increase capacity but also ration it by pricing.

Road user charging could be introduced as a way of delivering new benefits through advanced technology that is supportive to motorists rather than as a new tax as has been presented by Government.

The new technology could, for example, make speeding fines effectively optional, by warning the motorist of an approaching speed limit. It could also advise the motorist of lower mileage charges if his journey was delayed by an hour, of parking costs and availability nearby, or of train services from nearby railway stations where parking was available.

Comment: There does seem to be a synergy between investment needs in both the road and rail networks and perhaps infrastructure expansion in both should proceed on a much more similar basis. Would Route Utilisation Studies for the road network release much more cost effective capacity and congestion reduction than the way things are done now? This could be a very interesting topic of debate for the party and the CTG.

How about fringe next year on the possible use of RUS for the road network with road campaigners and Network Rail speakers?

Graham Nalty

Other transport fringes

There were several other transport related fringes at the conference, a couple are covered in news clippings below:

Birmingham launches bid to become High Speed hub

<http://www.railnews.co.uk/news/general/2009/10/09-birmingham-launches-bid-to-become.html>

Birmingham has launched a bid to become the engineering hub of the future High Speed rail network in Britain.

The Leader of the city council Mike Whitby told a fringe meeting at the Conservative Party Conference that the city's engineering heritage, central location and readily available skills-base meant it was 'the only logical choice'.

He explained: 'Birmingham's experience, capacity and engineering skills-base is unparalleled by any other city sitting on the network, making us the only logical choice to host the large scale

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engineering and train valeting facilities which will be required to operate the network. Not only would locating these services in Birmingham make sense for the train operators, but it would also reap great benefits for the city, directly creating hundreds of skilled and semi-skilled jobs, and many more besides in the local supply chain. The West Midlands-based lines also represent the only stretches of the proposed network which every single train will have to pass through en route between London and all onward destinations.'

Cllr Whitby was supported by Paul Kehoe, who is CEO of Birmingham International Airport. He said: 'The first intercity railway from the capital was the London to Birmingham railway built in 1837. From Birmingham the routes eventually spread out to reach other key cities in the north. I am convinced that this is how it will happen with the High Speed renaissance as well.'

Comment: This obviously looks like a press release issued before the meeting that was scheduled in the fringe programme for Wednesday lunchtime.

I remember Stephen Hammond referring to it in the Breakfast meeting on high speed organised by the Railway Forum. I was not able to attend the Birmingham meeting so I can not report what happened. There does not yet seem to have been any report in the Birmingham Post (I am writing this on Monday) that I have seen but I will check the Post for transport articles in the coming week.

What is interesting is that their view of the Birmingham Hub is not a railway station/interchange but a train maintenance, and possibly civil engineering site for track work, that will provide work for people in Birmingham and that is commendable. There is not much about sites for the station and services from Birmingham, but the presence of the Airport CEO indicates that Birmingham would like an airport station as well as a city centre station for the high-speed line.

Both The Railway Forum and Birmingham City Council are people we could approach regarding a fringe for next year, possibly for a joint high-speed fringe.

Graham Nalty

Tories 'cop out' of fuel duty debate

<http://www.roadtransport.com/Articles/2009/10/07/134734/tories-cop-out-of-fuel-duty-debate.html>

A future Conservative government can hold out no promise of a halt to the current administration's fuel duty escalator, shadow transport minister Stephen Hammond told a fringe meeting hosted by the Freight Transport Association (FTA) at the Conservative Party conference in Manchester this week. Hammond said he would have to "cop out" on the issue of fuel duty as that was a matter for the Treasury, not the DfT. FTA policy director James Hookham called on the government to stop "taking cash out of the industry" in rising fuel duty. He said: "Two pence per litre adds around £1,000 a year to the cost of running a truck. For that, an operator could train each driver three times in safer and more efficient driving." Hammond did, however, hold out hope that a future Tory government would introduce a foreign lorry road user charge.

Comment: Very much the sort of fringe that CTG ought to be doing.

Graham Nalty