

JONATHAN BRAY



How can we support towns like Batley?

Towns can help themselves - but they need big institutions, including the transport sector, to think carefully to back them up

► There are so many policy reports on transport and cities you could stack them up as high as the Beetham Tower. However, the pile of reports on transport and towns would struggle to get higher than the front step. Of course, getting big city transport networks right deserves attention. Wider city region economies, and indeed the national economy, won't work if our biggest cities can't move. However, the era is now over when all urban policy reports had to focus on cities. It is no longer okay for the de facto economic policy for post-industrial towns to be one of 'trickle down' from the growth of increasingly glossy and high rise city centres and for the message for towns to be 'smarten yourself up, as realistically the best it gets is you may have the honour of becoming a dormitory town'.

The days of that approach are gone because city region mayors cover voting territories far larger than core cities, and because those places that felt left behind and unheard made themselves heard very clearly with the outcome of the European referendum. A sign of the times is that both the mayors of West Midlands and Greater Manchester now have specific towns policies and initiatives, and rightly so.

Last month we followed up our report, *About Towns - How transport can help towns thrive*, with a roundtable in Batley Town Hall to talk towns and transport with transport authorities and organisations, government reps, towns-focussed NGOs, academics and thinkers. It was a fitting place to have

the event. Like so many of the many post-industrial towns in the city regions Batley has a history of graft, ingenuity, specialisation and boldness which has left behind a fabulous and dramatic built environment. In Batley's case the town originally boomed out of the local invention of new cheap textiles (Shoddy and Mungo) which the world couldn't get enough of. Indeed a magnificent avenue of showrooms (battered but mostly still there) was built from the station into the town. Among those who came to buy were representatives of both sides in various conflicts placing orders in bulk for their respective armies' uniforms.

The attitude that 'anything a city can do we can do too' also persisted in towns like Batley well into the twentieth century. In Batley's case some of the biggest stars in show business performed at the Batley Varieties in the sixties and seventies after a local magnate opened up this Vegas-inspired cabaret nightclub. Louis



Batley Town Hall

Armstrong, Shirley Bassey, Roy Orbison, Eartha Kitt were among the stars who came to town. Headly days. But the Varieties is long gone, along with the textile industry.

So what can transport do to help the many towns like Batley thrive in the here and now? Perhaps the biggest lesson of our report is that standalone transport capital projects are unlikely to be enough on their own to turn a struggling town centre around. That's not to say that building a high quality interchange isn't the right thing to do, but don't just build it and walk away. It needs to be part of something bigger.

There are some good examples in South Yorkshire (like Barnsley and Rotherham) and Tyne & Wear (South Shields) where new or improved stations or interchanges have been, or will be, tied into wider projects to locate new colleges or training facilities close to, or as part of, the transport development.

So the South Shields 365 Town Centre Vision includes a new transport interchange alongside a new railway skills academy for the Tyne & Wear Metro as well as improvements to the market place and a new central library. Making the new interchange into gateway and key component of a wider investment will bring footfall and a buzz.

Ideally too capital measures need to sit alongside revenue measures to make the use of the public transport that serves these new capital schemes more affordable. So for example the 'MyTicket' offers for young people in the Liverpool City Region which offered unlimited travel for £2.20 a day led to a 142% increase in bus trips by young people.

The transport sector is also a significant employer in towns, including in distribution and logistics, taxis and private hire and on the buses. As a sector it can support people in towns by paying good wages, building skills and supporting career development.

The transport sector can also work with what have become known as local 'anchor institutions'. This is a concept from the States which is that there are some large institutions which aren't going anywhere else (usually, but not exclusively, public sector), such as schools and universities and which are therefore anchors for the local economy. They could be more so if they used their considerable purchasing power to buy more goods and services from local businesses.

The town of Preston is the most celebrated

“Standalone transport capital projects are unlikely to be enough on their own”

example of this approach so far in the UK with the council seeking to ensure that as far as possible the local state buys local. Examples of this kind of approach in the transport sphere include the West Midlands Metro extension in the Black Country, where the scheme promoter is aiming for 80% of the project’s supply chain to be with local businesses.

Pulling back to the big picture, perhaps one of the best examples of thinking through a coordinated approach to maximising the benefits of new transport investment remains the Borders Railway. This rail reopening formed part of a much wider long term plan for revitalising the towns and places it serves through a long term, multi-agency strategy to create new transport hubs, provide new premises for small businesses, boost tourism and open up opportunity by providing access to employment and education opportunities.

At Batley Town Hall the fascinating roundtable discussion used our report as a jumping off point to range far and wide, including exploring how towns can adapt to an era where ‘transactional’ shopping is going online and the larger chains are pulling back to the biggest centres. Can towns trade on their strengths of manageable size and scale for walking around, an often very attractive built environment and a strong sense of identity to become places that offer something different and complementary to the cities, and something deeper than is available online? Their potential to offer a unique experience - with their own character, identity and local goods and services. Human places which offer opportunities for contact, kindness and connection in person which, in doing so, help to tackle loneliness and isolation. Places that are about doing rather than just buying. And not just the few towns which become the raw material for the incoming young, economically privileged and connected to energetically fashion into the next hipster haven - but the many more towns which more resemble hipster-free Batley.

Part of the answer to this could be providing more support for people like our host at the town hall, the outgoing mayor, and Batley born and bred, Cllr Gwen Lowe. Gwen is also the chair of the Friends of Batley station which is where we went after the roundtable for lunch at the community café she and the Friends have worked tirelessly to establish in what was a very

A visualisation of a new transport interchange for South Shields



Cllr Gwen Lowe, the outgoing mayor of Kirklees

run down station. It’s not been easy to get as far as they have in getting the café in place, as well as a garden in tribute to murdered local MP Jo Cox, alongside other improvements (like a painted mural in the subway).

Over lunch Gwen told us about the challenges, setbacks and slow progress in getting the railway to pull together to provide consistent support in helping them to make the improvements they are volunteering to make to the station (as well, as on a more positive note, about how the work of the Friends has helped make Batley feel better about itself in general, and those who have been active in the Friends in particular). It wouldn’t take much from big organisations to put some rocket boosters on the work of

the Friends so that they could give Batley the welcoming, friendly, greener station it needs.

And that perhaps echoes one of the big themes of the day itself. Towns can help themselves - but they need big institutions (including the transport sector) to think more carefully, and work more collaboratively, in order to support them. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.