

JONATHAN BRAY



Stormy weather looms over transport

Big shifts are going on - crises for bus and rail, 'big tech' reined in and an active travel revolution underway in Greater Manchester

► Whilst the summer weather has been day after day of serene blue skies, politics has been anything but. The arcane detail of rival concepts of Brexit (or no Brexit at all) are entirely consuming divided parties at Westminster, while Trump is careering across cyberspace and international summits like a runaway harbinger of something even worse. All of which might make the transport sector seem a place of calming respite. However, transport too is undergoing its own upheavals and seismic shifts which will set the tone for the sector when autumn comes - the busiest time of the political year.

Starting with those suspiciously blue skies and it's clear from the Climate Change Commission's most recent report that the transport sector needs to do more, a lot more, if the government's overall carbon targets are to be met. What's perhaps most striking about the commission's findings is how rapidly the grid has decarbonised as King Coal has been dethroned in favour of less carbon intensive fuels for hungry power stations. But whilst the grid has been decarbonising, progress in decarbonising transport has stalled and is now going into reverse. This is an opportunity for a greener grid to get transport back on track on carbon through more electrically powered vehicles. And one more argument why we should hold our nerve and continue to pursue rail electrification despite recent setbacks.

If transport is the bad boy on carbon the same is true for air quality. Given the government

does not look inclined to take its full share of responsibility for improving air quality through using the national vehicle taxation framework, local government is shouldering the burden with Clean Air Zone (CAZ) plans for the worst affected areas (a fuller picture of how the CAZs compare will become apparent by the Autumn). It will be particularly interesting to see how the Birmingham CAZ (which proposes to charge for the worst polluting cars) goes down given it clearly sets a precedent - and in one of Britain's largest cities too.

In tackling air quality there are also some massive challenges (and costs) to address around making the transition to cleaner buses, taxis, vans, lorries and public service vehicles. These challenges come down to how you channel public funding for vehicle renewal where services are provided in a fully commercial way, how much funding is available in total to do this and which cities receive it, as well as the availability and affordability of much greener vehicles (in particular for freight). Some of these problems are particularly acute for taxis and vans where there are many small hand to mouth businesses and sole traders. All in all things could get messy. And messier still if Client

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Earth wins another successful legal challenge.

Meanwhile, we are now in the run up to a budget and spending review announcement where health may well be biggest winner - given the NHS perennial funding crisis and the need for a Brexit dividend which can in some way reflect the famous message on the side of the 'vote leave' bus. What with one thing and another it would not be altogether surprising if defence also got a boost. That doesn't mean that transport funding couldn't see some far reaching change. A further review of the Bus Service Operators Grant is likely. There are also growing calls for greater stability on local transport spending rather than the stop-start and random competition funding that currently bedevils the sector. After all, national rail and highways now have five-year funding deals - so why not local transport too?

The National Infrastructure Commission's recent advice to government on long term infrastructure planning makes the same point. And it goes further too, by arguing that more transport funding should go to cities (because that's where you get the biggest impact). They also argue that the balance of transport funding should change after the current splurge on big schemes between cities to more of a focus on spending on transport within them. Greater certainty over local transport spending would clearly be good news for bus and rail - however both sectors are currently struggling with their own existential crises.

For bus, the crisis is about the future of the mode itself given ongoing decline. In some ways the decline of the bus is nothing new - it's a mode that has been allowed to quietly deteriorate by successive governments for years (they might as well have put a 'do not resuscitate' sign at the bottom of this particular patient's bed). However, perhaps not so quietly now with an upsurge in national media interest as the plight of bus users becomes increasingly desperate, with more tipping points being reached in more places. And not so quietly in the city regions either as the first wave of combined authority mayors know that they will partly be judged on the mark they make on transport in general - and on bus services in particular. Hence the acceleration in both the scope in alliances and planning for more comprehensive alternative options.

Fares and funding of bus services could become even more distorted as the clamour

“Greater Manchester’s ambitious Beelines programme shouldn’t be underestimated”



Chris Boardman (pictured) deserves credit for building the support for active travel in Greater Manchester. Pictured Right: the ambitious Beelines plan

The plan for Greater Manchester's cycling and walking network

The first 15 infrastructure projects that could be funded as part of Greater Manchester's cycling and walking infrastructure proposal.

Key

- Dots: Crossing points and junction upgrades
- Circles: Cycle parking at Metrolink Stations
- Green lines: Confirmed Beelines
- Yellow lines: Proposed Beelines
- Thicker yellow lines: Proposed Beelines on a busy road, offering full segregation and public realm improvements

- Bolton**
New route to the town centre, running parallel to Chorley Old Road
- Bury**
16 new or upgraded crossings and junctions
Cycle parking at nine stops on the Bury Metrolink line
- Rochdale**
Major enhancement to the high street in Castleton, including new facilities for cycling and walking
- Oldham**
Refurbishment of King Street West bridge
Refurbishment of Union Street West bridge
- Wigan**
Extension of the innovative Saddle Junction cycle facility to the southwest, connecting with Alexandra Park
- Salford**
Junction enhancements in Swinton and Walkden
Junction enhancement at Broad Street/Frederick Street
Complete transformation of Chapel Street East
- Tameside**
Package of improvements including creating filtered neighbourhoods where people are prioritised over cars
- Trafford**
Upgrade to cycling and walking provision where Talbot Road meets White City Way and Seymour Grove
- Manchester**
Segregated cycling route to the city centre from Chorlton
- Stockport**
Gilbert Road crossing upgrade, Cheadle Hulme
New cycling and walking route from Brimington to Stockport town centre



For detailed plans visit mappinggm.org.uk/beelines

for more concessions for different types of bus users shows no signs of abating. Ahead of the pack is a proposed new national concession for apprentices (a Tory manifesto commitment). There is an admirable case to be made for it, but it will be challenging to find a way of routing the money to pay for it if unintended consequences are not to follow with the cost of the concession being reflected in reduced services as bus operators seek to maintain profit margins.

There's clearly a need for some more thorough reform of bus funding for what sense does it make for an ever greater proportion of bus passengers to be funded by the state to travel for free on shrinking networks, whilst regular passengers vote with their feet - partly over the ever higher regular fares that they are paying? And all supported via funding flows from the public sector which are byzantine in their complexity into what is supposed to be a fully commercial free market (but is in effect an oligopoly). There's a strong case for more public funding for bus but the current tangled way in which this is provided isn't helping. Interesting too that in more places round the world (Estonia being the most celebrated current example and Paris the most notable place to say it's interested) there is some very bold simplification going on - ie no bus fares at all.

Meanwhile, on rail the existential crisis is less about the mode itself but about the

viability of the way the industry is structured. This follows on from the recent nervous breakdowns on timetabling in both the south and the north, and the fear of more horrors to come with other franchises predicated both on wildly optimistic passenger forecasts and on timelines for delivery of additional Network Rail infrastructure and capacity that just aren't going to happen.

Our new 'big tech' wannabe overlords have not been getting it all their own way either. The period where society has been entirely bedazzled, hypnotised and beguiled by anything to do with technology has come to an end. No longer is resistance useless. The idea of boring old regulation in the public interest is something we can talk about again. You can see it in Facebook wanting to be our friend again and in the humbling of Uber. That doesn't mean that we aren't going to continue to see some buccaneering behaviour and 'disruptions' via new business models, but it does mean the arrogant 'get out of the way, we are the future' narrative that these new players frequently employ has itself been disrupted.

From high tech to low tech and in this round up of the big shifts that are going on out there, the significance of Greater Manchester's ambitious Beelines programme to get more people walking and cycling shouldn't be underestimated. I would argue it's the third biggest thing to happen on cycling in particular

in recent decades. The first was Sustrans delivering high quality infrastructure for cycling that got used. The second was London (as the UK's world city) mainstreaming cycling within their transport plans and programmes at scale, and now Greater Manchester is the first to follow suit. Usually active travel gets the crumbs from the transport spending table, but that's changing now and Chris Boardman deserves a lot of credit for building the political and public support for this big shift in Greater Manchester.

And if that wasn't enough uncertainty and change to be going on with there is also the way that successive sets of recent transport and travel statistics suggest some big changes may (repeat may) be afoot on travel patterns. With the biggest unknown being whether the way that people are now living their lives (in an era of transformative social and technological change) is leading to significant, far reaching and permanent big picture changes in travel and patronage trends.

Stormy weather indeed! ■

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.