LEEDS LOOKS FORWARD TO 2012
Futuristic trolleybuses to replace stalled Supertram?

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Trolleybus plan shows new mood of pragmatism

Will Leeds, one of the first British cities to introduce trolleybuses over 95 years ago, also be the first to reintroduce them?

The news that Metro, the West Yorkshire PTE, has abandoned its Supertram dreams for a favoured option of double-articulated 'electric bus trams' like those already running in a few French cities will provide much cheer to those trolleybus enthusiasts who have never lost faith in the potential for electric urban buses since the last Bradford examples vanished almost 35 years ago.

More than that, though, this represents a huge change of heart for a city so determined until now to deliver a new mass transit system with steel wheels on steel rails. A project driven no doubt partly by Yorkshire civic rivalry, for if Sheffield could provide itself with a Supertram in the 1990s, Leeds pride demanded something similar in the capital of the West Riding. Only successive government ministers, and an all-powerful Treasury, were sceptical in the extreme. Why go to the expense of a tram, they said, when cheaper bus rapid transit could provide some of the benefits?

Having recognised that the tram game almost certainly is up — and Sir Rod Eddington's transport report reinforces this by recommending lots of small solutions rather than a few big, glitzy ones — Metro and its passenger transport authority have embraced the possibility of bus rapid transit with a difference and should be congratulated for its courage.

It has a thing about trolleybuses. The Bradford connection was ensured by immediate past PTA chairman Stanley King, a Bradford Conservative and an enthusiast — in all senses of the word — for the mode. He has never given up on the dream that they could run again. And over the past 20 years, Metro has plugged away at projects to run modern trolleybuses in Bradford and Leeds. Their chances didn't look too bad before deregulation 20 years ago, and it wasn't until suburban rail was given a higher priority that more recent plans went into a terminal loop.

This time, instead of using them to replace diesel buses, it is showing more imagination by choosing its 'electric bus tram' as the next best thing to a tram. A high-capacity, near silent, zero emission vehicle (yes, we know it does cause emissions at the power station) with its own track, but unburdened by having expensive rails to run on, underground services to be diverted or a gold plated depot to inhabit. As a byproduct, it also is a vehicle that can divert in emergency from its track (unlike a tram) and also penetrate lower density housing areas.

None of that means it is guaranteed to happen, however. The Treasury may be seduced by Metro's second option of something similar using hybrid diesel-electrics, or even by its third option of a low-emission diesel more like First's 'fit'. Diesel is the safe, proven solution. Hybrid potentially delivers the benefits of trolleybuses without overhead wires, but the technology is still in its infancy.

It would be nice to think that our nation's decision makers might see past today's diesel solutions. The efforts going into hybrid suggest it will get a lot better. Eventually. Equally, trolleybus technology is proven and is still being perfected.

Significantly, Volvo — the one global bus builder showing hybrid technology at Euro Bus Expo in November — believes that oil production will peak around the time Leeds hopes to get its trolleybuses. After that, the price pressures may become intense and favour electric or other non-oil solutions. Metro wants its consultants to factor likely oil price rises into the equation when presenting the case for the Leeds scheme. We must hope that Whitehall also considers that when deciding on this and other urban public transport projects.

ALAN MILLAR
Leeds favours trolleybus option instead of Supertram

Metro, the West Yorkshire PTE, wants to reintroduce trolleybuses to Leeds along the alignment of the Supertram route, which failed to secure government funding. It says they could start running by 2012.

It has prepared three bus rapid transit options serving, east, south and north Leeds and is seeking government and West Yorkshire Passenger Transport Authority support for a further year of feasibility studies on the exact routes to be followed. Its preferred option, which it describes as 'bus tram', is for a 'very high quality, electrically powered bus with the visual appearance of a tram'. The vehicle would operate in electric mode for most sections other than when negotiating highway obstacles or when diverted from route,' Metro director general Kieran Preston has told the PTA.

These vehicles would be similar to the tram-like Bombardier trolleybuses operated in the French cities of Nancy and Caen. Like them, they would be three-section double-articulated vehicles, for which special dispensation would be required for operation on public roads. The French vehicles are guided by a single rail in the road surface, but the Metro report makes no mention of a guidance system.

It estimates that each vehicle could be bought for £1.1 million and that the complete system would cost around £600 million for Supertram over a similar alignment. The main savings are through not having to divert underground services, not using so much former railway trackbed and not building a tram depot at Hunslet, although it acknowledges that double-articulated trolleybuses would require depot space. It also intends to reserve the Hunslet site against the possibility of the route being upgraded to trams.

Metro, which has been pursuing trolleybus projects on and off for over 20 years, has asked its consultants to develop whole life costs for the vehicle options being considered and to take account of potential future rises in the price of oil. Already, it insists that the 'bus tram' option could be operated without subsidy.

Its next best solution, which it says would be £50 million cheaper to install, is to use tram-styled hybrid diesel electric buses. These would cost £700,000 each and run in electric mode 'where there may be adverse environmental and public acceptability impacts of diesel operation'. The third option, costing at £210 million, would use Euro4-engined vehicles of the calibre of the Wright StreetCars employed in FirstGroup's 'ftf' concept, which Metro says will cost upwards of £325,000 each.

First is poised to introduce 'ftf' on Leeds route 4 (Pudsey-Whinmoor) during 2007 to test the concept on an intensive cross-city service.

Metro and Leeds city council have largely completed the required infrastructure improvements, but trial operation of the first two StreetCars has been delayed until January. More ominously, Metro says it will neither support their use nor enter into a partnership agreement for the scheme until First resolves the ticketing and interior design problems that have caused so much difficulty on the 'ftf' service in York. In Leeds, First intends to employ conductors initially, install a second on-bus self-service ticket machine and extend off-bus ticketing.

For the 2012 bus rapid transit service, a key element will be park-and-ride, for which four sites are planned at Bodginton in the north, Grimes Park in the east, Stourton to the south and at Junction 45 of the M1 in the Aire Valley. It has ruled out an extension beyond Stourton to Middlesbrough, but believes the flexibility of buses would permit an £8 million northward extension to Holt Park.

Leeds opened one of the first two British trolleybus services in 1911, but while the neighbouring Bradford system opened the same day survived nearly 61 years and peaked at 187 buses, the 15-vehicle Leeds system lasted only 17 years.

Stagecoach and Anglo-French transport group Keolis have been shortlisted to operate the Manchester Metrolink tram system for 10 years from next April in place of current operator Serco.