

WHY DOESN'T BRISTOL HAVE TRAMS?

Gavin Smith (Bristol City Council, Transport Planning & Public Transport, retired).

Why does Bristol need trams?

- Bristol is beset by traffic jams, air pollution, delays and intrusive rat-running through inappropriate residential streets. **It's one of the largest Western European cities without any form of rapid transit.** An Underground would be too expensive, buses not attractive enough to car-owners, and 'bus rapid transit' not different enough from buses, and time-wasting – Caen in Normandy for instance has just converted its guided buses to conventional trams. Most large cities in Western Europe have tram systems. Bristol used to have trams: its existing built-form **expects trams.**

Why does Bristol not have trams?

- Firstly, because of no encouragement or guidance from central government. **The government's Dept. for Transport (DfT) has no rapid transit section.**
- Secondly, Bristol is in the car-dominated **South.** Brighton, Cambridge (ill-advised rail conversion to guided bus), Reading, Oxford, the Solent, Plymouth, Milton Keynes – none of them have trams. Trams are found in the cities with civic pride: in the North and in the devolved countries. Edinburgh, soon Cardiff; and in the Midlands and North, Birmingham, Nottingham, Sheffield, Newcastle (a subsurface bit), Manchester, soon Coventry. But a shout-out here in London – a slow mover internationally – for the Docklands Light Railway and Croydon Tramlink. (as well as the Underground and Overground).
- Thirdly, Bristol has had **no leadership.** There was a tram plan under Avon County Council, but Avon was abolished. The West (WECA) – Bristol and Bath – at last now has '**Combined Authority**' status, like most English metro cities. And is working towards some sort of transport plan – but the LAs argue with WECA. Contrast the non-CA city of Nottingham, who had a Chief Planner and a leading Councillor forty years ago who together planned a tram system.
- Transport planning in Bristol and WECA is **non-integrated.** Each section – cycling team, rail, buses, traffic planning, road safety – works more or less in isolation. Much of it – rail and buses – is largely left to outside, partially privatised, bodies. A tram plan requires integrated transport planning. Traffic has to be cleared away, buses and trains have to plan to interchange with trams, cyclists have to mostly have different routes (through not completely – see Ghent). Bristol Mayor's impractical Underground plan, pushed by developers regarding particular plots, failed to **face up to road traffic management.**

How can Bristol get trams?

- By **lobbying the politicians.** WECA currently is Labour-run, but might return to Tory. Bristol's Labour Mayor is about to be abolished, and the city return to a Committee system, half of whom are likely to be Green. Each of these parties has to be persuaded. The **MPs** have to be persuaded, so they can lobby the Minister – soon

Labour. Trams have to become a **cross-party agreement** in Bristol. We have work to do.

- Put **national pressure on DfT** to get tooled up!
- WECA's **regional housing plan** has to become public transport-led – in the past it has always been highways and site led. We have to copy the Netherlands and Sweden, and plan housing expansion around rail and rapid transit services.
- The **public has to be consulted and brought on board**, as obviously they were in Nottingham. They have to become enthused by trams' practicality, modernity and attractiveness.
- To achieve any of these things, someone has to come up with and publicise an **outline plan of a realistic tram system** for Bristol. Only then will DfT consider giving WECA a **grant** to start building it – as they do for the other metro cities that have plans. This is a technical issue, and will require help from appropriate consultants – WECA is dabbling with consultants at present. It will probably involve a certain amount of **local rail conversion and reopening** for trams (as in Croydon, Manchester). The Portishead line reopening has dragged along for ever, but should be for tram-trains instead of heavy rail.
- It particularly needs **vision**. The ability to envisage **Bristol as it could be**. For instance its urban motorway, the **M32**: there is the beginning of a consensus that this should be de-motorwayed – National Highways are amenable due to the repairs costs – and include an inexpensive tram route linking an M4 Park&Ride site to the city centre. Similarly the orbital **Avon Ring Road** dual-carriageway with its car-dependent retail and business centres – they include a tram service. The people of Bristol need to see such a vision offered to them.
- One thing is **knowledge**. Bristolians **don't know** Birmingham has a tram system, and that Cardiff and the Valleys are about to have their rail network completely upgraded and tied together by on-street tram in the city centre. So another need is for councillors and community leaders to go to Birmingham or Ghent; or at least be shown a decent film and vision.