Meeting on 20 March 2012 at the House of Commons at 15:00

Summary Report

The Chairman, John Leech MP, introduced the speakers, Greg Mulholland, MP for Leeds North West, László Szedlmajer, Chief Engineer, BKV, Budapest, and Stuart Kerr, Manager, Strategic Business Development, Vossloh Kiepe. He explained that the meeting was a follow up of a study tour of Budapest made by a delegation from APPLRG in January.

1st speaker, Greg Mulholland MP

I must begin by thanking Vossloh, sponsors of APPLRG, and Jim Harkins for supporting and organising the trip to Budapest. It is always useful to see transport organisation in other countries in order to inform decisions to be made in the UK. My own purpose in visiting Budapest was to see trolleybus operation in view of the proposed trolleybus installation in Leeds. Budapest operates 117 trolleybuses on 73 kilometres of route as part of an integrated transport network. I had not been on a trolleybus before this and my initial impression was that they are not very different to diesel buses. Their main advantage seems to be that, having a fixed route, they give a better impression of permanence of service. BKV, the Budapest transport operator, is looking to tramway rather than trolleybus expansion for the future development of the network. There is also a new metro line under construction, which is likely to be further extended in the next 25 years.

In the UK, outside London, only Manchester begins to approach the sort of integrated public transport network that Budapest has. At present, lack of cash will prevent development of similar networks in other British cities.

Is the trolleybus right for Leeds? I think that the basic trolleybus is not suitable for British cities but the system proposed for Leeds, NGT (New Generation Transport) is more sophisticated and has been proposed as a “light rail substitute”. It is a tragedy that Leeds does not already have a light rail system, which is due to past decisions of central government. Leeds is not now where it would wish to be, but NGT is the only proposal on the table and even that is still awaiting final government approval. There is no current light rail proposal and, if NGT does not get the go-ahead, the money will not be available for anything else, and more money will have been wasted on fruitless planning on top of that already wasted on the aborted light rail scheme. DfT knows that there is little enthusiasm for NGT in Leeds and this could be an excuse to scrap the scheme. A decision is expected in May or June. If it is not approved,
Leeds will continue to be the largest city in Europe without a rapid transit system, so, in spite of this being a “second best”, I hope to be riding NGT in Leeds by 2018/2019.

Questions

John Leech: Many see NGT as a forerunner of the tram, is conversion a realistic possibility?

Greg Mulholland: I discussed this with Metro (the Leeds transport authority) in the early stages of the scheme. My backing NGT is due to their view that it is convertible and growth in passenger numbers may make this necessary. The next rapid transit line after the two NGT lines could well be light rail, especially if the costs can be got down. There are still many places in the city needing good transport links that will not be served by NGT, including a link to Bradford.

Andrew Braddock: Budapest trolleybus operation is not a good comparison for NGT in Leeds, Lyon or Zurich would have been better. Leeds must build on NGT to develop its network as other European cities have done, converting heavily used trolleybus lines to light rail and then using the displaced vehicles to convert the busiest diesel bus routes to trolleybus. We must look at whole life costs of the different modes to get the appropriate mode for each route.

James Skinner: Would it not be more sensible to go for low-cost light rail from British manufacturers than more expensive foreign-built systems?

Greg Mulholland: Yes but the decision –making at present is with DfT. In future, devolution of decision-making to local transport bodies will enable better decisions to be made. At present, it is made clear that if we ask for anything other than NGT, we get nothing.

Dave Holliday: Have you looked at the dual-power (trolleybus/diesel) buses in Seattle?

Greg Mulholland: We have had information on Seattle.

Lewis Lesley: What is the reaction of the existing commercial bus operators to the NGT scheme?
Greg Mulholland: In the corridors to be served by NGT, this means First Bus. They are not happy with the proposals, which involve some quite complicated traffic management at congested points in the routes.

John Leech: The main advantage that Budapest has is a fully integrated system. In the UK outside London different operators are in competition with each other. There is, however, the possibility of introducing quality partnerships to improve integration.

Ian Souter: Is there scope in Leeds for a common ticketing system?

Greg Mulholland: I am not aware of any plans; I imagine NGT will be competing with First Bus.

John Leech: The government is looking at bringing in a countrywide smart card for all public transport.

Robin Woolfendale. Budapest and Leeds are surely very different in ridership patterns, with the population in central Leeds being more dispersed.

Greg Mulholland: Certainly every city has its own characteristics, but with recent developments more people are now living in central Leeds. The problem is one of commuting from outside the city centre. The roads are jammed and the local train service lacks capacity. A more efficient transport system might well alter the population distribution.

Paul Tweedale: What is the difference in cost between the trolleybus and light rail schemes? What difference will the scheme make to Leeds?

Greg Mulholland: The NGT scheme (2 lines) will cost £200m as against upwards of £500m for the 3-line light rail scheme. The benefit-cost ratio is good for NGT but was equally so for light rail and the modal shift would have been greater for light rail. Local business is supporting NGT in the absence of light rail because it sees poor transport as the main factor restricting growth.

Paul Tweedale: What other expenditure might Leeds give up in the future to increase transport funding?

Greg Mulholland: Leeds has already put substantial amounts into transport. In retrospect it might have been better to start with one light rail line rather than three.

John Leech: These are large infrastructure project and local authorities do not have the cash without substantial input from central government.
John Leech then introduced Laszlo Szedlmejer and thanked him for his help during the APPLRG Budapest visit.

2nd speaker László Szedlmejer
Mr Szedlmejer gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Budapest public transport operator BKV with particular emphasis on their tram and trolleybus operations. He outlined the advantages and disadvantages of operating a mixed fleet. In addition to rebuilt Ganz and Tatra cars there were 40 low-floor Siemens Combinos which had been bought new and a fleet of refurbished, second-hand, high-floor cars from Hannover. [It had been suggested before the meeting that the Hannover cars could have been used in Manchester]

The presentation can be viewed on the APPLRG Website at {LINK}

3rd speaker Stuart Kerr
Mr Kerr gave a PowerPoint presentation on the criteria to be considered in planning urban public transport networks. He stressed the importance of a reliable schedule of operation in gaining the trust of the public and using zero-emission vehicles and the role of fixed-track systems in encouraging both commercial and residential development. He stressed that all modes have a place in a network and are complementary he showed a graph of the optimum loadings for different modes. He felt that the UK should be more open to ideas from elsewhere in assessing transport options.

The presentation can be viewed on the APPLRG Website at {LINK}

Questions

Elaine Greenwood: The Hannover cars would have been too wide for use in Manchester. I would also contest the statement that the UK is not open to ideas from overseas.

Lewis Lesley: Stuart Kerr’s figures showed tram becoming the preferred mode at 3000 passengers per hour whereas Manchester had only 2000/hour.
Stuart Kerr: If you cannot afford the best, go for the best you can afford. Doing nothing leads to stagnation.

John Leech: I am aware that Budapest has budgetary problems. Is the fact that a fixed wire system reassures passengers the reason why trolleybuses are being retained?

László Sz edm aj er: Yes, although we could not anyway afford replacement diesel buses at the moment.

Mary Bonner: What about the integration of public with private transport through park and ride, parking charges etc.?

László Sz edm aj er: We have been thinking about congestion charging but car traffic is currently decreasing due to high fuel costs. While there has been a small increase in public transport use, the biggest increase has been in the use of bicycles. We also need more park and ride provision.

John Leech: A problem encountered in Manchester is unofficial park and ride where motorists park in residential streets near tram stops.

Paul Rowen: What is the level of public transport subsidy in Budapest?

László Sz edm aj er: The figures are:

- HUF 40B from farebox
- HUF 6B government reimbursement for concessions
- HUF 10B for research and development from municipality
- HUF 24B government operating subsidy

Sonal Jogi: There is a lack of coordination between local authorities in development and transport provision and a lack of standardisation. How can this be improved?

Stuart Kerr: There have been moves to create light rail standards but this is proving difficult. At present each new system is bespoke.

John Leech: This is largely due to the way schemes are funded. This could only be substantially improved by changing the method of procurement which is unlikely to happen at present.