

Comment

EDINBURGH TRAMS AND THE PLANNED INQUIRY

Paul Tetlaw looks at some of the questions Transform Scotland want the answers to, and why the tram project is being singled out for a Public Inquiry amongst other delayed and over-budget transport schemes.

Transform Scotland has been a long-term supporter of the Edinburgh tram project. In January 2001, along with Passenger Focus we organised the first ever international conference in Scotland on trams, with speakers from across the UK and Europe discussing the benefits that trams had brought to other cities. It was therefore with relief and delight that on 4 March 2003 we heard the Scottish Executive announcement that the City of Edinburgh would receive GBP375m (EUR472m) for two tramlines. Since then we have gathered support from organisations across the city, and produced briefing papers for key votes in the City of Edinburgh Council in 2006 and 2011, and in the Scottish Parliament in 2007. Additionally we submitted evidence in favour of the construction of the two lines during the period of parliamentary scrutiny.

As readers will know, the project has suffered from a series of disputes and delays, so it was a relief to witness crowded trams take to the streets of Edinburgh on 31 May 2014. Whilst the service is still bedding in it is clear that the public mood has shifted – 130 000 people flocked to use the new services in the first week.

This appears to have taken elements of the local media by surprise, as well as some of those politicians who were hostile towards the project.

However, given the history of the project it came as little surprise on 6 June to hear the First Minister announce that a judge-led inquiry will be held.

Raising some difficult questions

Clearly it is important to establish the causes of the delays in construction, and the roles of the key agencies and individuals involved. Some questions are:

- Why did the Government withdraw Transport Scotland from this major project of international significance?
- Why was the funding for this major public transport project so rigidly capped by the Government, no matter what adverse circumstances might arise?
- What was the purpose of this financial constraint, which seems to be unique, when so many road schemes have been allowed to over-run their initial budgets very considerably (e.g. the M74 extension and the Aberdeen western bypass)?
- Did the City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) and Transport Initiatives Edinburgh (TIE) have the appropriate skillsets to manage a project of this scale?

- Was the correct relationship established between CEC and TIE?
- Did the contractors take advantage of the situation that arose in Edinburgh?

To provide a valid account of the cost of building the tram infrastructure in terms of a significant long-term investment, the estimated costs of replacing the utility services, and the costs of the consequent delays, should be subtracted, as being a separate utility responsibility that had long been neglected. To what extent were difficulties and additional costs in replacing

utility services responsible for the protracted dispute between the Council and the contractor?

Politicians of all parties here in Scotland might like to reflect on the above key issues and also why it is that this public transport project is the sole subject of the inquiry and not the similarly over budget road schemes. However, we will be willing to give evidence to the inquiry in our role as 'innocent bystanders' from inception to launch of the trams and trust that the terms of reference will allow for a close scrutiny of the part played by all parties.



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A plan for the future

As far as the current first tramline is concerned it is clear that extensions are needed and there is every reason to believe that they will happen. That is the pattern with all new tram schemes and Edinburgh has a fleet of trams, a depot and indeed the rails all ready for the construction of further lines. For all of the problems some aspects have been proved to be well founded; the CAF trams with a large capacity have certainly been needed

and the decision to create a new combined company to run the trams and buses will surely be a model that others will follow.

Happily, there does now seem to be a political consensus developing on Edinburgh Council that what has been built can only be the start of a new era of public transport in the city, and that tram extensions must follow. **TAUT**

> Paul Tetlaw spent most of his career in environmental management in the water industry, retiring as General Manager, Key Customers for Scottish Water. Paul has been a Board Member with Transform Scotland for over ten years and served as Chair for four years.

Transform Scotland is the national alliance promoting sustainable transport in Scotland with a membership representing all major public transport operators. The broadly-based membership also includes local authorities, universities, transport consultants, car clubs and a range of active travel organisations.