

New Generation Transport (NGT): Fact or Fiction?

NGT presents itself as a “modern trolleybus network” bringing to Leeds the following benefits:

- Fast & reliable journeys into and across Leeds with exclusive lanes and roads and special equipment to give NGT vehicles priority at traffic lights and junctions.
- High frequency journeys served by high quality stops and shelters with real-time information showing passengers when NGT services are due to arrive.
- Zero emissions on route from new, comfortable fully accessible vehicles that are better for the environment
- Over 2,300 park and ride spaces for people wanting to avoid the jams by swapping from the car to NGT..
- £160m boost to local economy each year, helping to create 4,000 permanent new jobs.

If this is the case, why then should so many community organisations in north Leeds be raising concerns and objections to the proposal?

These organisations recognise the importance of improving the transport infrastructure for Leeds, and the need to tackle issues of traffic congestion. However, there should be the reassurance that any proposal clearly demonstrates value for money in terms of its cost, what it achieves and its impact on the traffic flows, community life and the overall character of Leeds.

If this assurance and confidence in the proposal is lacking then these organisations feel justified in challenging the NGT trolley bus proposal, especially since there seems to be a widespread ignorance both of the NGT scheme and its potential impact on the communities around the A660.

Do these benefits as listed by NGT stand scrutiny?

Fast & reliable journeys into and across Leeds with exclusive lanes and roads and special equipment to give NGT vehicles priority at traffic lights and junctions.

Journey time savings are estimated to give a 21 minute journey time into the city centre from Bodington. If current bus services on Otley Road had the same road privileges as NGT any differences would be negligible.

Part of the time saving comes from fewer trolley bus stops, meaning less stopping and starting but is this good customer service with passengers having to walk further to their trolley bus stop? Also bus stops and NGT stops are separate and will not be close together so the user will have to gamble in advance on whether to wait at a trolley stop or a bus stop.

Part of the time saving comes from ticketing schemes and bus conductors.

NGT intends to use a mixture of an off-vehicle ticketing system, such as Oyster cards or a contactless ‘wave and pay’ scheme, and on-board ticketing by a conductor. Again something which could be introduced on the current bus system?

Part of the time saving comes from dedicated lanes and light priority. For the A660 section, apart from the Headingley by-pass which sees the trolley bus running behind the Andale Centre, special lanes are shared with buses, with well separated bus and trolley stops being set back into lay-bys to prevent delays. Where the trolleybus has to cross other traffic lanes it will always have priority provided by complex sets of traffic lights. Presumably some form of bus priority system could achieve similar journey time savings?

High frequency journeys served by high quality stops and shelters with real-time information showing passengers when NGT services are due to arrive.

At peak times NGT is planning to operate a service from Holt Park running every 12 minutes linking into the Bodington Park n Ride to give a service every 6 minutes from Bodington. Current bus services on Otley Road are already more frequent than every six minutes.

As yet no information is available as to the specifications of a “high quality stop”, but real time (as compared to timetabled) travel information is currently already available in new bus shelters, such as those for the A65 new bus corridor. “High quality” stops are an irrelevance, since the objective is to spend as little time as possible at them while waiting and none at all when alighting.

Zero emissions on route from new, comfortable fully accessible vehicles that are better for the environment

Emissions issue: Although local emission from trolley buses is lower than for diesel buses, there is the question of emissions at the point of electricity generation. There is also a lot of debate about hybrid and electric battery-powered buses and future developments.

Overall there will be extra congestion from other traffic caused by the NGT trolley bus priorities, especially from traffic queues through Headingley while they idle in stop-start driving. This side-effect of the NGT is mentioned almost as a virtue in the NGT document under ‘Indirect Tax Revenues’. The duty collected as a result of ‘additional fuel consumption [by other traffic] from additional congestion/ increased highway trip lengths’ is shown as offsetting the cost of the project by no less than £1.3 million. This is in spite of a projected reduction in the total number of vehicles using the route!

NGT promises new, comfortable fully accessible vehicles. These appear to be articulated or bi-articulated vehicles which require long lay-bys at the stops. Closer examination of the internal layout of articulated trolley buses reveals that most passengers have to stand - 53 seated and 60 standing or 68 seated and 124 standing: the proportion of passengers allowed to stand on buses is considerably lower.

Although standing is not as ‘comfortable’ as sitting, the business case of quicker journey times mandates minimal boarding and alighting times at each intermediate stop, which in turn means more doors and less seats.

Over 2,300 park and ride spaces for people wanting to avoid the jams by swapping from the car to NGT.

Park n Ride schemes work well in many cities, usually serviced by buses. For example Bath has what it describes as “The new, eco-friendly hybrid diesel/electric buses offering a luxurious travel experience with individual leather seats, free on-board Wi-Fi, next-stop displays, and climate control on the upper deck”

The trolley bus proposal is modelled around the experience of tram / light rail systems which typically show a of 18 -20% drivers switching to public transport (modal shift). The Business Case Submission for NGT assumes that only around 15% of NGT passengers will have transferred from cars, with over 75% shifting from buses. It also assumes that 7% of NGT passengers will be former walkers and cyclists.

The loss of up to half of passengers from existing bus services will have a dramatic effect on these services: even the NGT business case expects the No. 1 and No. 6

services to halve in frequency. The loss of profitable full-bus services during peak times raises the spectre of outlying services closing or becoming very infrequent.

Interestingly results from five 'major light rail systems' in the UK have shown that 'while there has been a modal shift from cars to light rail of up to 20 per cent, the impact on congestion has been a lot less or nil.'

£160m boost to local economy each year, helping to create 4,000 permanent new jobs.

The National Audit Office (NAO) in 2011, evaluated the economic and development impact of the Sheffield Supertram, a project which has about twice the "line length" of the NGT proposal. The NAO states that there was no established methodology for identifying the regeneration benefits at the planning stage and they did not know how the jobs estimate had been made. Their evaluation of the Sheffield scheme estimated that 1,600 jobs had been created, the report also goes on to add "Of course, in measuring regeneration and social inclusion benefits retrospectively it is difficult to separate the impact of light rail from other regeneration programmes or from changes in the local or national economy".

Incidentally for the Sheffield tram, opened in the mid-1990's, the total annual patronage for 2010 – 2011 was still 32% below the original forecast usage figure.

Leeds has an excellent record in attracting inward investment, with ongoing initiatives including- Trinity Quarter, Eastgate, EASEL and South Bank . The regenerative or "Sparks effect" of installing new transport networks to attract new businesses is unproven for trolley bus systems.

It is also worth remembering that only 5% of total traffic going into the city centre is from the A660. Furthermore the A660 has the highest bus usage carrying 2.5 passengers for every 1.0 car passenger, elsewhere in Leeds it is 1.5 bus to 1.0 car passengers.

NGT also ignore the serious negative impact for local businesses, such as those at West Park or Far Headingley, who are faced with the loss of customer parking and/or frontage. The potential loss of these businesses would diminish the quality of life within the adjacent local communities.

The concerns felt by residents extend beyond the above issues:

Environmental concerns:

The A660 runs through 5 conservation areas and has significant numbers of mature trees all contributing to the character of north Leeds.

Current plans require removal of 'a significant number of mature trees', pavements, stone walls, frontages, and even some buildings. Yet these are the very things that make the A660 route charming and interesting and are part of the reason why most of the route passes through designated Conservation Areas. Road widening to accommodate prioritised trolley bus routes will dramatically and detrimentally alter the streetscape.

Trolleybuses need overhead power cables which, together with the associated supports/gantries are intrusive and ugly.

Community access:

The whole thrust of NGT is to drive a particular form of public transport down A660 with all advantages that can be given it by precedence systems of road space and signalling, giving small advantages to the users of NGT and ignoring the very considerable disadvantages to everyone else. For instance, this dictates limiting or preventing traffic

flow onto or from side roads, seemingly with no regard to residents and the communities along the A660.

For many, the new wider roads, pedestrian unfriendly crossings and possible railings will act as barriers splitting one side of the street from the other often referred to as the 'York Road effect' so dividing communities.

Traffic flow

Current plans seem to give scant attention to any likely "rat-runs" or changes to traffic flows caused by NGT traffic alterations or priorities. These are likely to be felt across the wider communities, not just those adjacent to the A660.

The Business case even makes the following statement

"Lawnswood Roundabout: proposed traffic signal layout results in some reassignment of traffic to avoid this junction. The increased flows are on roads with little residential frontage; "

A similar assertion is made about Hyde Park Corner/Woodhouse Moor but where on earth are these roads with little residential frontage ?

The Lawnswood roundabout will become a junction which, during peak times will assign the trolley bus priority across it about every 3 minutes to give the six minute peak time service. One wonders just how long will be the traffic queues around the Ring Road.

FUNDING for NGT

The scheme has been given access to £173.5 million of Central Government funding, leaving Metro and Leeds City Council (LCC) to make a local contribution of £77.1 million over a six year period. Apparently a number of funding sources are being investigated to fund the local contribution, and it is not proposed that council tax payments will be changed as a result of building or operating this scheme.

Accepting these words at face value, it is still difficult to see how council tax payers will not be affected either directly or indirectly. Experience of other schemes such as the new Edinburgh tram system, where costs have risen from £375Million to over £1Billion, and the Sheffield tram, which suffered from lower than expected revenue in the early years, are not encouraging.

The money is on offer solely to construct a trolley bus scheme, with much of the planning deriving from the previous "super tram" proposal. Many residents see NGT as blindly forcing through a particular traffic "solution" regardless as to whether it would actually suit the A660 situation or bring any actual benefits. It also seems to rely on "milking" the revenue from existing A660 bus services to provide the monies to operate the scheme.

It is often quoted that in terms of traffic congestion and the future "doing nothing is not an option" but it ought to be the "right something" or if that contradicts the offer of government funding then it should be the "right nothing".

[NOTE: Any figures quoted are taken from NGT , Leeds City Council or National Audit Office sources]