

The WEST PARK CHRONICLE

The Community Newspaper for West Park December 2014

www.westparkresidents.org.uk

Special Trolleybus Inquiry Edition

This special edition of the West Park Chronicle comes at the end of a year dominated for many concerned Leeds residents by the Public Inquiry into the proposed Leeds Trolleybus scheme.

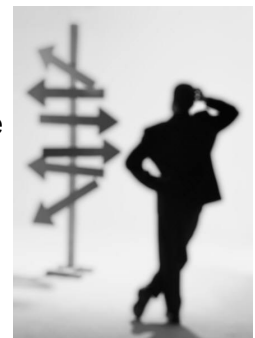
The Inquiry was in session for four days a week over six months, excepting August—a total of 72 working days. During that time a dedicated body of local objectors, including WPRA Chair Doug Kemp, attended almost every session on behalf of the rest of us.

Arduous as it was, attending the sessions was only the tip of the iceberg. A vast amount of detailed background preparation was also required to assimilate the promoters' case (set out in over 1,100 documents) and to prepare the counter-case.

Much of the latter was done by a team of local experts but some aspects required bought-in expertise funded by volunteers. As well as all that, our local experts had to develop skills in cross-examining the promoters' witnesses, and in standing-up to cross-examination from the team of legal professionals working on behalf of the promoters.

When it became clear that there would be no official transcript or recording, the objectors made their own. Remarkably, almost every minute of the proceedings are available to listen to on the Internet thanks to local resident and blogger Claire Randall and her helpers. The audio can be accessed via the index at this webpage: <http://nwltf.org.uk/NWLTFaudio.php>.

The rest of this edition of the Chronicle comprises Doug Kemp's personal account, from the front line, of what it was all about.



Report on the Trolleybus Public Inquiry

By Doug Kemp, Chair of WPRA

Many aspects of the proposals were emotive, such as tree losses, impact on conservation areas and changes to the general ambience & character of North West Leeds. However, leaving this aside and trying to be fair, dispassionate, and working from the *official information* presented during the 72 days of the Public Inquiry, how convincing or compelling is the argument for the trolleybus scheme?

Why Was the Route Chosen?

All the radial routes into the city are congested with the A660 and the A61 (southern NGT route) typically seeing travel times increase by over 100% during the morning and evening rush hours. Other routes, which incidentally have dual carriageways and carry at least 200% more traffic than the A660, only see travel times increase by 80%+. Aside from this factor, the choice of the A660 appears to come from previous planning dating back almost 20 years.

Public transport is seen as the only way to either mitigate some of the congestion or to provide for future traffic growth on the A660, given that there is little practical scope to increase road capacity on the A660, although the scheme does envisage highway changes and road widening. Hence NGT is presented as a form of public transport, with faster journey times and better punctuality which would attract people out of their cars and encourage others to use new Park & Ride facilities at Bodington and Stourton rather than drive into the city centre.

Headingley By-pass

(Buckingham Road to St Chad's Drive)

The By-pass (66 ft wide) will have dual two-lane carriageways running to the east of the existing Otley Road at the rear of the Arndale Centre and shopping area. The road will be entirely in cutting (up to 30 ft deep in places) and will pass 20 ft below Shaw Lane. Slip roads will be provided to the Shaw Lane junction which will be signal controlled and remain near its present level.

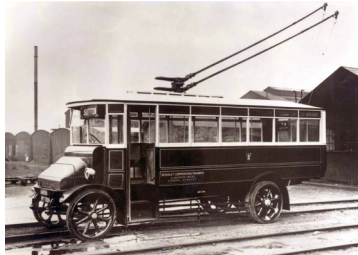
From a March 1973 Council leaflet

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Why a Trolleybus and not a Bus?

The current slow journey time and poor bus punctuality is due to buses getting stuck in congestion and to boarding delays. Provision of more bus lanes and of greater priority at traffic lights would reduce the impact of congestion and improved boarding procedures (more doors, greater use of “smart” tickets purchased in advance) would reduce boarding delays. But both of these improvements could be made without the introduction of trolleybuses, which after all is just a bus which takes its power from overhead wires.



Passenger journey times would also be reduced by constructing a Headingley bypass, although as we will see later, the journey time savings due to the bypass would be offset by increased waiting times at bus stops. The bypass, it seems, cannot be afforded except as part of the proposed NGT project.

Another argument for the introduction of trolleybuses has been that they would provide extra public transport capacity. A trolleybus can carry more passengers than a double-decker bus, although it does take up almost twice the road space and most passengers would have to stand. The promoters have been careful to avoid specifying the configuration of their trolleybus vehicle, but in order to carry the number of passengers which they expect to attract, it would need space for 160 – of whom only 40 would have a seat. On this basis it becomes clear that, with the trolleybus system as planned, there would actually be fewer seats per hour than there are now. Total capacity would be greater but only if passengers are prepared to stand in conditions of up to 7 people per square metre.

Another argument put forward by supporters of trolleybuses is that the “permanence” of a fixed overhead line system would make people think it similar to a rail-based tram or train system. This, so their argument goes, would attract passengers and provide tangible evidence of Leeds’ commitment to having a modern transport system which would attract businesses / employers to the city.



This “permanence” comes at a cost - inflexibility; routes cannot simply be extended without addition of overhead cabling. Bus services can be easily re-routed as demand dictates, whereas trolleybus services cannot. Even now the new housing developments in Adel, although close the Bodington terminus, are beyond the reach of the trolleybus.

In the face of the fast-moving development in environmentally friendly buses, including all-electric and hybrid buses which are not constrained to follow overhead wires, why is what seems an increasingly obsolete technology, namely a trolleybus, being proposed?

Leeds City Council, it seems, is tying itself to a trolleybus system because Leeds, based on their consultants’ advice, asked for one. Correspondence from the Department for Transport shows that the funding would have been available for a “bus based system” but Leeds chose to ask for a trolleybus scheme.

The Leeds Transport Model

The predictions of the Leeds City Council’s Transport Model (LTM) are crucial to the whole proposal. The LTM predicts all the traffic movements, calculates the impact on congestion, and predicts how many people would use the trolleybus and what revenues it would produce for its owners. The model uses factors based on “Stated Preferences” derived from surveys conducted in Leeds in 2008. These factors quantify passengers’ reaction to different transport conditions (crowding, new buses, better bus stops, etc.). They showed that, for instance, passengers preferred new buses to old ones, that they disliked travelling in crowded conditions and that they would like the bus stops to have good lighting, CCTV and real-time information.

The survey also showed that passengers would prefer a bus to a trolleybus. However, the consultants employed by Leeds ignored this finding and assumed the reverse, namely that passengers would prefer travelling on a trolleybus than on a bus or a train! Furthermore, they ignored peoples’ aversion to travelling without a seat and the fact that they would prefer new buses of the type likely to be the norm in 2020 to those that were already old in 2008.



These are fundamental assumptions; the factors fed into the model caused it to predict that people would switch from bus and rail to trolleybus (with people who had previously used bus or rail making up over 70% of trolleybus passengers) and that the Park and Ride service would be so attractive that people would use it even if it added an hour to their journey time. Against this background we do have to wonder whether the predicted trolleybus passenger numbers can be relied on.

Another model, the Urban Dynamic Model, was used to predict the impact of the trolleybus on employment. It predicts that the scheme would result in almost 4000 extra jobs in the Leeds area. However, it turns out that this prediction was again based on

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the assumption that people will prefer travelling on trolleybuses and that they have no aversion to having to stand. Furthermore, it took no account of the fact that journeys would, on average, take longer if NGT was introduced than if it wasn't.

How Strong is the Business Case?

A revenue surplus from operating the trolleybus would be required to pay off the debts which Leeds will need to take on in order to build the scheme and to pay for the lease on the trolleybuses. But, given the questionable assumptions made about passenger behaviour, the predicted revenue figures are likely to be incorrect.

The Business Case makes assumptions about how bus companies would respond to the introduction of a new trolleybus rival. Crucially, it assumes that the trolleybus would not be faced by serious prolonged competition from bus companies (e.g. by those companies reducing fares or by providing new buses or offering increased bus frequencies). This seems to be a dangerous assumption – given the experience in Sheffield where competition from bus companies forced the council to sell off its tram system at a massive loss to the ratepayers.

The Government funding of £173.5million is fixed. £77 million of local funding is needed to complete the scheme. £35million of this would have to be borrowed. Changes to the scheme and increased costs since 2012 have already added 12% to the overall cost to the public sector. The scheme costing does include an allowance for contingencies and there has been some sensitivity testing to evaluate the impact of fewer passengers and some other uncertainties, but these tests do not fully address the issues mentioned above.



In accepting government funding for the NGT scheme, Leeds City Council would have to make up any shortfall in construction costs and cover any losses incurred in operating the trolleybus. The councillors in charge of running the city have decided that the risks are acceptable - but it is council tax payers and other council service users who would suffer if the scheme fails to produce the revenues predicted by the models.

What are the Alleged Improvements in Public Transport?

Well, the trolleybus scheme consists of a single north to south line and misses out important passenger destinations such as the bus station, Leeds Market, Merrion Centre and St John's Centre as well as the Victoria Gate Centre now under construction. The southern route barely touches the Belle Isle es-

tate and completely ignores Middleton. There is talk of future extensions at some future date but this would be dependent on funding becoming available.

A central feature of the proposed system is that the trolleybus would have its own set of stops – separate from the existing bus stops. This means that passengers would have to choose whether they want to use the trolleybus service or one of the remaining bus services – and then walk to the appropriate stop. The trolleybus stops would be more widely spaced than the existing bus stops so the walk would, on average, be longer. Similarly, since most of the current bus stops would be moved from their current positions, or in some cases removed completely, the average walk to a bus stop would also be longer.



The provision of separate stops also means that the service frequency at any given stop would be reduced. On the A660, the current average frequency is one bus every three minutes but, if NGT is introduced, the planners anticipate that this would be reduced to one every six minutes - the same as the trolleybus frequency; resulting in average waiting times being longer than they are now.

This will be a particularly serious issue in those parts of Tinshill, Cookridge and Adel which would not be served by the trolleybus because they would suffer from a reduced frequency on the #1 and #6 buses without the compensation of new trolleybus services.

In fact the problem of reduced bus services could affect many other areas of Leeds; evidence from First West Yorkshire during the Inquiry indicated that, depending on how much revenue they lose to the trolleybus, services such as #97 and #28 might be reduced and possibly cut altogether.

Finally just how much quicker will be the trolleybus compared to the bus? This depends, not surprisingly, on where you start and where you want to go to. Supporters of NGT claim that the peak period journey from Boddington to City Square would be nearly 13 minutes quicker by trolleybus than it is by bus. However, this comparison doesn't take account of the increased walking and waiting times.



Expert witnesses at the Inquiry showed that, taking into account extra waiting and walking times, the promoters' own data shows that overall journey times by trolleybus would often be longer than those currently achieved by bus.

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What About the Effects on Car Traffic?

NGT has been promoted on the assumption that it would attract people out of their cars and so help reduce congestion and the Leeds Transport Model does indeed predict that some people would switch from car to trolleybus. However, closer examination of the predictions reveals that introduction of NGT would actually lead to an increase in car miles driven (and, as a consequence of this, to an increase in emissions, accidents and fuel consumption). The number of people switching from car to trolleybus is actually less than the predicted number of people switching from walking or cycling.



The Leeds Transport Model predicts that introduction of NGT would result not only in an increase in car miles driven, but also in reduced car speeds; journeys by car would, on average, take longer if NGT is introduced than if it isn't.

Expert witnesses at the Inquiry suggested that, if the unwarranted assumptions in the Leeds Transport Model were removed (e.g. the assumption that people would rather travel on a crowded trolleybuses – with no seat - than on a bus or train, and the assumption that people would use Park & Ride even if it meant that their journey would take an hour longer), the predicted switch to trolleybus would be much lower and the increase in congestion would be worse.

They also suggested that, although a Park & Ride service could make a useful contribution to reducing congestion (and to tackling unofficial park & ride parking on residential streets), the proposed system was far from ideal because the “shuttle” would be a crowded stop-and-start commuter trolleybus service rather than a dedicated express service which is known to be an important feature of Park & Ride schemes elsewhere.

Another feature of the NGT proposal is that it would result in a reduction of parking spaces around shops and other local businesses in West Park and Far Headingley. This is likely to result in people going elsewhere and so driving further – inconveniencing themselves and threatening the viability of the local businesses.

Has a Compelling Case Been Made?

There is a lot of documentation, and it is disconcerting to find it littered with errors. Some of these show streets incorrectly identified, indicating amongst other things poor local knowledge. This is compounded by some proposals which clearly show a lack of appreciation of the issues which affect local businesses and communities.

Other errors associated with the modelling are significant and fundamental to the whole basis on which the scheme is being justified and evaluated. The scheme is supposed to have been assessed by the Department for Transport (DfT) in terms of value for money, but evidence given at the Inquiry indicates serious errors in the analysis. It seems that DfT may not have been told the whole story!

The scheme, we are told, is part of a “plan-led” approach leading to an integrated transport plan for Leeds as a whole. Yet the “Integrated Plan” seems like a bit of this here, a bit of that there, and ideas such as better use of rail routes and linkage to the airport seem to have taken a back seat. Indeed, one is left with the impression that the whole scheme is based on re-using earlier Supertram plans, and hoping that it will all come right in the end.

Conclusion

Given the more than 1,100 NGT documents supporting the testimony of 16 NGT witnesses, the whole concept, rationale, and justification for the trolleybus scheme should have been put beyond doubt. In our view this did not happen. The conclusion that we drew from the proceedings is summed up by WPRA's Closing Statement to the Inquiry (see box).

"... we submit that the Secretaries of State can have no confidence that the scheme is capable of delivering the transport improvements needed for Leeds, or that the scheme would deliver benefits which in any way compensate for the damage that it would cause to the environment, heritage and character of North West Leeds."

No-one objects to improving the city's transport infrastructure, but one has a right to expect that any scheme would deliver *real* transport benefits.

Let us hope that, whatever the result of the Inquiry, Leeds Council has the good sense not to saddle the city with any white-elephant scheme likely to affect council debt or other council services.

Further Information

For further information readers are encouraged to look at <http://www.westparkresidents.org.uk> and <http://nwltf.org.uk>. Audio recordings of the complete Inquiry proceedings are available here: <http://nwltf.org.uk/NWLTFAudio.php>.