



## SUPERTRAM - VITAL INFORMATION KEPT SECRET

A report that could shed light on the Leeds Supertram fiasco would probably, if released, confirm what most people suspect, that we have a Department for Transport (DfT) that is incompetent in its decision making on light rail projects (1). This is in line with conclusions reached by the National Audit Office (NAO) in their official report. Efforts by local politicians to use the Freedom of Information Act to release this damaging data failed, mainly because of a legal loophole. The Director General of West Yorkshire Metro is on record as suggesting its release would be in the public interest (2). Whilst crucial information on urban transit is withheld, the suspicion of rejecting quality for lower cost bus operation remains.

Organisations supporting the concept of a good quality transit system in this country have been shocked at Britain's general approach which in effect restricts the public's modal choice. A local newspaper (3) "pulled no punches" in blaming the then Transport Secretary (Alistair Darling) for his short sighted decision which cancelled various Supertram projects in 2005. Until the issue is put right, Leeds remains the largest city in the European Union without a mass transit system.

This incompetence stirred a strong public response in the press from readers, many suggesting that "Leeds should go back to the future", a reference to Vane Moreland's (former transport manager) proposals at the end of WW II. His suggestion was to continue with transport segregation, put the tram tracks underground in the city centre and experiment with single deck trams. The high cost became a political issue and was dropped.

At that time putting trams underground in Europe was not unusual but passengers were just beginning to differentiate between urban trams and light metro. Passengers in Frankfurt on Main forced the transport operator to restore the street tracks in the CBD whilst Rotterdam filled in a badly vandalised tram subway and restored the surface tracks. It is interesting to record that Transport for London (TfL) now recognises that walking in Central London can be quicker than using the tube (4). The new Tramlink services in Croydon have probably helped to prove this point and without doubt, the proposal to connect Waterloo with Kings Cross will be a success story just waiting to happen.

The first evidence in Britain that a combination of railway and tram street track was likely to be a "winner" was the innovative connection between Manchester's Victoria station and Piccadilly station by Metrolink. Passenger response was very encouraging and tended to demonstrate that on short city centre journeys the tram was paramount. The Dutch city of Rotterdam thought on similar lines when it converted a short section of underground tram track with its badly vandalised tram station to surface operation.

## REFERENCES

- 1) DfT castigated over light rail decisions - LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY - 2nd May to 15th May 2008.
- 2) Paul Robinson - Yorkshire Evening Post - 24th January 2008.
- 3) Editorial Comment - Yorkshire Evening Post - 21st January 2008.
- 4) Walking Quicker Than Tube for many central short trips - Ben Plowden - LOCAL TRANSPORT TODAY page 3 - 2nd May to 15th May 2008

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