



# Light Rail (UK) Group

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## Why light rail expansion is vital to green recovery



Protecting and expanding light rail services is key to ensuring towns and cities can recover from the impacts of Covid-19, according to a new report.

*Leading light: What light rail can do for city regions* – <https://lightrailuk.co.uk/admin/dashboard/UTG-Urban-Transport-Group> produced by consultant Steer Group on behalf of the Urban Transport Group – stresses the role light rail networks have played in providing connectivity during the pandemic, allowing key workers and others unable to work from home to commute, as well as providing access to healthcare facilities and vaccination hubs.

However, the report also highlights the uncertainty around how long it will take for passenger numbers to return to pre-pandemic levels. This concern is further emphasised by the fact that government funding of up to £56M to help support services in response to the pandemic will end in April 2022.

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“Light rail systems play a bigger role in the life of British urban areas now than they have for well over 50 years,” said South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive’s executive director Stephen Edwards, who leads on light rail for the Urban Transport Group.

“This report sets out in detail, and with numerous case studies, why and how light rail has been such a success story for the places it serves. It also supports our wider case to the Comprehensive Spending Review for both continued funding support for our light rail networks, whilst patronage is constrained due to Covid, and, in the longer term, for a more stable and consistent approach to extending the benefits of light rail to more places and passengers.”

The report looks systematically at how light rail, which pre-pandemic carried 282M passengers a year, contributes to the economic, social, and environmental objectives of both national and city region governments.

Light rail has the potential to support growth in employment and economic activity in town and city centres, while supporting redevelopment, regeneration and improved public realm. For example, the findings show that the Tyne and Wear Metro contributed around £290M to the gross value added (GVA) of the North East economy.

Light rail can also support the transition to net zero carbon and contribute to cleaner air in cities. Manchester Metrolink and Nottingham’s NET, for example, are powered exclusively by renewable energy, while South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive estimates that Sheffield Supertram helps to save over 2,000t of CO<sub>2</sub> per year.

Proposed light rail schemes

## **Manchester Metro Extensions**

Transport for Greater Manchester describes the Metrolink tram system as “one of Greater Manchester’s major rapid transit success stories” and is looking to extend it as part of its 2040 transport strategy.

In the medium-term (to 2030) new Metrolink lines are being considered, along with potential for tram-train services. Extending the network into Bolton, Middleton and Stockport has been proposed as a key priority.

Longer-term options being explored include tunnelled metro-style services under the city centre, as well as linking with the future High Speed 2 network.

## **Croydon Tram extension**

In November 2018, Transport for London (TfL) announced three route options to extend the current Croydon tram network out to Sutton in south London. The new service would link Sutton to the existing network at either Wimbledon, South Wimbledon, or Colliers Wood.

Last year, following a lengthy public consultation, TfL backed a tram extension that would link Sutton with the Northern Line Tube at Colliers Wood. However, the transport authority has put the £425M project on hold following uncertainty around financial pressures caused by the pandemic.

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## **Spelthorne light rail to Heathrow**

[In August 2018, Spelthorne Council submitted a DLR-style scheme to the Department for Transport's call for ideas for privately financed railway schemes.](#)

The £375M light rail scheme to Heathrow from Staines-Upon-Thames is in direct competition with the heavy Heathrow Southern rail bid and the now rejected bid by the Windsor Link Railway.

## **West Yorkshire mass rapid transit scheme**

[In January, West Yorkshire Combined Authority published its Connectivity Infrastructure Plan and Mass Transit Vision 2040 which could include a mix of high-capacity buses, trams, and tram-train vehicles.](#)

The plans set out the critical role of major projects in delivering an integrated transport system that connects communities in West Yorkshire to each other and the wider UK. Projects include High Speed 2 (HS2), Northern Powerhouse Rail and the upgrade to the Trans-Pennine line, plus a rollout of rail electrification.

[In March, West Yorkshire appointed Jacobs as lead consultant for the proposed project.](#)

If given the go-ahead, construction is expected to start in the mid-2020s.

## **Edinburgh tram extension**

[Plans for an extension to Edinburgh's tram network have been put forward by Edinburgh City Council.](#)

The extension would involve a north/south line, running from Granton Harbour and down to either Roseburn or Shandwick Place, on the existing central tram line. The line would then follow the existing city centre track, before turning south-east to the ERI and Bio Quarter.

Other suggestions set out in the council's City Mobility Plan include a mass transit network, including trams, extending west from the airport to West Lothian.

## **Liverpool Airport connection**

The most conceptual of potential new light rail proposals is a connection from Liverpool Airport to the city centre.

Liverpool Airport chief executive John Irving has said a new direct connection would be "transformational". The new link is apparently on the radar for Merseyrail, but it said a new connection would not be simple or cheap to build.

However, Irving has confirmed that while the plans are a top priority, they are currently on hold. A previous scheme dubbed Merseytram was first proposed in 2001 and then finally canned in 2013 due to "funding problems". The scheme was to be a loop around Liverpool city centre with three radial routes including the line to the airport.

Courtesy:

by [NADINE BUDDOO](#) New Civil Engineer Magazine