

'EUROPE HAS EMBRACED TRAMS - WHY HAVEN'T WE?'

As CEO of Keolis' UK and Ireland division, the largest light rail operator in the UK and partner in a number of heavy rail franchises, Alistair Gordon has an unparalleled insight into the current challenges for public transport.

Already a regular *TAUT* commentator, we caught up with him in late January to gauge his views on the current state of both Keolis' own operations (London's Docklands Light Railway (DLR), Greater Manchester's Metrolink and the Nottingham Express Transit tramway) and the wider industry, the ongoing pandemic, and how he sees the long-term future for tramway development.

Q Last time we spoke, you said that a real change in people's habits would all depend on how long the pandemic lockdowns lasted. As these are continuing in 2021, do you now think will we see that 'reset'?

A We were three or four weeks into our first UK lockdown then and starting to feel the threat. Countries such as Italy and Spain were in a really bad way and talking to colleagues in Manchester we were in that scary zone of believing that we might have to shut everything down. It was full-on crisis management and we thought this could get very ugly, very fast.

My feeling then was that if we spent six months with major restrictions then maybe we could break our old habits. Now, when I talk to our teams around the country, we are split into thirds. A third just want to get back to how life was, in the office Monday to Friday. Another third don't ever want to go back, they have adapted, quite enjoy the time they've got back and would maybe enjoy a day or two a week in the office to get the social element back. Then you have a middle third who are saying 'I've learnt a lot from this, and there is a balance to be had, but I still want three or four days a week back in the office'.

Taking that as a small sample of the population would put public transport demand back at 60-70% of the pre-pandemic numbers, but I think it would likely add more leisure traffic. All of the things we do in public transport are designed around the peaks, so maybe we'll have a better spread of our demand going forward.

The biggest issue we face is this conscious and unconscious message that is currently being given that 'public transport is bad'. The UK Government's current position seems to be 'COVID goes to the supermarket, COVID goes on the bus, COVID goes on the train'. But it also goes in the car, and in any other public space. The fact is that the transport industry has been singled out, despite having worked incredibly hard to very quickly implement rigorous regimes to keep staff and passengers as safe as possible. Such messages can only make it harder when we do the work to recover passengers as the pandemic eases.

For all the years we've spent trying to get people out of their cars and onto mass transit, we seem now to be going backwards. Restoring confidence and trust isn't going to be easy and that worries me.

Keolis' UK operations are really impacted: DLR is at around 20-30% passenger demand - there's quite a lot of construction work in the area and people are still working - but Manchester and Nottingham are still at 8-9% of what they were at this time last year.

On the main line railways the situation is even worse. Every day feels like Christmas Day at the stations - all the retail outlets are closed and you can't buy a ticket if you try.



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Q How do we restore trust with passengers?

A Number one, we need to make travel really easy: easy to buy a ticket, easy to understand the routes, easy to change modes. We can't have any barriers to entry.

Number two: The idea that we run a Monday to Saturday timetable now looks like madness. We need to be much more dynamic in how we manage the demand and manage the service, but we need flexibility to deliver that.

Number three: We need to offer an excellent service and publicise that fact. People want public transport to be quicker than the car, they want reliability, they want it to be clean and comfortable, and they want to see that we as transport operators really care about their safety.

Getting a bit more demand would then be helpful because at the moment we're suffering from really bad anti-social behaviour in some places. People are graffitiing the trams as there's no-one on them and on some networks we've put passenger flow systems in

and people were ripping up the barriers and throwing things at staff.

Our staff aren't there to enforce the law, that's what the BTP [British Transport Police] and local police are there for. Having more passengers will help of course as bad behaviour seems to reduce in large crowds.

With all these measures in place, the demand will come back. We have seen this in other countries that Keolis operates in. With the relaxation of lockdowns and curfews, we've seen demand get back up to 70, 80 or 90% in some countries.

I was looking at some graphs recently and the disappointing thing is that in terms of public transport passenger demand, the UK is bottom of the list of everywhere we operate. Our numbers will come back to reasonable numbers, but while we have no-one going to school, no-one going to work, it's not surprising the numbers are so low, is it?

Q English and Scottish systems have now had a number of different waves of Government support funding, how do you feel this has been handled?

A Unfortunately, we're always at the end of the queue.

The real danger is that we get back to 70% demand, and 70% of the revenue, but the funding stops. This can't be just a switch. We're going to need a gradual build-up back out of this with public transport being weaned off the support it is currently receiving.

That is my biggest message to Government: how can they help us build a more sustainable funding model for public transport, where places with trams and light rail systems are incentivised to build their ridership back but are supported while they do it.

Q Do you think the pandemic will genuinely change the way Governments think about transport - and in particular, light rail and trams?

A We've been lobbying the UK Government around light rail for a year and a half, and I've seen the White Papers that Mainspring has published, but the worry for me is that the Government is currently looking at a national bus strategy and at restoring the railways. That's at the bottom end and the top end of our transport network, but tramways occupy that middle ground and seem to be being missed.

Because we don't have central government thinking about light rail, it makes things really difficult. You've got cities like Nottingham which have persevered: they said 'we want a tramway' and have gone out and made it happen. Then you have a city like Leeds which has just found it too difficult and has ended up still - after all these years - with just a really poor bus network.

Nottingham is a city that businesses want to work in; people enjoy easy access to the city because of the trams and it's a city where

bikes, walking and fresh air are all embraced – it's all there. It's obvious to me. The rest of Europe has embraced trams and their benefits, so that's the message we've taken to the Rail Minister. We saw him before the end of the year, outlined the benefits of light rail again and said 'here's a really good opportunity'.

Light rail needs to be part of the Government's rail reform; if we are going to restore some of the lines Beeching closed then some should be considered for restoration as light rail.

Also, if we had a strong pipeline of real projects and a proper light rail industry – with manufacturers of rolling stock, systems, constructors and designers all signed up – then we could challenge ourselves. How do we make it so that light rail isn't so disruptive when we build it? How do we make it so it's not so ugly with catenary everywhere? How do we introduce trams using hydrogen or battery power? And finally, how do we create an affordable solution that every city wants? As an industry we have to address those challenges, rather than just assuming the benefits we have got currently are good enough.

I'd hate to think that the UK doesn't build another new tramway in the next 20 years. We have expanded a few systems, and there will be more extensions to come, but I'd hate to think we haven't built a new one before the end of my career.

Q We've previously discussed that a fundamental challenge is that the gestation period of new tram schemes is ten years. How do we change that?

A It's got to be four years, because it has to be done in a political cycle. Few politicians will invest in something like public transport – unless it's a major national project like HS2 or the Olympics – unless they can see the benefits within their tenure.

So we've got to find a way to make it four years and we've also got to find a way where we're not just constantly doing one new system at a time. We need a production line so we can make savings and centralise some of the bigger issues. Take the issue of utilities. We've all been banging on about the challenges around moving utilities for 15 years, but still nothing's really been done.

Q In your last column you mentioned a gap in knowledge and leadership in light rail. Do you think this has changed during these past nine months?

A We're still missing a few key elements. For example, how do we get to a place where central Government has more wide-ranging powers while at the same time giving local government the delivery? Local government need to be saying 'we want to solve our transport issues, we want a tramway', with central government then giving them a range of solutions.

'You want a tram? OK, well we can provide all the technical and Green Book [HM Treasury guidance on project and policy appraisals] support to build your business case, you choose your route and local add-ons.' That's how it should be, not the current system where local government have to do everything but still go to central government to make the final decision and allocate the funding.



▲ Nottingham's tramway is one of the UK's success stories, but has taken bold local leadership and strong champions to drive its success. Keolis subsidiary Nottingham Trams has run the service since 2011. Neil Pulling

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The COVID pandemic gives us new opportunities. Tramways fit perfectly with the current Government's strategy: cleaner, greener, and helping cities generate organic growth. Northern England is claimed to be a key focus, so why don't we choose those cities that need better public transport to start with?

Q At a time of strained public finances, do you think PPP/PFI could be the answer? They have a tarnished reputation, but does the private sector have the opportunity to step in now and help plug the gap?

A Probably, but part of the problem with PPPs is that whenever we try and build a new infrastructure project, the emphasis on the business case is so strong that people put unrealistic projections in. They say passenger demand will be bigger, it will grow faster than before, that revenues will keep increasing etc.

For example, we can't open a tramway in Bristol and expect to have 30 million passengers in year one. It won't. It took two or three years after we opened lines 2 and 3 in Nottingham to build the traffic, to change the patterns of the way people use the system – even though the city already had an established tramway. So we need to find a way to realistically assess what the ridership may look like over a suitable timeframe.

Also, when we started talking about how we get demand back, one of the things we are going to need to look at is the funding of public transport. Can we ask the fare-payer to keep paying? If so, what is too expensive?

You could put public transport on and make it ridiculously cheap to get people to use it; if you've got a new tram route into the city, it should be packed. But the Government always wants the private sector to pay for more of it, and for the fare-paying passenger to pay more. We won't get demand back if it is cheaper to drive a car into the city, so we have to make sure the price of travel and the quality of service meets what customers want.

Q Do you think the current expansion programmes that are underway, or planned, will go ahead?

A Yes, but the industry really needs to be sitting at the table, demonstrating the benefits we can bring. If HS2 is to carry on – and it seems the appetite is there to continue – connecting the cities that either have light rail schemes or are without light rail schemes, then that is one of the ways we should be going to Government and saying 'let's go'.

They are saying they want to put money into construction, into infrastructure, so that is a real opportunity for us. We shouldn't always be the poor relation saying that we'll cut the cloth as it's given to us and carry on as we are.

We're ready to help cities become greener, more relevant, and create and sustain jobs. We don't want our cities to be empty, do we? We shouldn't just be nostalgic for nostalgia's sake of course, but there's something really special about city centres – and under lockdown that's something I really miss.

Despite the pandemic, we see forward-thinking PTAs across the world put their faith in Keolis and others to deliver greener mobility solutions and I'd like to think the UK will not be far behind.

Q To conclude, how would you summarise the past year?

A I said this last time, but I do want to emphasise again that if I look back across the last nine months, the dedication of the staff that work in light rail is unbelievable. Keeping the service running, keeping it safe, and helping people who may be distressed when they are using our service. I'm overwhelmed by the loyalty, dedication, commitment of all of the staff, almost without exception. It is amazing.

They are very proud of what they do and the sector they work in. I look forward, once we come out of this, to visiting all our networks and thanking everyone personally. **TAUT**