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Six tests for PM's London-style vision

The Prime Minister wants other UK cities to enjoy the kind of integrated transport system that London has. Can he deliver it?

► Boris Johnson wants transport in the rest of the UK's metro areas to be a lot more like London and a lot less so so. So here's six early indicators to watch out for that show whether we are on course for this...or not.

1 All the political big names love buses these days - if they can't claim blood relatives in the industry, they are making models of buses in the evenings. True love means long term commitment though and if bus decline is going to be turned upside down then we need to see the bus get a bigger slice of the transport funding pie. So all eyes will be on the budget and spending review to see the extent of reform and any funding increase.



2 There's been lots of talk both pre and post election on ramping up devolution and even significant local government reform. Early signals are that we could be looking at some rationalisation at least - with one model (city region mayors) for the big urban areas and another for the shires (less tiered than now). But will Whitehall now really take the plunge and give up its ability to pull the strings and take the credit for local government successes?

Getting some longer term stability on local transport funding will be particularly crucial if we are to see the ramping up of investment in transforming local transport in towns and cities. At present there's excessive reliance on ad hoc competition funding which makes for great press releases and helps clever and important people in meeting rooms in central London feel suitably omnipotent. It's true that separate new funds for potholes, electric bus towns, cycling, superbuses, future mobility and so on all make tremendous sense in their own terms. But it all adds up to a nonsense way of doing things if you are trying to plan local transport networks as a whole in an integrated long term way.

For example, what if it makes sense for your authority to focus on different things in different years due to the lumpiness of some projects (such as BRT systems, trams, major interchanges)? What about projects that cut across different competition headings? How do we fund the stuff that doesn't have its own pot? What about the costs of all the bids

that fail? How on earth does a local transport authority plan its workload and develop its staff when it doesn't know what competitions are coming next and when they will win? How do you meet the long term challenges of urban transport when all of these funding pots are relatively short term? So what happens early on with local transport funding could set the tone for years ahead about whether we are looking at real devolution or a more vigorously spun version of the usual puppeteering from the centre.

3 Talking of devolution we can now expect to see rail reform following on from the Williams Review. The PM has been strong in speeches about handing over more control over local rail networks. However the Williams Review team could hardly have been more cautious - if not borderline negative. How this is resolved is key to whether or not our metro areas are going to get the fully integrated, London-style urban transport systems that the PM has said he wants to see. Because for many of our big urban areas the heavy rail network is the tram/light rail/S-Bahn system they haven't got (or only partially got). So, no meaningful control over urban rail means no meaningful wider integrated public transport network.

4 Not so high profile, but rumbling along in the background is the government's moves to establish a legal and regulatory framework that can cope with new mobility options, such as the transformation of the PHV sector, powered personal mobility devices (including e-scooters), connected and autonomous vehicles and so on. Urban transport authorities don't want the overarching technical safety role. But they do need a legal and regulatory framework which gives them the ability to strike the right balance in their areas between consumer benefits and the wider public interest; between 'sandboxing' innovations and taking action if flooding of cities with new mobility options is causing wider problems, such as for public safety, congestion or street clutter. The danger is that if this doesn't happen urban transport policy will end up being re-centralised by the back door - with Whitehall setting one-size fits all rules for new mobility over the top of the more locally specific arrangements for old mobility (buses and trains).



"We remain, as ever, so near but yet so far on urban transport"



New Merseyrail trains and bus reform could give Liverpool city region a single, modern and fully integrated network

5 Post election everybody is talking post-industrial towns. A good job about that, last year while everyone else was writing repetitive reports about cities, we put together the one and only report on how transport can help post-industrial towns thrive. In short it found there are no magic bullets. Among its findings were that town centres should radiate easy cycling and walking routes and that town stations and interchanges can act as hubs, gateways and community and business premises. It also made the case for the transport sector to be an exemplary employer because it is a major employer in towns (from bus and taxi drivers to workers in big shed logistics centres). But it also showed the need for attention to local detail and the views of local communities. A prime example of the need for patient, long-term policies which again requires real devolution of powers and funding.

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6 One more thing and it's the biggest thing. The thing that is going to grow as we head towards the make or break international talks in Glasgow in November - the climate emergency. It's likely in 2020 that at the very least this will lead to a ramping up of moves to electrify road transport. This means we will need to move from the current cottage industry of charging infrastructure to something much more comprehensive. And for that we need a bigger top table of those who are going to bring it about - with the city regions given a seat alongside government, catapults, the vehicle manufacturers, public transport providers and the energy sector.

More widely, if we really mean it about it being an emergency, then it should change the way we look at everything - in particular how much sense it makes that bits and pieces of staggeringly expensive road schemes (which in turn are a guarantee of more car dependent sprawl) are still so dominant in transport spending when they are utterly non-compliant with a climate emergency and counter-productive in nearly every other way too. It could also mean we are back in the business of modal shift and traffic reduction targets as well as big leaps forward in the scale of car-free ambitions (take a bow Birmingham).

So in closing we remain, as ever, so near but yet so far on urban transport. Take Liverpool city region as an example. Right now it is taking delivery of the first of what are the UK's most sophisticated commuter trains which will transform what its extensive S-Bahn equivalent urban rail network provides. In parallel with bus reform it's now within grasp to bring this all together within the next five years into a single, modern and fully integrated network which will look and feel akin to the 'one network, one ticket, one system' that London and European counterpart cities take for granted. Indeed it could be up there with the best of them. And the same is true of course not just in Liverpool city region but in other city regions too. What happens with the six pointers above will give an early indication of whether this will be finally achieved over the next five years, or remain a 'so near but yet so far'. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.