

# JONATHAN BRAY



## Northern Ireland is getting ahead

You may not have yet noticed, but it's become the place to watch, with growing bus and rail demand and plans for unified ticketing

► Of the four main constituent parts of the UK, only one of them saw bus use grow last year. It is the same one on track to having a smart and fully unified ticketing system across all forms of public transport, and which has also seen the use of its rail network double in 10 years. That's Northern Ireland, where after decades of being sidelined as car dependency took hold, public transport is back.

The posterchild for the new found assertiveness and visibility of public transport in Northern Ireland is Belfast's new Glider BRT system which spans the city east to west with a branch into the Titanic quarter of the city's docklands. As a visitor to Belfast you can't miss this striking new addition to Belfast city centre's imposing street grid. Residents have taken to it too - it's winning over passengers and raising the wider status of public transport in the process.

Glider works because it's been thought through. It's on-street and unguided but this format for BRT works in Belfast because of the specifics of the road network and the geographies served. These artics don't get to give their rubbery midriffs much of a work out because the roads they serve are mostly straight, which makes the experience of using Glider feel more rapid transit. Some of Belfast's roads are not just straight they are also wide enough to slot bus priority in without too much fuss (the city centre's streets are also, helpfully, on a grid pattern). Where the roads narrow as they pass through inner city communities,

getting bus priority in was trickier - however, rather than attempt to barrel bus lanes through for the benefit of suburbanites, the opportunity was taken to renew local streetscapes, giving local high streets a boost in the process.

If the overall concept has been thought through then so have the details. Stops were reduced and standardised to be more like tram stops. All ticketing is off-board. The vehicles themselves are no nonsense Belgian Van Hools which iron out the bumps in the road for passengers. The smoother ride gives more of a rapid transit feel. They also have air con. Because having big windows to gaze out of is lovely, but being trapped inside a rattly greenhouse - not so much.

The off-board ticketing also has some interesting beneficial side effects. Firstly, it makes dwell times shorter and more regular in duration, removing the background annoyance of the stop-start nature of conventional bus travel - making the experience more like rapid transit. It also means that passengers who don't like that kind of thing can avoid the interaction anxiety which comes from having to negotiate with a driver in front of an audience. Yet, at the

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same time human interaction, in less theatrical form (unless you are fare dodging), is retained in the form of roving teams of jovial inspectors.

The well thought through concept and the well thought through details mean the whole adds up to a lot more than the sum of the parts. It's what FirstGroup's FTR should have been and wasn't - despite the hype and sycophancy from the trade press, Department for Transport and so on that greeted its launch at the time. This isn't plonking fancy new bendy buses on the streets, and walking away - it's a whole new Belfast thing. People say they are getting the Glider rather than saying they are getting the bus. Suburban shopping centres are giving Glider the credit for higher footfall. Before it was implemented the media said all that bus priority would lead to is the shuttering up of local traders. Yet now look at Ballyhackamore - on a Glider route and voted one of the best places to live in the UK. And it's also doing its bit for bringing communities together as some people from nationalist communities have been travelling on it across to unionist parts of town, and vice versa. Some of them for the first time in their lives.

If Glider stands out in the city centre, there's something else that's striking to those used to the messy, shouty state of play in many GB city centres (with all those different buses in different colour schemes proclaiming the merits of tickets you can only use on their services). It's the calm and order in Belfast of the interlocking network of bus services which serve the city and Northern Ireland more widely. Metro for frequent urban Belfast services, a new high spec 'Urby' network for longer distance commuters, Ulsterbus for local services across Northern Ireland and then the Goldline coach network for fast services between towns and cities. It's an easy to understand network which experienced overall growth in patronage last year.

All of this is possible because, firstly, the vast majority of public transport services in Northern Ireland are provided by Translink (a state-owned corporation). And, secondly, Translink is carrying out its remit, which is not to use a monopoly position to manage decline but to get out there and ensure that public transport plays its part in delivering the wider objectives Northern Ireland has for a thriving green economy based on healthy communities.

The end of decline management is also



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Glider: As a visitor to Belfast you can't miss this striking new addition to Belfast's city centre

exemplified by the transformation of Northern Ireland's rail network. In the sixties Northern Ireland was no more immune to the brutalising of its railway system than the rest of the UK - leaving some districts without any rail service at all. Until the early 2000s this residual rail service was the domain of veteran English Electric 'thumper' units which dolefully and noisily trundled their way around a bare minimum of trackwork. When, finally, approval was given for new trains it unleashed an astonishing growth in passengers - a doubling in 10 years.

Meanwhile, bringing the whole rail and bus shebang together are two major projects. The first is a rebuild of the current hub of both Northern Ireland's rail and bus network at Great Victoria Street. It's starting to feel its age and both the bus and rail terminals are struggling to cope with surging demand; so much so that some rail services can't be squeezed into it - such as the Enterprise rail service to Dublin. Everything is going

to change, including the name (it will be rebranded within a broader regeneration site known as Weavers Cross), when it becomes a new, more spacious interchange topped off with a significant commercial development.

The second major project is the modernisation of transport ticketing. There are already 28 million smartcard journeys annually and nearly half a million active smartcards. As the modernisation project is rolled out across more types of services and ticketing projects, Northern Ireland is one of the frontrunner territories in Europe for achieving smart, simple and fully integrated ticketing across its entire public transport network.

Finally, layered on top of everything is a marketing campaign that stresses the intrinsic advantages of public transport for both the individual traveller and Northern Ireland as a whole. The predominance of the car culture in Northern Ireland (and the consequent tendency of Belfast to gridlock) can be an

advantage here - as you are starting from a clean slate with a fresh proposition. The aim is to make public transport a credible answer for policy makers looking at where best to invest in tackling wider social, environmental and economic goals and for individuals' travel needs. 'Get on board' as the strapline has it.

Northern Ireland really isn't so different from the rest of the UK to make it an invalid comparator or to make lessons untransferable and the rest of the UK really needs to start looking at what Northern Ireland is doing on public transport. Because whilst you weren't looking - they got ahead of you. ■

**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.

