

# JONATHAN BRAY



## A vision for the future of 'Rail Cities'

The crisis on Northern and Thameslink shows how important rail is for cities - and opens up a space for some bigger thinking

► The recent meltdowns on Northern and Thameslink not only left many passengers beside themselves with frustration about not being able to get to work on time - or at all - it also led to a firestorm of criticism and condemnation from politicians and media alike. With the immediate shock of that first Monday morning of the meltdown passed, there's now a bigger debate about whether the way that rail services are provided for in cities needs some far reaching reform.

Before coming to that the first thing to say (and as we set out in our recent *Rail Cities UK - our vision for their future* report) is that the fundamentals for urban rail remain very strong. Here's why. All cities want to become denser, more dynamic places which attract the best people to the growth sectors of the economy (including the 'Flat White Economy' of media, communications and information). In order to achieve this cities are reducing space for motorised traffic in favour of space for people as they strive to become places where people positively want to spend time in. Because that means more visitors, more investment and more smart people wanting to work there.

It's very difficult to see how you can get people into denser city centres with less space for road vehicles without expanding rail networks and their capacity. There are also synergies here with improving air quality and reducing carbon emissions if more of the road traffic that was spiking the air with carcinogens can be moved on to rail services powered by a

rapidly decarbonising national grid. Rail can also help reduce the impact of freight and logistics vehicles on urban roads. This can be done by long hauling more bulk freight either into urban freight terminals directly (including passenger stations which are otherwise unused at night) or to rail connected distribution hubs on the urban periphery, where freight can then be loaded onto road vehicles better designed for the urban environment in terms of safety, propulsion and size.

What's more, if housing need is to be met (and housing is the one domestic policy area with some traction given Brexit's domination of the wider political landscape) then again it's

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rail that will be key. This is because so much brownfield land (either former rail land or former rail connected industrial sites) is next to railway lines. In addition, rail can extend commuting ranges and offers the opportunity for more housing to be built above, or as part of new or overhauled rail stations and interchanges. In short, rail expansion is vital if we are to avoid the sprawl and road congestion that might otherwise result from a big increase in house building.

In some ways there's nothing new here. Successful cities have always grown with their rail networks. London is a prime UK example - from Metro-land at the start of the 20th century to Docklands nearer the end - rail network and city expansion have been in lock step. And, to be fair, there is significant investment going into urban rail at present - including new train fleets for Northern (the Pacers are doomed) and Merseyrail and the Tyne & Wear Metro. However, much (but not all) of this investment is incremental or involves replacing rolling stock on its last legs - it stops short of a wider vision for the rail cities that we need. What would such a vision look like in practice?

First of all there comes a point where the biggest cities need more cross city routes because edge of centre termini can't cope with the numbers. Hence the push for Crossrail 2 in London but also the need for more cross city capacity in cities like Birmingham (on the Snow Hill route) and Manchester (on the Oxford Road to Manchester Piccadilly corridor as well as a potential new underground route).

Tram-train technology can also help - allowing the lucky commuter that benefits to get on board at their local station and get off right outside their city centre office on main street in the city centre, rather than piling out at a Victorian railway terminal on the edge of that city centre. Tram-trains aren't the only tech fix available. Battery packs can extend the range of existing electric trains deeper into the 'look ma, no wires' hinterlands, as well as allow trams to glide through city centres without the expensive clutter of overhead wires.

More mundane, but equally useful, work to increase capacity through signalling, station, track and junction work offers the opportunity to move to turn-up-and-go networks with greater capacity and more reliability. Networks that start to emulate the best of

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what comparable German rail cities already enjoy; interlocking networks of long distance, regional express, regional, S-Bahn, U-Bahn, trams and buses - under common ticketing.

But in talking about Germany and common ticketing I am now getting back to where I started around the debate on whether some fundamental change is needed on how urban rail networks are provided. Obviously there is a bigger national discussion going on about whether the current structure is just too layered with too many costly interfaces and too fractured a chain of command. And in addition whether the railway should be publicly or privately owned and operated.

It's been heartening to see the growing recognition that, regardless of how these debates are resolved, more devolution for urban and regional services should be part of any solution. Not only because fully devolved services have been out-performing comparators operationally and for passenger satisfaction - but also because local control, rather than remote control from Whitehall, will mean that the dots can be joined between rail and housing, between rail and the wider re-fashioning of city

centres and between rail and local communities (for example, through repurposing stations as wider hubs for local community use, enterprises and housing). It will also allow (as in German rail cities) for rail and the rest of local urban public transport networks to be part of one system rather than just on nodding terms as is all too often the case at present.

That's the vision, but how can it be achieved? As well as a new settlement on rail devolution (both in terms of specification and oversight of services and on stations) we need to put some stability back into infrastructure investment. This means getting back to a long term approach to rail expansion alongside a long term approach to skilling up the sector so that we can deliver that expansion more effectively. The appraisal methodology that is used to justify and rank transport investment decisions is also not designed to capture the wider transformational benefits of major schemes - plus there is a tendency to prioritise investment in inter-city over intra-city.

Finally, if the goal is reducing rather than increasing urban traffic congestion then it makes sense to ensure that planning of

transport, local economic development, housing and land use is coordinated. Of the English cities, London is furthest advanced in this regard though the creation of Combined Authorities (and in some places Mayoral Combined Authorities) is leading to improved coordination elsewhere. However, planning and prioritisation on the national rail network only fitfully reflects this approach.

The crisis on Northern and Thameslink has been a miserable experience for rail users, affected cities and the rail industry. If any good has come out of it, it is that it shows how important rail is to cities and opens up a space for some bigger thinking about what kind of rail cities we need for the future - and how best we can make them happen. ■

### 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.