

# Growing urban transport agenda gives UTG plenty to chew on

The Urban Transport Group is capitalising on the heightened interest in city-region transport challenges. **Andrew Forster** went to meet its director, **Jonathan Bray**, and chair, **Tobyn Hughes**

**T**hese are exciting times to be involved in urban transport. Elected mayors, combined authorities, and devolution deals are giving city-regions added clout – and cash – to deliver their visions. And the transport agenda is constantly evolving, with new mobility products and services, new regulatory models for buses, rail devolution, and so on.

All of which means the Urban Transport Group (UTG) has plenty on its plate. The UTG was formed in 2016, supplanting the Passenger Transport Executive Group (pteg) that had represented the Passenger Transport Executives in the metropolitan areas outside London.

The new name gave the body a higher profile and signified a change of remit, away from the narrow public transport focus of PTEs to an all-encompassing view of the urban transport scene – passenger and freight – reflecting the governance changes of combined authorities, elected mayors and multi-modal transport outfits such as Transport for London and Transport for Greater Manchester.

Says UTG chair Tobyn Hughes: “Before we were PTEs and we talked about trams, trains and buses for the large part. Now there is probably more time spent discussing Mobility as a Service, health outcomes, street planning, taxis and private hires, and all the issues around making our cities better places to live and work.” Hughes is managing director of transport operations at the North East Combined Authority.

UTG’s membership comprises Greater Manchester, the Liverpool City Region, Transport for London, Tyne and Wear, Sheffield City Region, West Midlands and West Yorkshire. Associate members are Bristol and the West of England, Nottingham City Council, Strathclyde Partnership for Transport and the Tees Valley Combined Authority.

UTG director Jonathan Bray says Transport for London’s membership may have caused angst for some initially, but has been invaluable. “Before they came on board obviously there could be some nervousness in some parts – you know, ‘Here comes London’. But genuinely, they’ve been great, very collegiate, there have been no sharp elbows and it’s speeded up the transmission of interesting stuff that London as a world city has been able to communicate to other cities.”

The UTG has a small team in Leeds and a modest budget of about £620,000. It has a governing board of transport directors but no political representation. “We are looking at whether we can establish a political network of key transport leads for member areas,” says Bray.

The UTG organises numerous topic groups through which members can meet



Urban Transport Group director Jonathan Bray (left) and chair Tobyn Hughes

or exchange information online.

Much of the UTG’s work is what Bray describes as “thought leadership”. “We have got space where we can do some of the thinking in a way that other people are not doing because we’re looking at it from a transport for cities perspective,” he says. He points to the report on taxis and private hire vehicle policy, *Taxi! Issues and options for city region taxi and private hire vehicle policy*, which the UTG published last December. “No one else is doing that.”

Good relations with civil servants help to ensure the UTG viewpoint feeds into policy-making, says Hughes. “Quite often they will ask us for an opinion on ideas that are floating round the civil servants’ minds before they close down a set of options to present to the ministers.”

## The Bus Services Act

Hughes says the UTG and its members had an important influence on the Bus Services Act 2017, which includes powers for franchising and strengthened forms of partnership working. Did the UTG get all that it wanted from the Act? There were, after all, concerns that transport secretary Chris Grayling, who was appointed during the Bill’s progression, was trying to use the Act’s statutory guidance to put obstacles in the way of franchising.

“I think we’ve overall got a much better package of powers than we had before,” says Bray. “We were happy with the dialogue we had with the DfT over the whole process; if we were holding the pen on all the detail of all the guidance and regulations and legislation would we have made some further tweaks? Yes we would.”

“The biggest issue clearly is around only mayoral authorities getting it [franchising powers] as of right.

“But we’re pleased with the overall outcomes because, as you know, it was

certainly a long and lonely battle – not a great deal of support for PTEs in making the case for what is the biggest form of public transport relied upon by the poorest.”

Adds Bray: “What’s quite interesting as well is there are lots of games you can play – putting franchising to one side – around ticketing powers, around the Advanced Quality Partnerships, and Enhanced Partnerships. There are quite a lot of tunes you can play across the piece around that.”

The UTG’s bus strategy group is now looking at some of the wider issues surrounding buses. Bray says the old argument about bus priority is no longer as simple because of the greater competition for road space. “There’s a greater squeeze on road capacity in city centres, a greater demand on the remaining road capacity, active travel wanting segregated cycle routes, and the massive growth in private hire vehicles,” he says.

“I don’t think anyone has the answer across the piece. Some people say they do – ‘it’s all about bus lanes, if there were bus lanes everywhere everything would be perfect’. Obviously bus priority has a role to play but [in] the environment where people say, ‘we’re not going to have vehicles in our city centres full stop’, it’s a much more complicated argument now.”

## Rail powers

Rail devolution is another area that keeps the UTG busy. “Devolution is one of the biggest things that’s happening on the railways – Scotland, Wales, London, the North, the West Midlands,” says Bray. The UTG’s rail devolution group includes representatives of the Welsh Government and Transport Scotland.

Hughes says the benefits of devolution are clear: “The overall premise throughout

is that wherever combined authorities or local transport authorities have been given a high degree of influence over their local rail networks, then the rail network is better, it’s much more locally focused, it delivers for local passenger needs.”

Local authorities in the West Midlands and the North of England now share responsibilities for the local rail franchises with the DfT. Is that an end point, or merely a staging post to further devolution?

Says Hughes: “I think there was a pragmatic mid-point, which is sharing responsibility with the DfT but the agreement certainly was further steps towards further devolution would take place throughout the life of the franchise and that’s the case we’re making for Rail North.”

## Skills and secondments

Although less visible than its policy work, the UTG is active on the skills and diversity agendas too.

One thing that goes largely unseen is secondments between some member authorities. Says Bray: “There were a lot of secondments going on – particularly Transport for Greater Manchester were doing a lot of secondments in and out of Transport for London; I can’t speak in exact detail about that but there was a period when there was quite a lot of secondments from TfL into TfGM.”

A Transport for the West Midlands officer, Jake Thrush, has been on part-time secondment to the UTG itself to do a project on transport in towns.

“That’s an area where there’s perhaps not enough focus because a lot of the focus is on cities,” says Bray. “Cities are very important but we have a lot of urban centres besides that in our city regions, some of them are struggling, so what kind of transport intervention alongside other interventions might help those economies? And how do you make our city regions feel more like a jigsaw that fits together, rather than a glossy city centre and everything else is some kind of trickle down question mark.”

With the help of consultant AECOM, the UTG has developed a transport data hub called Insight (*LTT* 07 Jul 17). “It’s getting good usage, I don’t think there’s anything like it out there,” says Bray. “We want to develop it further with more datasets, we’re looking at offering a free version to members so they can manage their own data.”

“We’re also doing some interesting technical stuff around an algorithm that will work out when people get off buses as well as when they get on,” he explains. This would help with concessionary fares reimbursement. “We’re doing some of this stuff ourselves rather than everyone getting separate consultants to do it.” **IT**