

# Jonathan Bray

## Connections

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### News and stories of progressive change

#### I'm glad you asked

When we talk transport we are usually thinking urban centres. But that's not where most people live. They live in suburbs. If we want to decarbonise then we need to do more thinking about how suburbs can decarbonise. After all there's a stack of reports a mile high about transport and cities but hardly any about suburbs - despite the challenges of decarbonisation being even more acute in suburbs given their dispersed form. So, I'm delighted to have been awarded a year's fellowship by the Foundation for Integrated Transport to carry out research into solutions for suburbs - including exploring good and interesting practice in Europe (from mobility hubs to car clubs and more besides). There should also be read across to a multi-million pound project to encourage people in Leeds to design and try an alternative to private vehicle ownership. The groundbreaking [INFUZE](#) study (Inspiring Futures for Zero Carbon Mobility) will ask communities across the city to help design bespoke mobility solutions, which could include car clubs, responsive taxi-style bus services and shared bicycle and scooter schemes. The £7.8m plan is being led by the [Institute for Transport Studies \(ITS\)](#) at the University of Leeds, where I am a visiting senior research fellow.

I'm writing this on a combined trip to Dublin and Cardiff. I was in Dublin for the Transport Ireland 2024 conference to try to get more under the skin of how Ireland is getting more patronage growth on public transport than Great Britain. I was particularly interested to find out more about the systematic, and very

successful, upgrading of rural bus networks in Ireland and the impacts that's having (more to follow in my next think piece for Passenger Transport). And then to Cardiff for a busy few days of meetings (after a weekend taking my time to cross Wales by rail and bus) as part of my work with Transport for Wales and the Welsh Government to bring all buses in Wales under public control. I think there should be more sharing of experience across the four nations of the UK and Ireland so I'm pleased to be doing my bit.

As you've probably noticed there's a general election coming up. Local Transport Today asked me to write about what this could mean for local transport. So I wrote [this](#). In short it could mean more stable funding (though potentially at 'austerity-lite' levels), more progress on devolution, more integrated public transport (as public transport returns to public control), a battle for the soul of a new push on housing (more sprawl or progress towards more sustainable suburbs) and fits and starts on traffic restraint at the local rather than the national level. But we shall see.

Meanwhile I am going with the flow of a peripatetic life spending most of my time in either York, Estonia or Derby. Will be returning to Estonia before long for more of [Tartu, European City of Culture 2024](#). Go visit - you'll like it.

## Policy geek postcard: Stockholm



Here's a [twitter thread](#) about Stockholm - from the astonishing art caves on its Metro to some fabulous new suburbs with trams and rain gardens.

This is optimistic version of the future - doing everything good all at once.

## Stories of progressive change: Buses in South Yorkshire before bus deregulation



In the 1980s South Yorkshire, famously, pursued a cheap fares policy for buses which helped ensure South Yorkshire's buses were busy and that Sheffield's roads were less congested than any other comparable city. The fares policy is well remembered now and very popular at the time (a million people signed a petition to keep it) but it wasn't the only innovative thing that South Yorkshire was doing on buses. It introduced Bendy buses in central Sheffield (an idea that had hitherto been so unusual that it was technically illegal to do it) and minibuses in rural areas (common now but not then). On green clean technologies South Yorks was also an early pioneer of battery buses and it ran a trial of a modern trolleybus (with a test track at Doncaster racecourse). This interest in pushing the boundaries of bus technologies was also linked to a strand of thinking around how a dynamic local public sector could help drive the wider regional manufacturing and technological development and capacity (creating skilled and worthwhile jobs in the process). So much for the public sector not being able to innovate! All of it



was brought to an end by bus deregulation in the mid-eighties where some fares went up 300% overnight ushering in a painful era of catastrophic cuts, patronage decline and increased traffic congestion. Now that public control of buses (and public transport more widely) is becoming the norm again will we see a return to the confidence and municipal entrepreneurship we saw in South Yorkshire in the eighties? There's no reason not to think big again. And in the meantime here's a [bit more](#) about when the buses were (nearly) free in South Yorkshire.

## In depth: A journey by design?



A draining COVID epidemic and the ungainly pirouettes of government policy on public transport from one extreme ('we want all day bus lanes') to the other ('we hate all day bus lanes'), has not been conducive to big and optimistic thinking about how public transport should look and feel in the future. But ready or not there has been some major shifts out there that public transport vehicle design needs to be alive to. For example, the railways used to be about commuters and now passenger rail's main market is leisure travel. Meanwhile older people have proved reluctant to return to bus and the bus itself is an extinct species in some parts of the country – and critically endangered in many others. Obviously public transport vehicle design isn't the whole story on how public transport retains existing users and attracts new ones. But it's part of it. So, here's some thoughts.

Let's start with the big growth market: leisure travel. The interiors of a lot of UK rolling stock can be somewhat basic – even on routes that have a strong leisure component. There's a big contrast with the big picture windows that are now common on many new regional units in mainland Europe (though maybe there is a technical or loading gauge reason why this is harder to achieve in the UK?). Meanwhile, modern buses do have big windows (and in many cases more legroom and more comfortable seats than you get on an LNER or GWR Azuma). Where the bus can struggle for longer leisure journeys is ride quality and comfort. Those big windows can create a greenhouse effect, and when combined with the noise and random lateral and vertical vibration, I for one have often had enough after about thirty minutes. With hotter and weirder weather on the rise this raises the question of air con for buses (common on trains of course). All of which would add to vehicle weight and complexity of course. But would there be a side benefit of that given heavier buses can also have better ride quality? It was fascinating to hear from NatEx in Coventry about two routes operated by the same type

and design of bus. The difference was that the route where the bus was electrically powered was outperforming for patronage the route where the same bus body was powered by diesel. Not only that but drivers of the electric buses were happier, the buses were driven more smoothly and accidents reduced. So, are we making enough of the co-benefits of electrifying buses and has the arguably superior passenger comfort made a difference? After all everyone raves about Glider in Belfast but one of the reasons why Glider works, and First Group's FTR didn't, is Glider's vehicle quality and spec. Meanwhile on rail not only are some train interior specs depressingly drab and poorly specced, the ride quality can also be unimpressive. In an era where everyone does their own thing on rolling stock (and from a very limited number of suppliers) are we missing out on what we used to have when British Rail had both a design panel and a substantial centralised research and development capacity? In some countries a lot of attention is given to the 'national train'. It's seen as a reflection of national style and aspirations. Something to be proud of. For example, there is nothing 'off the shelf' about the interiors of the new [Danish IC5 trains](#). A design team of architects, interior designers, product designers, and lighting designers drew inspiration directly from famous pieces of Danish design to make something that aims to reflect the national character and the best of its design traditions. We don't have a national train design, (or indeed a national intercity network anymore in the UK) which contributes to a fragmented and variable offer which is under-marketed on the national stage. By way of an aside it's also interesting to see how some overseas railways (eg Lithuania) give more prominence in their marketing to rail's green credentials than is generally the case here. Finally on this rather loosely themed section on leisure travel, public transport needs to integrate itself better with big leisure attractions (most of whom are seeking to reduce their climate footprints). ['Good Journey'](#) being the organisation which can bridge the gap between the two sectors.

From leisure to commuting. Whilst bells and whistles are good for leisure travel I sometimes wonder if we are overdoing it for the urban bus. Isn't what we need for short urban journeys something that is consistently clean, simple to use and green? A reliable utility rather than something that is pretending it's a fair swap for a BMW? There is a case however for the exteriors of the urban bus to look the part in the urban environment by looking good (or at least dignified) and that they relate to the identity of the places they serve – so the placemakers don't see them as a chaotic mass of shouty shoeboxes which they are consequently keen to consign to the backstreets.

Alongside the relative roles of leisure and commuting there are other dynamics in play too. For example, we have an aging population, a growing cycle leisure market and the rise and rise of a growing diversity of light electric vehicles (from mobility scooters to e-scooters). In short, public transport vehicles are being asked to do more for a greater diversity of different needs and wants (in this regard it's interesting to see in Europe more partitioning of on board space with dedicated space for families). But let's focus in on older and disabled people for a while. The UK has been relatively good (compared with other countries) at improving and prioritising the physical accessibility of public transport vehicles and supporting passenger infrastructure. However, it sometimes feels like we have taken a legalistic approach ('we have met the standards, what more do you want?') rather than embodied it fully in the way that public transport works and presents itself (for example how reliable is the kit and who is there to help if there's a problem?). Indeed does every type of passenger, and potential passenger, feel like there is a guiding hand behind their journey which is there to look out for them? This is a particular issue for buses where (outside of franchised markets) there is no one body in charge of a journey, because of the nature of bus stops and because where, once on board, the bus can feel like an unsupervised space. Unlike rail where, by and large, the staff do speak to passengers over the PA this isn't often the case on buses – even when the bus has a PA system. When TfL encouraged bus drivers to communicate more with the passengers it made a big psychological difference (for example explaining to passengers why and for how long the delay will take when the bus stops for a while to regularise the service). Even better when this happens alongside automated audio visual bus stop messaging.

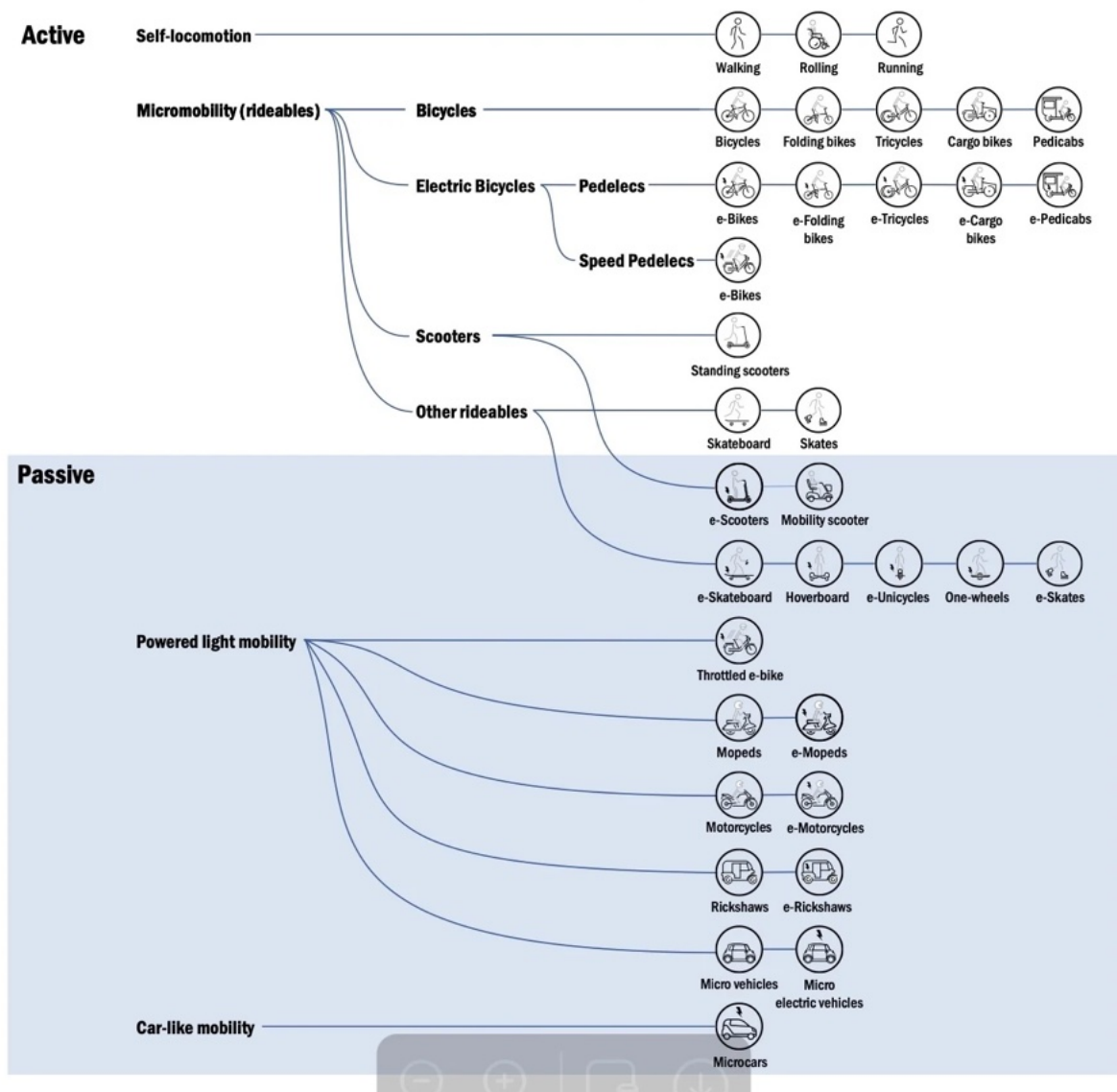
Of course there are many possible (and reasonable) objections to many of these ideas. Cost for one. There's also the fact that people are clearly prepared to rough it to save money (hello Ryanair and SNCF's budget Ouigo network). And also that many public transport vehicles serve more than one kind of market during an average day (never mind a lifetime). All of the above is also based on my perceptions which are informed by my background, wants and preoccupations. But at a time when the next Westminster administration is likely to be recreating some form of national rail system again, and when we are looking at a big transition from private control to public control of buses – now is the time when we should be thinking big again. There are some indicators of what this new era could bring. Like Merseytravel pushing the manufacturer hard to make its new urban, hydrogen powered bus into state of the art, or the stunning murals by local artists on the interiors of the new Tyne and Wear metro trains. In short we have the opportunity to make this positive transition something more than a technical and contractual shift but an opportunity for bold and fresh thinking about how we best serve a changed market in changing times.

This article was first published in Passenger Transport magazine. An illustrated pdf of the article can be downloaded [here](#).

A slideset version of the ideas in the article can be found [here](#).

## The future shock three

Figure 3. The Light Mobility Landscape



1. **Light mobility:** We are seeing both an expansion (and a blurring of boundaries between) different 'light mobility' / 'smaller than car' modes. What does light mobility include? Well it means e-scooters, micro-electric vehicles, e-mopeds, mobility scooters, e-unicycles, e-skates, bicycles to name but a few. It's a topic that this interesting [report](#) from ITF explores (and from which the above graphic is taken). The diversity and growth in all these different ways of getting about creates an enormous multi-faceted regulatory and policy challenge (for example on safety) and opportunity (for example on substitution for car trips) which is coming our way - whether we are ready or not!

2. **Climate migration:** Within some countries and continents there has been a tendency to abandon industrial norths in favour of a new start in sunnier souths. For example in the US there has been a shift from northern rustbelt towns to sunbelt settlements in the south. But as the climate heats up and life goes from pleasant to unpleasant in hotter souths will we be seeing reverse migration to cooler norths? This [article](#) takes a look at how Michigan is preparing to prosper again as America's centre of economic, population and agricultural gravity moves north again.

3. **Mega heat pumps:** Heat pumps are becoming more commonplace in homes but the next stage could be heat pumps for industry. The global market for large heat pumps could grow 15% per annum to \$40 billion by 2030 as industry looks to save on running costs, increase its energy security and reduce emissions. One working example is Italian supplier Turboden installing a 12 MW heat pump for a pulp



and paper producer in Finland, which will take 100 °C heat from factory exhaust and boost it to a scalding 170 °C. Other applications for mega heat pumps include centralised heating for residential districts. MAN is constructing a massive 50 MW project, to provide heating for 25,000 homes in the Danish town of Esbjerg. The project will use seawater as a local heat source, boosting temperatures before pumping the hot water into homes. There is also carbon capture requiring green heat where heat pumps could produce the steam necessary for the process. The heat pump revolution is only just beginning...

## Side projects: A day on a logging train on the last forest railway in Romania



In Maramures in the North of Romania, close to the Ukrainian border, is the Viseu de Sus forest railway. A wonky, shonky enterprise that is the only way of getting timber out of the steep valleys that provide access to the forests. We stayed in a B and B owned by one of the engine drivers. The line runs right past his house so early on Sept 1st 2010 I was waiting by the track for his logging train from out of the depot and up the Vasser Valley in order to spend the day witnessing some serious industrial railway hardcore action in one of Europe's most rustic corners. Here's the [picture story](#) of what happened (it's still operating by the way).

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