



JONATHAN
BRAY



French ambition contrasts with UK

In the 1980s, France's TGV high speed train revolution left the UK well behind. Is the same now happening on local transport?



Orléans is an example
of what a public
transport system
can do in a small city

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► Paris in the springtime but today we have given the conventional attractions of the 'City of Light' a miss in favour of making our way through an emerging new residential area to one of the sites for the extension of the Paris Metro. Why? Because this isn't your regular metro expansion site and this isn't a regular mass transit project. This is the testing and innovation centre - and public exhibition- for the Grand Paris Express (200 kilometres and 68 stations of new Metro - comprising four new lines and an extension of two existing lines). All designed to redefine the Metro as a mass transit system not just for the city of Paris but also for its suburbs.

We join a mixed group of regular Parisians who want to learn more about what's coming. The Grand Paris Express (GPE) 'Fabrique du Métro' exhibition is on a scale which reflects the awesome dimensions of the GPE itself. There are full scale mock ups of stations and trains, sections devoted to the engineering and others on the architecture and artwork. And beyond this aircraft hanger scale exhibition centre there has also been plenty more outreach - including arts and music festivals at construction sites.

There are no half-measures here. Whereas in the UK's world city the equivalent to the GPE is utilising existing multi-purpose heavy rail lines as best we can - as well as creating the emerging Superloop bus network. I'm not knocking what Transport for London has done with the resource they have - but by Parisian standards these are half-measures.

What is it that enables the French to think big? And then act accordingly?

Well, firstly there's a different conception of the role of the state than in the UK. In France, it's expected that the state will play an interventionist and leading role in the economy and society (with a higher tax take to match). Francophones also make up only 4% of the world's population - which means that, in order to hold its own, the French state is motivated to act big, generate momentum and maintain a point of difference.

Secondly, there's the stable and independent income stream provided by the Versement Mobilité (VM). The VM is a local payroll tax payable by public and private-sector employers with more than 11 employees. The VM is the biggest source of funding for urban transport now accounting for almost half of total



revenues (around €8.5bn per year) for mobility authorities.

Finally, there's the 2019 Mobility Orientation Law, a mammoth piece of legislation that signalled a shift in government focus from inter to intra-urban transport and put a new stress on sustainability and innovation with the aim of giving all citizens reasonable access to the transport they need. This in turn has been a prompt for greater focus on difficult geographies for conventional public transport - like low density suburbs or the deep rural.

So, if that's some of the policy and fiscal plumbing how does it manifest itself on the ground?

One of the ways is developing the 'noughts and crosses' of mass transit. Whilst Paris has had the linear 'crosses' in the shape of its well-developed RER network it has lacked the orbital 'noughts'. Something that the GPE will bolster - alongside the capital's growing network of orbital tram and Bus Rapid Transit schemes.

Meanwhile, in the next tier of French urban centres the Metropolitan Regional Express Service (SERM) programme will give 24 of them the 'crosses' they lack through their own RER networks. The public body that is building GPE will also lead on the SERMs,

"The French have got a more efficient way of delivering soaring ambitions"



allowing expertise to be built and retained rather than scattered to the four winds when a project ends.

Another manifestation is the return of the tram to the streets of French cities. As in the UK, France ditched its tram networks as mass motorisation took hold. But they have been far quicker in correcting the error and bringing the tram back. Every French city with a population of 150,000 now has a tram or metro compared with 30 British cities of 150,000 or more that don't. Something which the welcome recent announcements of extra spend on light rail in the UK will still not make much of a dent in.

And here another point of difference emerges. UK tram systems can (though not always) look like an insertion of a transport engineering project into a streetscape. Whereas in France new tram schemes enhance and refresh the streetscape. What's more they also manage to do this at roughly twice the speed and half the cost than in the UK. In short, France has mastered the art of building new tram schemes.

As well as investment there's also innovation. Take Grenoble as an example. It is piloting car share as de facto bus route. It works like this. Motorists who are using the pilot corridors can sign up for the scheme by an app. If they pick anyone up from the fixed stops (which look similar to a regular bus stop) then they get €2 per passenger plus 50 cents for every empty seat. If they don't pick anyone up they still get 50 cents per empty seat. Users also sign up to the app and can then wait at one of the stops for a ride. It costs the users nothing. This isn't instead of regular public transport - it is in addition. The rationale being that if you have all these empty seats going in and out of town then why not make better use of them? Sections of car pool lane are an additional incentive for motorists to get on board.

This is just the latest manifestation of how mega car share has become in France. Go on the SNCF website and you will also get a car pooling option alongside the train option. Car share lanes are also becoming more common - most notably on the Paris périphérique. You can discuss the rights and wrongs of car share versus public transport but for the purposes of this piece it shows how the national and local state in France is innovating.

Orléans is an example of how the twin pillars of investment and innovation come

together to rethink what a public transport system can do in a small city. Its beating heart is a two-line tram system. In the city centre, tram, street and city design come together seamlessly and beautifully to the extent that there is no distinction between the tram and street design. They are indivisible. They have also introduced some stylish new urban buses (Irizar's 'ie Tram') which enhance the streetscape and which nullify any risk of stigmatisation of the mode.

For low density suburbs and outlying employment sites in Orléans there is an extensive demand responsive bus service which feeds into the high frequency linear bus and tram lines (you can't use the service to go direct to the city centre). It's not a here today, gone tomorrow small scale pilot either. A fleet of 36 vehicles provide a meaningful level of provision - on a fixed stop basis - which is used by up to 36,000 people a month. All this in a place with a similar population to Gloucester, Basingstoke or Basildon.

Is France perfect? No. Have you ever tried to use the minimal numbers of RATP ticket machines at Paris Gare du Nord? Not all innovation is good innovation (I am not a fan of seasickness and therefore the ride quality of the Translohr trackless tram in Paris). Style can beat substance (catwalk-beautiful urban transit vehicles where only the driver gets a seat that's not rock hard).

Nevertheless the big picture is that the French have got a more efficient way of delivering soaring ambitions, underpinned by a long standing local funding stream and a mindset that sees public transport as a civic good and even a thing of beauty. In the 1980s, the Trains à Grande Vitesse (TGV) revolution began transforming long distance travel in France - leaving the UK well behind. Is the same now happening on local transport? ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

► For decades Jonathan Bray has been at the forefront of making progressive change happen on transport - from stopping the national roads programme in its tracks in the 1990s to getting buses back under public control in the 2020s. He is an advisor to the Welsh Government on bus franchising and an independent advisor. www.jonathan-bray.com