

Rapid expansion: BRT-UK's first year

Mark Curran reports on the first year of BRT-UK, the organisation set up to promote BRT in the UK, and share best practice

Last year saw a group of individuals and organisations make the first steps towards developing a better understanding and co-ordinated development of Bus Rapid Transit activities in the UK. Following a 'show of hands' at an informal BRT seminar in late 2005, chaired by the late Colin Eastman, BRT-UK was formed in January 2006 with a management committee of volunteers. Looking back, it is unclear how many of those volunteers had any idea how much work it would take to get the fledgling organisation off the ground, and promote BRT as a transport mode.

BRT-UK unashamedly hijacked the March 2006 Landor-organised conference on bus rapid transit to launch the organisation, and cheekily managed to insert the 'rapid bus' logo in to many of the speakers' presentations. A year later BRT-UK are delighted to have a more formal relationship as sponsor of the 2007 event, on March 15.

BRT-UK set out with eight objectives around the core themes of enhancing understanding of bus rapid transit, and developing better links between bodies with an interest in the mode. However, achieving objectives has not been easy. BRT-UK has a core management committee made up of a variety of local authority, bus operator, bus manufacturer, and consultant representatives, and therefore sometimes has conflicting aims. However, ultimately all are seeking the goal of delivering and operating improved public transport, whether as an upgrade to conventional bus systems

or as a practical alternative to light rail. BRT-UK does not exist to promote bus rapid transit over any other form of transport. Instead, we seek to enhance understanding of bus rapid transit as a mode. It is not widely understood how BRT fits in the hierarchy between light rail and conventional bus: for example there is a wide misconception that BRT must be kerb guided.

There is a vast tool kit of measures which can be used to achieve the principles of BRT, which are speed, reliability, and permanence. Looking around at BRT systems it can be seen that different schemes around the world use different elements, such as guidance systems, transitways, priority signalling, enhanced vehicles, styling, branding, stations and platforms, high-tech information and display systems, etc. It is rare that one system will have 'all' elements (the 'holistic' BRT), as in the vast majority of situations the cost of all elements is simply not justified to meet the system aims. However, one thing BRT must achieve is journey time reliability, and needs adequate infrastructure measures to achieve this.

BRT-UK has started the process of disseminating information on the variety of methods of implementing BRT. In 2006 this was achieved by site visits and by an annual conference. BRT-UK invited members to tour both the Kent Thameside 'Fastrack' and West Edinburgh guided busways systems, with formal presentation, informal discussion and route visits generously hosted by promoting and operating organisations. BRT-UK is seeking to inform and influence government thinking and policy development, and therefore gave both

the Commons transport select committee and Scottish Executive detailed briefings on BRT and what it can achieve.

Early links with universities have also been made, with two main aims. The first is offering guest lectures on the subject of BRT broadly at undergraduate level. The second is assistance with possible dissertation topics for post-graduate qualifications in one of the areas where there is incomplete knowledge.

However, the highlight of 2006 was the end of year Bus Rapid Transit conference hosted for the second year running in Coventry. The event was however tinged with sadness as it came less than two weeks after the death of Colin Eastman, the man whose drive and enthusiasm – and forward thinking – led to the formation of BRT-UK.

The role which BRT has to play in future transport systems was shown by our ability to receive presentations from both Moir Lockhead (First Group) and David Leeder (Commission for Integrated Transport). Both shared a number of provoking thoughts not only about bus rapid transit but also about the transport industry in general. However, the event also proved an opportunity to catch up on evolving BRT systems in the UK, and saw the launch of The Concrete Society's guided busway construction handbook.

Things will not be getting any slower in 2007. Following the sad events of November 2006, the organisation will go forward under the guidance of five directors, namely Dr Bob Tebb (First Group) as chair, Prof George Hazel (MRC McLean Hazel) as vice-chair, Alex Macaulay (Sestran) as treasurer, Claire Coulter (Wrightbus) and Mark Curran (Faber Maunsel), with further assistance continuing to be co-opted. There is a fluid committee structure, and input is welcomed from all

members who have the ability to commit to helping run BRT-UK.

In March 2007, we will launch *Bus Rapid Transit - a Transport Revolution in the Making*. This 12-page document will set out the world wide development of bus rapid transit and what it has delivered. The document will be accessible to decision makers in local and national government. This is a key way in which education about BRT as a mode will be undertaken. It is hoped this will help develop effective BRT schemes, ensuring BRT - public transport - can get the priorities and road space, marketing, promotion, and facilities it needs to be a genuine alternative. Assuming all has gone well 'behind the scenes' the first copies should be on a newsagent's shelf somewhere near you as an insert to the April 2007 edition of *Buses*.

Our programme of visits to BRT systems in operation will continue in 2007. In conjunction with the French Veolia group, there will be a visit to the BRT systems in Rouen and Caen in May. This will give the opportunity to see how both brave decisions regarding land and road space allocation and guidance systems are utilised on bus rapid transit delivering benefits for public transportation and the urban renewal agenda in France. Later in 2007, First and Metro will host BRT-UK in Leeds where 'the old and the new' of British BRT will be on show, from the kerb guided busways to the second 'ftr' route. The program for 2008 is already under development with the number of schemes to see, and the number of offers received, on the rise.

The 'BRT' message will also continue to be taken on the road, with conference speakers, guest lecturing and evening speakers. As interest rises in BRT it is inevitable that demand for these events will grow. The problems and opportunities presented by BRT will continue to be demonstrated to government bodies as the optimum authority/operator relationship is sought to justify the capital and operating investment most BRT requires. ■

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The objectives of BRT-UK

- To establish and promote good practice in the delivery of BRT
- To seek to establish/collate data on all aspects of BRT and to disseminate it within the industry
- To disseminate the benefits of bus rapid transit to opinion formers, decision makers and stakeholders
- To engage with Government (including Scottish, Welsh and NI) on key regulatory, legal and financial aspects governing the implementation and operation of bus rapid transit
- To promote and drive improvement in the quality of integration, infrastructure, vehicles, information and operations
- To identify and promote areas of BRT related research
- To provide its members with a range of benefits aimed at helping the professional in their day to day work
- To co-ordinate and engage with other organisations with similar objectives



BRT-UK members will visit the BRT system operated by Veolia in the French city of Rouen in May this year