

## Ambitious idea to run trams through city

Buses - whether on guided tracks or in priority lanes - look set to be at the heart of future transport planning for Oxford until 2031 and beyond.

But for all the extensive bus priority measures already in place on all Oxford's main radial corridors, it cannot have gone unnoticed that buses remain slow and unreliable - not through company inefficiencies, but entirely due to the chronically congested state of Oxford's roads.

With some motorists this week taking an hour to travel from George Street to the railway station, the appearance is timely of the new report "*Trams for Oxford: Could Light Rail Improve our Historic City?*"

It is timely too because in its response to Oxfordshire County Council's draft Oxford Transport Strategy, Oxford City Council showed itself to be more than a little interested in the idea of a tram system. "A tram network would attract a wider range of users than a bus-based solution," argues the city council's report, noting too that a tram track running down the middle of High Street would also be cheaper and less environmentally damaging than building a bus tunnel.

Sadly the idea of a tram system seems to have dropped from the list of realistic options being considered by County Hall which not very long ago was ruling nothing out or in. However, tram lovers in the city should count themselves fortunate that it now has the award-winning planning consultant, Dr Nicholas Falk, in their camp.

Dr Falk has been working closely in recent months with Oxford Civic Society to ensure the current debate about long-term transport solutions is an informed one.

His new report, with contributions from Oxford transport experts, is certainly refreshingly direct and ambitious. Much of it centres on spelling out how tram systems have been successfully brought into operation in historic and university cities in Germany and France. Few who have spent any time in Lisbon, Amsterdam or even Manchester would argue that tram travel is altogether more comfortable than buses. At the same time trams would cause less harm to historic buildings, and road surfaces, and are altogether less intrusive than buses. With the estimated cost of phase one put at £300m, Ian Hudspeth said that finding a solution working with bus

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companies could be delivered quicker and more cheaply - all that would, of course, depend on how you measure cost.

Dr Falk, however, argues that funding from developments on the edge of Oxford could hold the key. But then there are huge issues about restricted road space and where tracks could run.

The fear is that having unveiled its visionary but vague Connecting Oxfordshire initiative, the case for trams may have already been lost. If nothing else the *Trams for Oxford* report shows just what the city could be missing out on.