

# Metrolink trams

## 1980s and how full access to the new tram system was won by a campaign led by disabled people

### Summary

The idea of modern trams for Greater Manchester started being discussed by officials in 1982. Two years later there were firm plans in place – and disabled people were horrified. The plan was that the trams would use the existing platforms when running on old railway lines, but when on the roads people would have to climb in and out by using **steps on the sides of the trams**.

Disabled people started to campaign hard, as shown in this paper. In particular, around 70 disabled people met the officials on 22 November 1984, and people who were there say it was the turning point, because the officials started to listen and understand. Even so, it took another four years before full access was finally in the design.

Using documents from the Kevin Hyett collection in the GMCDP archive, and recent conversations, this is the story of that campaign.

February 2020

# Acknowledgements

My thanks to Richard Armitage, Graham Lightfoot, Nina Smith, John Taylor and Dorothy Whitaker for their contributions and comments on various drafts. Any mistakes are mine though. More comments, additions and corrections are welcomed.

The two main campaigning organisations were:

**ADAPT**, Action on Disabled Person's Transport, Greater Manchester branch (1979 to 1985),

and

**GMCDP**, the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (1985 onwards).

Tony Baldwinson

## 1982

Politicians and transport planners in Greater Manchester start to develop the idea of "light rail" or "light rapid transit" or "trams" which can run on railway lines as well as on roads in towns and cities.

The Rail Study Group was established with people from

British Rail, Greater Manchester Council, and  
Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive.

## 1984

The Rail Study Group formally proposed "Project Light Rail" in 1984. The idea was that the trams would use platforms when running on old railway lines, but when on the roads there would be steps on the sides of the trams for people to climb in and out. Many disabled people are horrified by this idea.

### June 1984

Derek Henshaw, Chair of ADAPT in Greater Manchester, had a letter published in Modern Railways magazine repeating the demand for Metrolink to be "accessible to all groups". The magazine published a

reply letter from the Greater Manchester Council (GMC), and the ADAPT group considered the council's reply "showed a marked advance in GMC's proposals for an accessible system compared with their original stance." Source: ADAPT Meeting Minutes, 26 September 1984

Also around this time the "**Strategies for a Coalition**" open meeting takes place on Saturday 16 June 1984 at County Hall and agrees to create the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP), to be controlled by disabled people.

Source: Leaflet advertising the meeting, 1984

### **October 1984**

The ADAPT group meets monthly and plans its next stage of the campaign. A meeting with the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive (GM PTE) had been arranged for 22 November 1984, 7pm, Reception Suite, Greater Manchester County Hall, Piccadilly Gardens, M1 3HU.

"Adrian Hardy has kindly agreed to chair the meeting ... The format would be half an hour's presentation by Phil Sulley (Transportation Advisor) and Tony Young (Principle Planning Officer with the PTE) followed by a discussion on any particular points, starting with the questions submitted in advance by ADAPT."

Source: ADAPT Meeting Minutes, 31 October 1984

### **22 November 1984**

The transport meeting on Thursday 22 November 1984 at County Hall was the turning point in GM PTE's decision to finally agree to a fully accessible system for the new trams. Probably the three main reasons for this dramatic change in transport policy were that:

- (1) more than 30 disabled people had seen a similar scheme in Newcastle,
- (2) nearly 70 disabled people turned up to the meeting, and
- (3) Vic Finkelstein made a powerful speech on disabled people's human rights.

The details of these three main factors are as follows:

- (1) There had been a trip to Newcastle before the meeting to look at their Metro train system and to meet members of the organisation there who had campaigned for an accessible system. The trip from Manchester to Newcastle was on an accessible double-decker bus (possibly owned by GM PTE) and it gave confidence to the 30+ disabled people from across GM who travelled there to assert their rights at the November meeting.
- (2) An excellent turn out at the meeting ... possibly 60-70 disabled people from GM, ADAPT members, GM Highways and Disability Group, plus other supporters from the new, developing GM Coalition of Disabled People. The size of the interest and geographical spread certainly surprised the GM PTE officers present because it clearly was not dominated by people from Manchester city area.
- (3) The fortuitous presence of Vic Finkelstein in Manchester on 22 November 1984. Vic was a founding member of UPIAS (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation) in 1972 and in 1984 he was leading the Open University's courses on disability. It isn't clear now why he was in Manchester that day but he agreed to come to the meeting in the evening and, crucially, Vic agreed to meet John Taylor, a non-disabled ally and transport advisor, at GMCVS (St Thomas Centre, Ardwick) for a briefing before the main meeting. John had been briefing ADAPT members, especially the message about a system which was there for perpetuity and needed to be 100% accessible from the beginning regardless of technical and environmental problems. Vic was able to articulate the message at the meeting in a human rights context. Having grown up and experienced discrimination and fighting apartheid in South Africa, he was passionate about equality. Vic's speech, plus a loud and passionate endorsement from Gerry Mills, an imposing Paralympics weightlifting winner from Middleton, Greater Manchester, impressed the GM PTE officials enough to concede at the end of the evening that the system must be 100% accessible.

Source: Dorothy Whitaker, email, 2 February 2020

Reporting afterwards on the large meeting that was held at County Hall, Piccadilly Gardens between disabled people and the transport planners, the ADAPT minutes said,

“It was generally agreed it had been a useful and constructive meeting and that ADAPT’s message of disabled people requiring a fully accessible Light Rapid Transport [trams] system was understood at last. ADAPT needs to ensure that the correct message is relayed to County Councillors and that a meeting is arranged” in 1985. Our thanks will be sent to “Vic Finkelstein ... for his valuable contribution from the floor.”

Source: ADAPT Meeting Minutes, 28 November 1984

# 1985

## January 1985

ADAPT consider a suggestion to petition “against the LRT [Light Rapid Transport - trams] Bill in Parliament on the grounds that it was not yet guaranteed as an accessible system. ... Also LRT [trams are] definitely being planned for West Midlands and Docklands in London, and ADAPT should consider sharing their experiences with other disabled people in those areas.”

## Spring 1985 Newsletter

“Light Rapid Transport [trams] in its present form is totally unacceptable for mobility impaired passengers as the step heights at various points along the track would be impossible for mobility impaired people. For example one would be able to get on a tram in Bury at the station platform level but unable to get off the LRT [trams] when it arrived in the centre of Manchester because there would be no street level platform to make access easy. For this reason ADAPT has actively opposed the Council’s proposals and we have encouraged other disabled people and groups to write to district councils, MPs and the Department of Transport expressing their dismay at the inaccessibility of such a proposed transport system for Greater Manchester. ADAPT - Greater Manchester will continue to actively oppose these proposals until such alterations are made which enable mobility impaired people to have easy access to this form of transport.” (Newsletter page 2)

# 1987

## March 1987

The GM PTE start to run a demonstration tram ride on railway track from Debdale Park to Piccadilly train station, selling tickets at 50p for adults and 25p for concessions and children.

## May 1987

A public meeting had been held recently concerning various problems with public transport.

“Over 100 people attended the seminar, and heard Councillor Guy Harkin, Chair of Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority, outline the operational and financial restrictions faced by the PTA. Councillor Harkin did not refer to the specific transport needs of disabled people, but he did say that the PTA takes ‘all areas seriously’ and that they would make the necessary improvements ‘if we can do it legally, and if the budget allows’. Unfortunately, Councillor Harkin was not around when various groups reported back to the meeting ... I was disappointed, however, at not being able to question Councillor Harkin as to why, that very afternoon at an ADAPT meeting, representatives from the PTE had refused to make a commitment that **all** stops for the proposed Light Rapid Transit system would be accessible to disabled people.”

Source: Lorraine Gradwell, GMCDP “Coalition” magazine, May 1987

# 1988

## Summer 1988

There “was a full-scale mock up built in the Birchfields Road bus garage in the summer of 1988 ... The faux [pretend] platform and part of a proposed vehicle shell were left in place until the winter ... a small number of wheelchair and pram users reported that the ‘gap’ between the raised platform and the tram door entrance was not noticeable.”

Source: Metrolink: The first 25 years, a book by Mark Ovenden, 2017.  
ISBN 978 185 414 4157

By this point in mid-1988 it is clear that the design principle of full access has become widely accepted by the transport authorities, and from anecdote accounts there were productive meetings between railway planners and engineers and disabled people on the technical issues faced in maintaining level access at all stops, such as loadings and vehicle suspension systems.

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## **Before the campaign**

# **1977**

In early 1977 the North West region of the Spastics Society (now Scope) set up the “Working Party on Transport for the Disabled in Greater Manchester.”

In July 1979 the Spastics Society published the report of the Working Party called, “Can I Get There?” The first of its ten recommendations was:

“Central Government must confer clearly defined and stated responsibilities on public transport operators to ensure provision is made for all disabled people.”

Also in 1979 the Working Party decided to change its name and membership to become ADAPT – Action on Disabled People’s Transport.

In April 1982 ADAPT published a follow-on report by Graham Lightfoot, “Getting There.”

I was (as Nigel Smith) the non-disabled Chair of the Working Party then ADAPT until early 1984 and then Derek Henshaw, a disabled person, took over as Chair. Similarly the number of disabled people involved in the Working Party then ADAPT rose steadily over time, including Sharon Hughes and Pat Entwistle. Advisors included Jeffrey Cousins, Huw Thomas, John Mitchell.

Source: Nina Smith, email, 4 February 2020

# After the campaign

## 1992

Summer 1992

Metrolink opens in stages from April to July 1992 with level access platforms **at every stop**, and with lifts or ramps added to street level as well as steps.

## 2008 onwards

The Disability Design Reference Group (DDRG) was set up in 2008 and is currently managed by Breakthrough UK on behalf of Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM).

From the Breakthrough UK website, the DDRG

“is made up of disabled individuals from across Greater Manchester who experience a wide range of disabling barriers.

They provide advice from their own lived experience, which assists TfGM to ensure that, as far as possible, an inclusive, barrier-free environment is developed across public transport in Greater Manchester.”

“Peter Cushing, Metrolink Director at TfGM said:

“During the Metrolink expansion and enhancement programme, the pragmatic advice of the DDRG has played an integral part in ensuring that accessibility for passengers is fully embedded into the entire delivery process, allowing Metrolink to excel as the most accessible mode of public transport in Greater Manchester.

Following success with Metrolink, TfGM is now looking to expand the remit of the DDRG to include its wider projects and initiative.”

Source:

[breakthrough-uk.co.uk/disability-design-reference-group](http://breakthrough-uk.co.uk/disability-design-reference-group)