COUNCIL SEMINAR
16th April, 2013

Present:- Councillor Smith (in the Chair); The Mayor (Councillor Pickering); Councillors Ahmed, Atkin, Burton, Clark, Foden, Gilding, Godfrey, Goulty, Hoddinott, Kaye, Pitchley, Read, G. A. Russell, P. A. Russell, Smith, Swift and Wyatt.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dodson and Jepson.

TRAM-TRAIN: SHEFFIELD - ROTHERHAM - PARKGATE.

Members received a presentation from Steve Davenport (South Yorkshire Passenger Transport Executive) about the proposed Tram-Train project which will link the Sheffield City Centre, the Rotherham town centre and the Retail World development at Parkgate. During the presentation, further contributions were made by:-

Chris Elliott - representing 'Stagecoach' the Supertam Operator – this Company will operate the new system, which will integrate with the existing Supertram network; the Company will undertake vehicle maintenance of the rolling stock in an enlarged vehicle depot on the Supertram line in Sheffield;

Simon Coulthard – representing Network Rail, a senior sponsor of the project; Network Rail will analyse the project as part of a learning experience in preparation for the introduction of the Tram-Train elsewhere in the United Kingdom;

Tony Bentley – representing Northern Rail, who will be the overall project manager;

Helen Plummer - Project Manager, SYPTE.

Members noted that the Government Department of Transport is the main funding provider and overall project sponsor. The project will attract in excess of £60 millions of public funding, the vast majority being provided by the Department of Transport. Norman Baker MP, Minister for Transport, has a keen interest in ensuring that the Tram-Train project succeeds in South Yorkshire and, eventually, elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

The presentation referred to the following salient issues:-

(a) Project Inception

: the project is a strategic objective of the South Yorkshire Integrated Transport Authority; a previous intention to extend the Supertram network into the Rotherham Borough area had not received Government funding;

: the 2009 trial of Tram-Train technology (eg: in Alicante in Spain; Karlsruhe in Germany) and the desire to do the same in the United Kingdom;

: from 2010 to 2012, the project's business case had been prepared, both for South Yorkshire and other locations in the United Kingdom;

May 2012 – Ministerial approval for the project to proceed;

April 2013 – contractual close.

(b) Service and Vehicles

: an explanation was provided of the technical differences between heavy goods and freight rail rolling stock and passenger trains, especially the different gauges of track used by the different types of rolling stock;

: the principal purpose of the project is to deliver a new passenger transport service; the project has begun as a pilot to test the new technology;

: the project will utilise the existing rail and Supertram infrastructure and new electric railway technology, providing a route via the refurbished Rotherham Central Rail Station;

: the scheme provides a connection directly between the conurbations of Sheffield and Rotherham;

: the pilot allows the railway and transport industry to learn about further uses of the Tram-Train concept; untried technology and service delivery will be tested to ensure their fitness for purpose and sustainability;

: project benefits include connections of the City and town centres (via an enlarged, redeveloped Tram-Train halt at Meadowhall South); encouraging the model shift from private car to public transport; providing improved access to places of education, health, employment and leisure; opportunities to expand the network (eg: stops near to the Magna Centre and to Rotherham United's New York sports Stadium; possible future extension of the network to Swinton, Consibrough and Doncaster;

: the project may create as many as 30 to 35 new jobs (principally drivers and conductors on the Tram-Trains), as well as other jobs specifically during the construction phase;

: the scheme involves direct capital investment in South Yorkshire;

: the scheme provides positive publicity for Rotherham, Sheffield and South Yorkshire;

: Members viewed an artist's impression of the Tram-Train vehicle (quite similar to an existing Supertram vehicle); the vehicles will be manufactured by the Spanish Company 'Vossloh'; each vehicle has three carriages and will accommodate as many as 238 passengers, including seating for 96 passengers; at the end of each carriage there will be space for buggies/pushchairs and wheelchairs; the vehicles will have a 'low floor' area larger than the 'low floor' areas of the existing Supertram; included in each vehicle will be a closed circuit television system (both internal and external) and a passenger-counting system;

: vehicles have a maximum speed of 85 kilometres per hour (slightly more than 50 miles per hour); vehicles will utilise the existing 750 volt DC system as used on the Supertram network; however, the construction phase will 'future-proof' the new Tram-Trains which will be capable of operating on the modern 25,000 volt AC system;

: the Tram-Train passenger service is expected to begin operating during the Autumn 2015; the contract will specify three Tram-Trains per hour (ie: service every 20 minutes), between 0700 hours and 1900 hours (nb: these hours may eventually be extended);

: target journey times are 25 minutes from Parkgate to the Cathedral within the Sheffield City Centre and also 15 minutes from the Rotherham town centre to Sheffield Arena stadium;

: the new passenger transport service will complement existing services operating from the Rotherham Central railway station and is not intended to replace any existing services;

(c) Construction Works

: the preparatory work for the project includes plans for the connection of Supertram track and the Network Rail track network;

: the Tram-Trains will utilise the Supertram line from the Sheffield City Centre to Meadowhall and then transfer to the rail line to access Rotherham town centre and Parkgate;

: Network Rail will undertake most of the construction work (design works will soon be completed) and construction work will begin on site during 2014;

: construction works near to the Meadowhall South tram stop includes the provision of 400 metres of new track and the building a new junction on the track; there will be two new platforms constructed at this enlarged tram-train stop;

: the Electrification of the line used by the Tram-Train will extend eleven kilometres to Parkgate, with an additional power supply terminal to be constructed at Parkgate;

: within the Rotherham Central station, the Tram-Trains require a platform height different to that currently provided for trains; to achieve this objective, new platform extensions will be constructed at the Sheffield end of the existing station platforms; passengers will continue to use the existing access to this railway station;

: passenger safety and the provision of travel information to passengers are paramount and are being designed into all stations and new stops;

: a significant civil engineering challenge has occurred with the Bridge Street/College Road bridge immediately adjacent to the entrance to the Rotherham Central rail station; this bridge crosses the railway line at a height too low to accommodate the electrical wiring needed for the new tram-Trains; various solutions have been assessed, including the lowering of the railway line; however, this solution was rejected because of the flooding history of this area of Rotherham; the long term intention is to provide an Electrified route (25,000 volts AC) between Sheffield, Rotherham and Parkgate; therefore, the preferred solution is to raise the height of the highway bridge by constructing a new bridge deck so as to enable the electrical wiring for the Tram-Train to pass beneath the bridge; it is acknowledged that this construction work will cause significant disruption, both to the highway network and to passengers using the Rotherham Central rail station;

: the majority of Tram-Train's electrification system is capable of being installed during the night, which will minimise any disruption to travellers;

: construction works involving the bridge at Parkgate may require road closures at weekends;

: there will be a public consultation exercise in order to provide information about construction works and road, rail and travel disruption;

: Parkgate is the current termination point for the new Tram-Train system; 300 metres of track sidings and a Tram-Train turn-back facility will be constructed; in addition, this area will accommodate a terminus building on the shopping centre side of the track (providing passengers with easy access to the main walking route to the shopping centre);

: this terminus will be an important aspect of any future extension of the Tram-Train system to other areas, such as Doncaster.

(d) Questions from Elected Members

: Members expressed concerns about the condition of some of the rolling stock vehicles in South Yorkshire; it was acknowledged that investment in new and replacement rolling stock was essential;

: it was noted that the Tram-Train would not provide a direct service to the new Waverley development between Rotherham and Sheffield;

: the pilot project did not include any proposals for a 'Park-and-Ride' facility to be provided at Parkgate;

: the existing traffic congestion on roads in the Parkgate area was acknowledged;

: members requested clarification of the job creation benefits of the project; it was acknowledged that many of the jobs would be for the temporary period of the construction works; it was anticipated that one of the benefits of the new transport system would be to assist in attracting companies to invest in this area of the Rotherham Borough;

: half of the £60 millions funding would be utilised to purchase seven new vehicles (three compatible with the existing system and four of the new Tram-Train vehicles); £20 millions will be used for construction works on the track and station network and the remainder will be used to fund the operation for the pilot period;

: Members discussed the possibility of the Tram-Train system eventually being extended to the wider Dearne Valley area; it was noted that any further extension would depend upon the assessment of this initial pilot project and its technology and service patterns, as well as Government approval and funding being made available in the future; reference was made to the tram system operating in Manchester on previously de-commissioned railway lines;

: there were no proposals to allow bicycles to be carried on the Tram-Trains, nor on the existing Supertram network and no immediate trials were proposed; it was considered that bicycles occupied too much space and restricted passenger mobility inside the vehicles;

: it was noted that Local Transport 'pinch-point' funding had been obtained to replace and renew some of the existing Supertram tracks, especially the tracks embedded within the public highway which were prone to a faster rate of deterioration than the more traditional railway line; there would be a phased programme of repair and renewal of the Supertram tracks during the period to 2024;

: Members asked to receive information on a regular basis about the progress of the development of the Tram-Train project.

The Chairman thanked the officers for their interesting and informative presentation.