

Time for trams: the smart solution for sustainable cities

Tram networks once crisscrossed the country, connecting communities and transforming cities. Although largely dismantled in the middle of the 20th century, trams are now making a comeback, with modern electric trams offering an eco-friendly, accessible and efficient transport solution.

Campaign for Better Transport is working with Create Streets and others to support more efficient and cost-effective tram and light rail systems in more communities.



Trams in their heyday

Once a staple of British towns and cities, steam-powered trams were introduced in the late 1800s, followed by electric trams in the early 1900s. By the 1920s, over 100 UK towns had active tram systems with networks covering hundreds of miles and serving millions of people.¹

By the late 1920s, cheaper trolleybuses were starting to replace trams and the growth in private car ownership meant more and more road space was being devoted to cars. A 1931 review of the London tram network recommended it be dismantled and by 1952 the capital's trams were no more. Just a decade later, Blackpool had the last remaining tram network in the UK.



A single lane of a city
street could carry
1,500
people per hour in cars,



8,000
people in buses,

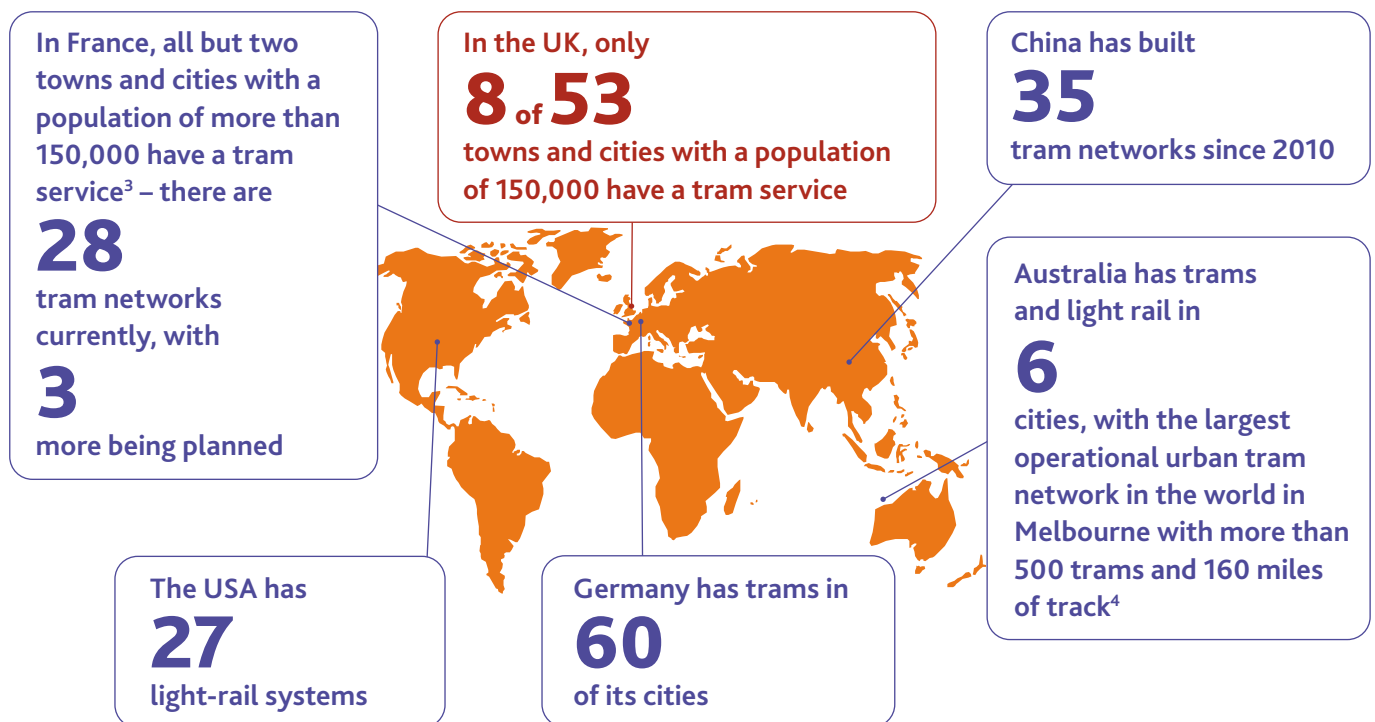


or up to
22,000
people if it was used
as a tramway

A tram renaissance

Outside of London, our cities' productivity is stifled by lack of transport choice, and where cars were once seen as the future, local transport authorities are now grappling with the effects of air pollution and congestion caused by too many cars on our roads. In many places, trams are seen as the solution.

The UK is currently home to eight tram systems which carried 231.2 million passenger journeys last year.² But we are still well behind other European countries.



Why trams work in towns and cities

Capacity: A single lane of a city street could carry up to 22,000 people per hour if it was used as a tramway.



Punctual: Trams usually run on dedicated tracks, meaning they bypass road congestion, keeping timetables reliable and predictable.

Safety: Trams help set lower speeds in cities, helping to make travel safer for pedestrians and cyclists, as well as motorists, and creating safer urban environments that encourage active travel.



Zero-emission: Modern trams are all electric, helping to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Cost effective: Tram networks are cheaper and easier to install than rail lines, with lower-cost innovations coming on board.



Accessible: All UK tram networks feature full level-boarding making them accessible to wheelchair users and people with pushchairs or luggage.

Permanence: Tramways become a permanent part of the physical infrastructure of a city region, so are more difficult to remove than bus services.



Economic benefits: Trams connect people and businesses, helping economic growth and local regeneration.

Popular: In urban areas, trams hold wide appeal compared to other public transport modes, with people showing greater willingness to switch from car to tram than to other options such as bus or bicycle.⁵

Lessons from abroad

There are many lessons that UK cities can learn from peers across Europe in the planning, design and delivery of trams networks.

Campaign for Better Transport joined Create Streets and Freewheeling to examine how modern tram systems are helping French cities build new homes while creating attractive, walkable neighbourhoods.

Based on a study visit to three tram-based developments, the *Towns and Trams* report offers some valuable lessons.



Transport and housing should be planned together with tram lines integrated into new development plans from the start.



Street designs should prioritise people and community uses with gentle density buildings and minimal surface parking.



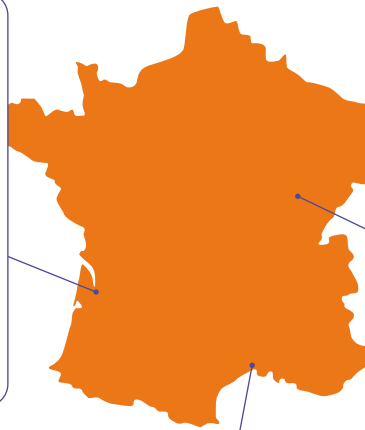
This requires stronger local powers over land, roads and design, alongside devolved, predictable transport funding.

You can read the report on our website.⁶

Trams in France

Bordeaux

Bordeaux is France's ninth largest city with a population of 240,000. The Bordeaux Metropole adopted its tram plan in 1997. The first line of the modern tramway opened in December 2003 and by 2005, the initial phase was complete – three lines crossing the city centre. The system now has four lines with a total length of 77.5km, serving 133 stops.



Montpellier

Montpellier, a city of around 487,000 on France's Mediterranean coast, reopened its first tramline in 2000 (51 years after closing its original network) and has since expanded to four lines, giving the tram priority at junctions and an exclusive right of way that makes it the fastest way to travel across the city.

Dijon

With a population of around 165,000 and population density of 3,900 per km², Dijon ranks as the 18th biggest city in France. The modern Dijon tram network opened in 2012 after a lengthy process of restructuring their transport system which began in the 1970s. The tram system is well linked with buses in Dijon – a reconfigured bus service upon the introduction of the modern tramway connects neighbourhoods and park and ride facilities to the tram and city, with free electric shuttle buses feeding the tram in the city centre.

You can find more details on how these French cities can provide lessons for their UK counterparts on our website.⁷

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_town_tramway_systems_in_the_United_Kingdom
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/light-rail-and-tram-statistics-england-year-ending-march-2025>
3. <https://bettertransport.org.uk/research/towns-and-trams-learning-from-the-french>

4. https://www.createstreets.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Tram_Report_Digital.pdf
5. <https://www.createstreets.com/projects/10562/>
6. <https://bettertransport.org.uk/research/towns-and-trams-learning-from-the-french>
7. <https://bettertransport.org.uk/resources/case-studies>

Where next for trams?

Reliable, frequent, accessible and zero-emission, trams have the potential to transform the UK's transport network and create safer, cleaner urban environments with thriving local economies.

At Campaign for Better Transport, we have established a partnership with Create Streets to support the delivery of more tram and light rail schemes around the country to help deliver a sustainable transport network for everyone.

So far, the Time for Trams campaign has:

- Created the advisory Tram Network of experts in tram delivery
- Established the annual Time for Trams conference in partnership with Landor Links
- Actively worked with local leaders across the country to help make the case for and ultimately deliver tram networks
- Conducted joint research, including the *Towns and Trams* report
- Disseminated best practice through case studies and blogs.

We have seen some welcome recent developments. The 2025 Spending Review committed £15.6 billion in transport settlements to transform mass transit networks across England's major city regions.

The Government has established a Mass Transit Taskforce to identify and tackle the major barriers that slow down the planning, funding and delivery of urban mass transit networks. There is also a commitment to shorten planning processes.

We are closely involved in the work of the Mass Transit Taskforce. We plan to continue supporting the sector by developing a Tram Delivery Handbook for local authorities and their partners to accelerate scalable delivery of tram and light rail systems across the UK.

Our work aims to:

1. Raise awareness of the potential role for trams in an integrated transport landscape, showcasing success stories
2. Identify legislative barriers to the development of tram networks (such as high building costs) and potential changes which will help accelerate project development
3. Advocate for increased powers for local authorities, to enable projects to be shaped in ways which respond to local needs and provide targeted solutions
4. Help increase capabilities for local authorities to deliver tram projects by identifying gaps in capacity and advocate for improved resource allocation.



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Campaign for Better Transport is the national charity working across England and Wales to make transport better, greener and fairer. For more information about our work visit www.bettertransport.org.uk

Campaign for
Better Transport 

Create Streets is a design practice, town-builder and think tank. It leads research, master-planning, design coding and community co-design to help develop and steward beautiful and popular 'gentle density' places which residents and neighbours can love for generations. For people, prosperity and planet.

