

# GOING THROUGH A PHASE

**The Government's go-ahead for extensions to Manchester's Metrolink remains conditional on it staying on budget. But Manchester transport officials are confident that having got the go-ahead for Phase 3a extensions, approval for Phase 3b will follow. Paul Coleman reports**

This summer's go-ahead for Phase 3a of Manchester Metrolink's expansion gives the impression that Douglas Alexander's reign as transport secretary might herald a brighter dawn for light rail projects. But project promoters and local transport planners insist such optimism should be guarded, as the DfT still insists that cost overruns will not be tolerated.

Alexander's announcement means Manchester Metrolink's network could double its size, bringing thousands of commuters within reach of the city centre. The DfT's agreement with the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities and Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority means nearly £640m could be invested in Metrolink in the next few years. 'This is fantastic news for Greater Manchester,' says councillor Roger Jones, chair of the GMPTA.

'We must now forge ahead to secure the rest of Phase 3 and I'm confident we will get further funding next year from the Government's Transport Innovation Fund.' The agreement means that £538m will be spent on Metrolink's Phase 3a extensions and on some 30 new trams. Phase 3a includes a 13.7-mile extension to Rochdale station, to replace the current Manchester-Oldham-Rochdale railway line.

Estate agents are already talking up the 'Metrolink effect' on local house prices. 'People in Rochdale also want Metrolink to come into the town centre and that's what they'd get with our planned bid for Phase 3b,' says a spokesman for the Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive. The New East Manchester branch of Phase 3a is a four-mile extension to Droylsden, one of Manchester's Tameside suburbs. Using the line to Ashton-under-Lyne, this wing takes in Manchester City



Artist's impression of how new stops Edge Lane and Firwood will look when work is complete.



football club's home at the City of Manchester Stadium and the Velodrome, both used in the 2002 Commonwealth Games. The third arm of 3a involves the replacement of a section of disused railway line between Trafford Bar and St Werburgh's Road, which will facilitate a 1.8-mile link between the heart of Manchester and its densely-populated southern suburbs of Chorlton-cum-Hardy and Whalley Range. Phase 3b, if implemented, would see this branch go to Manchester Airport. The DfT has stated clearly that Phase 3a's full approval still hinges on the agreed current costs and risks being maintained during the procurement process.

These three extensions come on top of £102 million agreed last year for capacity enhancements and refurbishments of the existing network. This includes eight new trams that will enter service in 2009. Coupled with Phase 3a, this would provide Metrolink with a

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total of 70 trams. The upgrade to the existing network also includes replacing 50-year-old track sections on the Bury and Altrincham lines, to give passengers a smoother ride. Amec, Balfour Beatty, Carillion, First Engineering and Mowlem have bid for the contract. Work will begin next summer.

Currently, Metrolink copes with 20m passenger journeys per year. Ten years after Phase 3a is completed, GMPTA believes 33 million journeys will be made on Metrolink every year. As well as extending Metrolink into these new commuter markets, 3a aims to cut

peak overcrowding and improve punctuality and tram reliability. Phase 3b would extend Metrolink into Oldham and Rochdale town centre, east to Ashton-under-Lyne and south to East Didsbury and Manchester Airport. The GMPTA spokesman admits that the Government is keen that Manchester considers the possibility of raising funds for Phase 3b through a London-style congestion charge.

Work would begin on both Phase 3a and 3b in 2008. 'If funding is agreed for Phase 3b, the idea would be to have just one contractor to carry on and complete the lines,' explains the GMPTA spokesman. In July 2004, Alistair Darling, then transport secretary, refused to approve the schemes because of rising light rail project costs not only in Manchester, but also in Leeds and south Hampshire. He contended that light rail in the UK was costing far more than in Europe.

Anger in Greater Manchester led to a vigorous get 'back on track' campaign. Some MPs blamed the banks, which underwrite tram schemes, for getting cold feet. Darling then appeared to u-turn over Metrolink, when he announced in December 2004 that the original £520m for the three extensions was still on the table.

In July 1987, the government had announced that Metrolink's proposals must involve private sector capital, entailing a significant transfer of risk from the public sector. That transfer hasn't taken place. But Alexander seems happy. 'We have been working closely with Manchester PTE and the local authorities to deliver a tram that is value for passengers and the taxpayer,' says the new transport secretary, giving rise to hope that the new phase of extensions may be approved.