

Private sector reliance hampers light rail plans

By Marino Donati

Light rail projects in Britain are poorly integrated with city development and hampered by an overemphasis on private sector funding, according to research published last week.

A report comparing light rail in England, France and Sweden has found that English systems often resemble suburban railways rather than urban tramways, and that people without local knowledge find it difficult to use public transport in England.

According to the report, produced by the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute, private sector negotiations have pushed up project times for English schemes. Although building a light rail line is cheaper than building a metro



Off the rails: lack of public investment stymies light rail plans

line, it is still seen by many planners and politicians as too expensive, the report adds.

"The objectives of English light rail schemes have been vague," said Tim Pharoah, co-author of the report. "Government insistence on private sector funding and narrow cost-benefit criteria

for public contributions have made progress slow and difficult", he added.

The report contains case studies of light rail systems in the three countries, including schemes in Manchester, Sheffield, the West Midlands and Croydon.

It concludes that English public transport beyond the city boundary tends to be less satisfactory, and may suffer from resources being focused on "showcase" light rail projects within the city itself.

The greater independence of French city authorities and reliance on public rather than private funding are cited as the reason for the differences between countries. There has also been greater political commitment to light rail in France than in England, the report adds.

Making Tracks – Light Rail in England and France is available from the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute (tel) 0046 13 20 40 00 or can be viewed via www.planning.haynet.com