

ON TARGET

Quite the conference

Marksman reflects on January's CPT conference and concludes it was the best for some time



→ BY MARKSMAN

The CPT conference is fast becoming the main focus for the bus and coach industry, and especially apt as it is held in January in preparation for the new year ahead.

Over the years, I have attended many such conferences, both regional and national. The pandemic was a hiatus, but an online format ensured a continuation of the communication that is so important. The 2023 Conference, held in Birmingham, was well-received, but this year's London conference topped them all.

The chosen venue at the Park Plaza, London Riverbank, was an inspired choice; it just worked. Of course, staying in London isn't cheap, but it is

accessible, and the timing of the conference, which was free of charge, was doable in a day for most. A very welcome working breakfast and lunch was a bonus.

I can sum up the conference in one word; business. That might sound strange, but all too often our industry conferences don't focus on the bigger picture, rather the parochial issues which should be dealt with in other ways.

The conference kicked off with an insight into what a general election will mean for public transport. Sharing their views were three talented women: Catherine De Marco, First Bus; Christine Quigley, Grayling; and Sonia Khan, Cicero. They drilled down into what the industry can expect and how we can influence those who might be in power. Some interesting questions were posed by the audience too.

The next speaker, for me, was the highlight. David Leeder, long known as a senior figure in our industry, has turned his talents to investment, focussing on transport. David firstly gave a fascinating overview of the nation's finances and why what we see is not always the full picture. He followed that up with his insight into the bus industry's prospects and in particular why the previously successful London bus isn't working as it should.

It was worth going to the conference just for this presentation. Two more talented women followed: Jane Cole, MD of Blackpool Transport, and Alex Jensen, CEO of National Express grouping, Mobico. Alex explained her vision for National Express and our wider industry, with valuable insight from someone who has come from another sector with blue sky thinking. Just how much will be achievable we wait to see, but it is good to hear of such vision.

I think you know I am sceptical about devolution, not least when it comes to buses, but the panel for Changing Perceptions of Public Transport from Scotland and Wales put up a good case. This was followed by a very short address from Guy Opperman MP for the government, but only via video recording. Not sure why he couldn't get himself along personally, or better still the Secretary of State. Is it because CPT have given up with the present administration? I can understand that, but it would be disappointing nonetheless. After lunch, the Labour Party had its say, but it was disappointing that Simon Lightwood MP spent much of his slot slagging off the government. He did mention coaches a few times, although it seemed to me to be contrived, as if he needed to

include a mention rather than with any great conviction.

The afternoon continued with discussion about partnership, with a wide-ranging panel from the public and private sector. It explored the changes we all face, with input from bus, coach and supplier. It was a well-chosen panel. The conference wrapped up with CPT's Alison Edwards and Go-Ahead's Martin Dean announcing the CPT's priorities for the next UK government. Alison and Martin dissected the message in a practical way and were honest about what is achievable; a refreshing change from certain politicians...

What a great conference. There were few coach operators there so I assume that's why the agenda was skewed to bus. I am sure this reflects the reality; that coach operators rarely attend such events, except for the more switched-on ones.

I did notice quite a few name badges still to be picked up and I suspect a lot of those who said they would attend did not turn up. A bit naughty, given the hard work that obviously had gone into the event by the CPT team. Those who did not attend missed something very special, so it was their loss. ■

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