Coventry City Council

Briefing note

To: Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3)

Date: 4 February 2026

Subject: Very Light Rail

1 Purpose of the Note

1.1 The purpose of this note is to provide an update on the current status of the Coventry Very Light Rail (CVLR) programme, including an update on the following aspects:

- Project Timeline;
- Stakeholder Engagement; and
- Statutory Occupier Status.

2 Recommendations

2.1 The Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) are recommended to:

1) Consider the information contained within this note and the Cabinet Report (Appendix A)

2) Provide comments and any further recommendations.

3 Information and Background

3.1 CVLR is a key component of the Very Light Rail Regional Programme (VLRRP) funded by the City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS), which is the primary funding source for the West Midlands Combined Authority's transport capital programme for 2022-27. The other elements of the VLRRP are the Very Light Rail National Innovation Centre (VLRNIC) in Dudley that provides test facilities for the vehicle and is operated by Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, and the Mass Transit Corridor Studies led by Transport for West Midlands which aim to identify potential mass transit routes on key corridors within the West Midlands, including Coventry City Centre to the Investment Zone and to Ansty Park.

3.2 CVLR is on target to deliver a new form of affordable rail-based mass transit that can be delivered in at least half the time and at least half the cost of conventional light rail in an urban environment. The project comprises of a lightweight battery-operated vehicle and a shallow track form that requires a dig depth of just 30cm. It

can be installed on top of most utilities' equipment, saving time and cost of delivery compared to traditional light rail.

3.3 The CVLR demonstration in Coventry city centre, known as the On Road Test (ORT), in Spring / Summer 2025 was a major success as our ground-breaking track was installed in just over eight weeks and proved that we are on target to achieve our target installation cost of circa £10m/km.

3.4 The next stage of the CVLR programme is to construct 800m of twin track for a City Centre Demonstrator (CCD) that will operate in a live traffic environment from Coventry Railway Station to Coventry University Technology Park. Appendix 1of the Cabinet Report illustrates the route.

3.5 The delegations required to enter into contracts and deliver CCD were approved at Cabinet on 16th December 2025 and at Full Council on the 13th January 2026. The full report and its appendices are available in Appendix A. The key information from the Cabinet and Council reports is tabled below.

3.6 This demonstration phase builds on everything learned during 2025 and will help to lay the foundations for the first commercial route by:

1. Operating the CVLR vehicle with live traffic – including the installation of a vehicle control system integrated with the city's traffic signal control system.
2. Providing rides for the public and stakeholders to demonstrate how the vehicle has evolved since the On Road Test (ORT) in June 2025 and to take feedback on the system.
3. Demonstrating at scale, using the learnings from the ORT, the speed of installation and affordability of the CVLR track.
4. Expediting the design and delivery process.
5. Utilising learning to inform the business case and design of a first commercial route and, more widely, to continue to stimulate national and global commercial interest.

3.7 As an added benefit to the above, in October 2027 the Intelligent Transport Systems World Congress (ITSWC) is being staged at the NEC in Birmingham. This provides an excellent opportunity to showcase, to a global audience, the benefits of CVLR, using it to carry delegates from the railway station to the National Transport Design Centre (on the Technology Park) to showcase Coventry's ground-breaking transport innovations.

3.8 As with any new and innovative project, there are associated risks. The programme risk register is regularly monitored and updated with oversight from Finance, Legal and Procurement.

3.9 To mitigate the risks, and to ensure the system operates safely, CCC and TfWM are working closely with an Independent Review Panel (IRP) of industry experts, and the Office of Road and Rail (ORR) through an appointed Independent Competent Person (ICP). The IRP have assessed all technical evidence, the case for safety, project costs and risk, and have recommended that the programme can proceed to CCD.

3.10 Vehicle performance trials received positive user feedback following the On Road Test in Spring 2025. In summary the surveys provided evidence that the ORT was well-received by the public that trialled the system, with 85% of people surveyed agreeing they would like to use CVLR regularly. A short video of the ORT can be found here: https://www.coventry.gov.uk/coventry-light-rail.

3.11 With respect to the track, evidence from test track installed at the VLRNIC in Dudley, at the Whitley Depot, and from the ORT indicates that the slab that is used for the track is outperforming expectations and is capable of carrying conventional trams as well as the lighter CVLR vehicles. This opens new markets and commercial opportunities as the CVLR track could potentially be used on conventional tram systems such as Midlands Metro and emerging systems in South and West Yorkshire. By using CVLR track on on-road sections of their systems, significant financial savings can be made on scheme costs by avoiding the need to move all utilities from the road. Further research and development activity is underway to refine the universal slab track for the conventional tram market, and conversations are advancing with the transport bodies responsible for developing those schemes. In parallel, CCC are progressing an ultra-thin slab investigation to allow for potential limited road depth constraints.

3.12 The funding for the final stage on the current CVLR programme was approved for release from the current City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) CVLR allocation at DfT's Roads Investment Committee on the 26th January 2026. Whilst the CRSTS programme is managed by the WMCA, DfT has specifically retained final approval of the CVLR programme due to its R&D nature.

3.13 The High-level timeline for delivery of the next phase is as follows:

- Feb 26 – Construction contract and programme agreed.
- Feb 26 - New vehicle assembly contract and programme agreed.
- March 26 – Utility works begin
- April 26 – Procurement of construction/ vehicle components
- June 26 – Detailed CCD route design complete
- Aug 26 – Delivery of rail to site
- March 27 – New vehicle build complete
- June 27 – Start of vehicle testing and commissioning (T&C)
- Oct 27 – T&C complete and CCD live traffic operation to residents, key stakeholders and delegates from ITSWC.

3.14 Engagement with a local Resident Liaison Group was held at the Council House 10 July 2025 and 15 January 2026 with delegations from the Council and Stoney Road Area Residents (STAR) to review CVLR to date and discuss the CCD. Several questions regarding the reasons for the route and the construction programme were asked and responses provided from the Director of Innovation.

3.15 A letter and leaflet, explaining the City Centre Demonstrator plans, were delivered to all nearby residents and businesses during week commencing 28 July 2025 and a further communication was issued in November inviting residents and businesses on Park Road to book a drop-in session with Council Officers.

3.16 During the drop-ins the businesses and residents that attended provided information about their access requirements and issues. The feedback gathered will be taken into consideration as we design and install the 800m of track. Further engagement on CCD construction will take place over the coming months when the design has matured and the construction programme options are available.

3.17 The top five CVLR risks and mitigations are summarised below;

Risk	Mitigation
Technical issues arise with the vehicle, track or infrastructure systems	All aspects of vehicle, track and infrastructure systems are scrutinised and documented at each phase with input from external companies with expertise in track and rolling stock, as well as the IRP (1.15). This process feeds to an appointed Independent Competent Person who signs off each element of the process, implementing the safety verification scheme for the project and ensuring that relevant industry standards are met.
Delays to vehicle build programme for live traffic operation	The new vehicle requires a live traffic compliant crash structure and control system to enable operation in a live road. The team are working with industry experts to achieve Case for Safety sign off ahead of operation in Autumn 2027. A plan B is in place for showcasing CVLR in the event the new vehicle is not ready for operation by October 2027.
Statutory Occupiers (Utility companies) may not consent to leaving assets in existing positions on the route.	Considerable consultation and collaboration have been undertaken and will continue between CCC and the Statutory Occupiers following the On-Road Test (ORT). Methods of access to assets have been trialled with positive results.
CCC may be liable for personal injury or Third-Party property damage	All road schemes undergo a Stage 1 and 2 Road Safety Audit (RSA) and it will be the same for CVLR. A Stage 3 RSA will be completed prior to operation. Any RSA recommendations made will be assessed, considered and responded to.
Delays to the procurement of an operator	CCC is currently engaging with the market to ensure an operator is procured ahead of operation in Autumn 2027

3.18 Continued collaboration with Statutory Occupiers remains a priority. Further dialogue with Statutory Occupiers will take place over the coming weeks and procedures for access will be agreed during the delivery of the CCD.

3.19 The team continue to promote the benefits of CVLR and the outputs/ lessons learnt from the delivery programme with the wider industry. There are several organisations, both in the UK and overseas, that have expressed interest in deploying either the CVLR system, or the advanced Universal Track, in the future. Conversations with the following combined authorities about opportunities for

Universal Track deployment have been initiated and are well underway; West of England, South and West Yorkshire, as well as Transport Infrastructure Ireland.

4 Health Inequalities Impact

4.1 An Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken and will continue to be reviewed. The EIA is Appendix 2 of the Cabinet Report

Appendix A: Very Light Rail Cabinet Report 16 December 2025
Appendix 1: City Centre Demonstrator (CCD) Route
Appendix 2: Equalities Impact Assessment

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