

BCIMO plays host to Minister of State for Rail and HS2

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Huw Merriman, Minister of State for Rail and HS2, has visited the [Black Country Innovative Manufacturing Organisation \(BCIMO\)](#) to learn more about the future of light rail transport.

Huw Merriman was joined by Dudley North MP Marco Longhi, Dudley Council Leader Patrick Harley, Coventry City Council's Director of Transport and Highways Colin Knight and BCIMO's Chief Executive Officer Neil Fulton. The group enjoyed a tour of the Very Light Rail National Innovation Centre (VLRNIC) and a ride on the pioneering [Coventry Very Light Rail \(CVLR\)](#) vehicle, which is being tested at the centre's Rail Development and Test Site.

The centre, which is based next to the new Wednesbury To Brierley Hill Metro Extension at Castle Hill in Dudley, West Midlands, has been home to the CVLR project since its arrival on-site in 2022.

Since then a programme of testing activity has been undertaken, including the installation of the project's novel track form in October 2023. This has enabled integrated system testing to take place, to prove its

suitability for the needs of Coventry and other small cities/large towns as the project is developed.

After visiting the Workshop facility where the vehicle is housed, the minister was given the opportunity to take a journey on the CVLR vehicle, travelling around the facility's unique 15m radius Rail Test Loop before travelling along the 2.2km Rail Test Track and through the 870m Tunnel, which is used to test vehicle performance and environmental monitoring.

The ride provided an ideal opportunity to experience the vehicle, which will have a capacity of around 56 people when fully operational, in action, particularly as the train hit speeds up of up to 40 kilometres per hour (24.8 miles per hour) as it went through the tunnel.

The minister also had an opportunity to hear about the wider facilities on offer at the VLRNIC, including its Engineering Laboratories & Equipment, Serviced Offices & Meeting Rooms and Meeting & Event Spaces.

The Express & Star newspaper, which covers the latest headlines, stories and events from Wolverhampton, West Bromwich, Walsall and other areas of the West Midlands, attended the event and provided BCIMO with the quotes and photos included in this article.

Discussing the visit, Huw Merriman said: "It's great to be here and I think it's pretty unique and innovative technology that's being deployed here and, really, it looks to be the future.

"We want to see more transit systems in place and very light rail systems that can be installed in many places.

"I just want to say a big thanks to the entire team for show me what is a fantastic product and what good is being done here."

Marco Longhi said: "It's great that Huw has come to Dudley to visit what we're doing with the Very Light Rail scheme, as well as the fact that he is seeing for himself that we've got a unique track in the United Kingdom for testing not just light rail, but all sorts of other rail concepts.

"It was also good for him to visit the BCIMO building where we can do all sorts of maintenance, refurbishment and test new technologies within the building itself.

"I'm delighted that he was here today alongside council leader Patrick Harley, who has been massively supportive for the scheme and through his work with the Combined Authority."

Councillor Harley said: "It's been great to be here and see the latest endeavours of our hard work over many years and this is a game changer for public transport as it means we can roll over trams across cities and towns not just in this country, but also across Europe and the world.

"That's at a third less cost than the traditional trams and metro, so that's good for this region."

Neil Fulton said: "Having the minister come to see us here at BCIMO is really important for him to see the work that's been done in Dudley and to see the relationship that we've built with organisations across the

West Midlands.

“This facility here to develop those innovations in the rail industry, with some of those in light rail and some of them that we can apply right across heavy rail and, also, we’ve got this amazing exhibition and events suite that we can offer to organisations across the West Midlands.

“It’s got the ministerial stamp of approval and it needs to as these are big investments and we need to make sure that we’ve got ministers on board to understand the opportunities that an organisation like this can create, so it’s important that we get these important visitors here.”

To learn more about the VLRNIC, visit the [BCIMO website](#).