

Briefing

March 2002



**Friends of
the Earth**
Northern Ireland

Regional Transportation Strategy Reverse Transport Spending

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Introduction

The Department for Regional Development is currently drawing up its ten year transport strategy for Northern Ireland. Friends of the Earth's view is that the Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy will not adequately tackle the problem of transport poverty, arrest the alarming growth in traffic volumes or benefit the regional economy. In this briefing we suggest that the strategy can only be successful if a far greater proportion of resources is allocated to public transport.

What should the strategy deliver?

A truly sustainable Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) would deliver a range of benefits, in particular it would:

- alleviate the 'transport poverty' experienced by those who neither have a car nor an adequate public transport service;
- reduce congestion;
- benefit the economy;
- provide motorists with an attractive alternative to the private car;
- stabilise and then reduce traffic volumes.

Transport poverty

Northern Ireland is a region with unusually low levels of car ownership. 30% of households here do not have a car.¹ In Belfast the figure is 54% and rises to 89% in the city's poorest wards.²

Even among families with a car, not every member enjoys equal access to it. This applies particularly to women: only 59% of women have full driving licences compared with 82% of men.³

Transport 2000 estimate that in local government districts outside the Belfast conurbation and Derry/Londonderry, at least 40% of households experience 'transport poverty' in that they either do not have a car or experience financial hardship in order to run one.⁴ Public transport provision in rural areas is infrequent where it exists at all, and rural dwellers without a car experience difficulty accessing health, leisure and commercial services, as well as employment opportunities. Transport policy has an important role to play in tackling social exclusion.

To tackle the menace of rural transport poverty, an ambitious target should be set for the proportion of rural households within easy walking distance (perhaps ten minutes) of an hourly or more frequent bus service. However the Proposed RTS sets no such target and devotes only 18.8% of the rural transport spend to buses.

The economy

The argument that roads spending benefits the economy was dismissed by the government-appointed Standing Advisory Committee on Trunk Road Assessment (SACTRA) which pointed to evidence that major roads projects can have the effect of 'sucking' economic development from a region or locality

¹ DOE *Transport Statistics 1998-9*, citing *1998-9 Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey*.

² *1991 Northern Ireland Census*.

³ *National Travel Survey: 1997-9 Update*.

⁴ Transport 2000's response to Developing a Regional Transportation Strategy submitted in 2001.

as firms find it increasingly possible to service the region in question from a base at some distance.⁵

⁵ SACTRA, 1999, *Transport and the Economy*.

Not only are the economic benefits of roads spending overstated, the economic benefits of public transport investment are overlooked. Evidence from Los Angeles has shown that 85 cents of every dollar spent on petrol immediately leaves the regional economy while, of every dollar spent on a public transport fare, 80 cents goes in transport workers' wages which goes on to generate \$3.80 of goods and services in the region.⁶

Investment in public transport and the resultant 'modal shift' from the private car to buses and trains would allow more of the money spent on transport here to circulate in the regional economy. And manufacturing jobs, for example at Wright's of Ballymena, would be secured and created by orders for new buses.

Congestion

Congested roads and 'bottlenecks' are normally blamed on insufficient road capacity but the contribution made by inadequate public transport provision tends to be ignored.

Building new road space is not a sustainable solution to the problem of congestion. In fact, SACTRA has warned that, far from alleviating congestion, the construction of new road space actually generates more traffic.⁷ New road space leads people to make journeys they would not previously have made, a phenomenon described as 'induced traffic'.

In 1999 the Scottish Executive concluded that '...a predict and provide approach in which road capacity is increased to match forecast traffic growth is environmentally unsustainable, unaffordable and self-defeating.'⁸

A sustainable RTS would deliver a transport system in which the volume of traffic was stable or falling. However the Proposed RTS sets out neither to stabilise nor reduce traffic volumes. In fact it indicates that we can expect traffic to continue growing, and suggests a rate of 2% each year over the ten year period of the strategy.

Time to put public transport first

For many years, Northern Ireland's public transport system has been starved of funding. In 1998/9 for example, just 16% of the total transport spend was on public transport. This compares with Great Britain where, during the same period, an estimated 65% of transport monies were allocated to public transport.⁹

The under-investment in public transport relative to spending on roads is evident when Northern Ireland's road and rail networks are compared with those in Great Britain. Per capita, our road network is more than twice as long as that in Great Britain but our length of railway track is just one fifth as long.¹⁰ There are many other indicators of the roads bias: the bus fleet is ageing; bus and rail service frequencies are wholly inadequate; the 23 new trains on order, while very welcome, will do nothing to improve service frequencies because they will replace retiring rolling stock; and traffic in Northern Ireland is growing at twice the rate seen in Great Britain.¹¹

⁶ Friends of the Earth, 1995. *Working Future, Jobs and the Environment*.

⁷ SACTRA, 1994, *Trunk Roads and the Generation of Traffic*.

⁸ Scottish Executive *Strategic Roads Review* 1999.

⁹ Internal Translink figures.

¹⁰ Figures from DOE *Transport Statistics 1998-9* and the Government Statistical Service.

¹¹ Roads Service *Vehicle Kilometres of Travel Survey of Northern Ireland: Annual Reports 1991-1998* and DETR *Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2000 Edition*.

The Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy:

- will not deliver a transport system in which the volume of traffic is stable or falling - traffic will continue to grow;
- does not set an ambitious target for the number of people in rural areas living within easy walking distance (perhaps ten minutes) of an hourly or more frequent bus service;
- does not propose to extend the Dublin-Belfast Enterprise rail service through to Derry/Londonderry;
- does not secure the threatened Antrim-Lisburn rail line;
- does not propose a new railway station at Belfast International Airport where the line runs right past the perimeter fence;
- does not propose to extend the rail network, for example to Armagh, one of the few cities in Europe without a railway station;
- does not propose a Belfast Area Rapid Transit (BART) with trains running at ten minute frequencies to Ballymena, Bangor, Larne and Portadown;
- suggests a per capita rail spend of just 19% of that promised recently for Britain's railways.¹²

In fact the strategy proposes that just one additional train be purchased which will run on the Enterprise service between Dublin and Belfast. The Proposed RTS suggests that only 35% of resources be spent on public transport, walking and cycling. However, a strategy able to relieve transport poverty, arrest traffic growth and benefit the economy will require investment in public transport of a completely different order. Belfast City Council is recommending that 50% of new transport spending be allocated to public transport¹³ but Friends of the Earth believes that the proportion necessary is likely to be in the region of 65%.

How to make your views known

The Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy was issued for consultation by Regional Development Minister Peter Robinson MP, MLA on 4 February 2002 and the deadline for comments is 16 April. The document is published on the Department's website: www.drdni.gov.uk/rts and can be obtained in hard copy by telephoning (028) 9054 0616.

Friends of the Earth recommends that the proposed 65% : 35% funding split in favour of roads be reversed in favour of public transport.

Assembly Members are asked to insist on a Regional Transportation Strategy which devotes two thirds of resources to public transport.

You are invited to email the Minister via Friends of the Earth's website: www.foe.co.uk/ni

References

¹² The Proposed RTS suggests a rail spend of £389.6m, being 19% of £2040m, Northern Ireland's per capita equivalent of the £68bn promised for Britain's railways by the Strategic Rail Authority in January 2002.

¹³ Belfast City Council *Transport Policy* 2001.