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Railways: ruin or revival?

Securing the future

The Northern Ireland Assembly will shortly be making tough choices on public expenditure priorities for the next three years. As our railways face a deepening crisis, this briefing argues the case for rail and responds to the conclusions of the Railways Task Force report.

Throughout Europe rail is seen as the backbone of public transport networks and as a viable alternative to the car. Networks have been maintained and expanded in recent decades and in parts of Europe including Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland where decline had taken place the situation is now being reversed with the reopening of disused lines and the improvement of existing ones.

If Northern Ireland's railways are often viewed negatively it is not because the concept or reality of rail travel at the start of the 21st century is a negative one. It is rather that we cannot deny what we see with our own eyes - a run-down network with out-dated rolling stock, poor track condition and infrequent services. The friendly and dedicated staff stand little chance of making up for the consequences of a paltry budget and tiny government subsidy.

But look beyond the current legacy of years of under-investment by successive direct-rule administrations and

we see a rail network which has the potential to form the core a first class public transport system as good as any in the United Kingdom, Ireland or the rest of Europe. Fast and frequent commuter services could serve Belfast and the surrounding towns, relieving congestion on the roads. Smaller towns on the main lines could acquire the critical mass needed for effective economic development by virtue of the benefits good rail links can bring. Londonderry/Derry could be linked to Belfast with a 1h 30m service, continuing on to Dublin in less than 3h 30m in total. Belfast International and Belfast City airports could both enjoy fast and frequent services - like most modern airports. More ambitiously, the line to Armagh could be reopened linking that important city to the rest of the island. Ultimately we could even see the reopening of the line linking Portadown to Omagh, Strabane and Derry/Londonderry.

The benefits of rail

Regional Development

Railways are a public service and throughout Europe they depend on public subsidy for their existence. Although railways cannot operate as conventionally profitable businesses they deliver a range of economic benefits. Railways act as a tool of sustainable regional development, opening up areas which have suffered over the last thirty years and more, providing a quality means of transport for business purposes. A town off the rail map suffers from perceptions of peripherality. If a town

is rail-linked it is part of a clear, international transport network. This is crucial to Northern Ireland's developing tourism economy. Railways can form a corridor for sustainable development, with stations acting as hubs for social and business activity.

Development needs to be located, as far as possible, in places which are rail served, or could become so. This is recognised in the draft Regional Strategic Framework 'Shaping Our Future' which targets towns for major growth in housing citing good rail links as a strength. These include Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine and Derry/Londonderry. Remove the rail services and the argument that such growth would constitute sustainable development collapses as new residents would be almost entirely car reliant.

Employment

Loss of a sizeable part of the NIR network would make the Translink engineering workshops at Belfast unviable, with the loss of up to 200 skilled jobs in an area of high unemployment, in addition to the redundancies of hundreds more operational staff. NIR employs a total of 700 staff.

The regional economy

The benefits to a regional economy of public transport investment are often ignored. Evidence from Los Angeles has shown that 85 cents of every dollar spent on petrol leaves the regional economy. In contrast, out of every dollar that buys a fare in public transport, 80 cents goes in transport workers' wages which go on to generate \$3.80 of goods and services in the region. (Friends of the Earth, 1995. *Working Future? - Jobs and the Environment.*)

Community-rail partnerships

The last few years have seen an exciting growth of community-rail partnerships in the Great Britain, and were recently praised by the chairman of the Shadow Strategic Rail Authority. They are usually informal structures which bring together train operators, Railtrack, local authorities and the wider community in the promotion and development of a line or group of lines. Rail partnerships are ways of bringing the railway and

the community closer together, acting as linear development agencies along a rail corridor. They encourage their members to see rail not just as an isolated form of transport, but as a key part in a much broader canvas including integrated transport, land-use, economic development and tourism, and other areas of social policy. There is exciting potential for such partnerships in Northern Ireland particularly where lines traverse more rural areas.

Social need and equality

30% of households in Northern Ireland do not have access to a car. Rail provides opportunities for access to employment, training and leisure. Cuts in rail services would disproportionately affect already disadvantaged groups, especially young people, older people and women. The railways also provide an important 'neutral' or 'shared' space in Northern Ireland where such space is diminishing. Railways also cut across class divides. This is critical to the development of a viable public transport system. A good rail system provides a viable alternative to the private car creating middle-class 'buy-in' to the public transport system.

Environment and health

Rail is a safe, low-polluting form of transport which can relieve road traffic congestion and associated air pollution. It provides an alternative to expansion of the roads network as private car drivers transfer to rail freeing up space for freight and buses. The countryside loss and deteriorating urban life resulting from continued road construction can be avoided.

Carbon dioxide emissions from transport are a major and growing contributor to climate change. That growth and the resultant economic, social and environmental consequences can only be reversed by achieving a modal-shift from cars to public transport.

Typically rail commuters walk for 30 minutes a day (10 mins to the station and 5 mins to work at the other end, twice). Medical research shows that this can mean the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy lifestyle.

Cross border links

The importance of cross-border public transport infrastructure has long been recognised by the EU, the Cork-Dublin-Belfast-Larne-Stranraer rail link being one of the priority TENS (Transeuropean Networks) projects. Another priority cross-border route for the governments of both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland must surely be the Londonderry/Derry-Belfast-Dublin-Cork rail route. This would be a project which could simultaneously serve the causes of economic development and reconciliation between both parts of the island.

What the public think

The Railways Task Force reports the key themes emerging from its public consultation as

- immediate investment needed to safeguard future of the network should come from public funds followed by expansion in the longer term;
- the Assembly must provide leadership in setting a long term vision for rail;
- the Regional Transportation Strategy should set out a vision for transport with an emphasis on high quality public transport;
- decisions on future of the railways should give at least equal weight to non-financial considerations - particularly environmental, social inclusion and wider economic factors;
- people in NI believe they receive unequal treatment in terms of public transport subsidy compared with other regions of the UK and EU;
- NIR should be allowed flexibility in leasing rolling stock and investigating alternative finance;
- a quality rail network is essential to: stimulate growth in inward investment and tourism; improve business competitiveness; improve efficiency and increase volume of freight and passenger movement; reduce congestion and prevent potential gridlock; improve quality of life for citizens and visitors; produce positive effect on the environment and public health; and support future social and economic prosperity.

And this is how Community Technical Aid recorded some comments from members of the public:

We must look at a long-term vision

Can any of you on the panel name one country in Western Europe where they're considering cutting part or all of the railways?

A wise man once said if you can get people to ask the wrong questions it doesn't much matter what the answers are... Why are we even questioning this when all the research studies show you cannot build your way out of congestion and that the only answer to our traffic problems is a properly integrated transport system...

Now is the opportunity to seize this challenge and please can we do so?

Do we want an exclusively road-based transport system because if we cut the trains we're going to go hurtling towards gridlock...it's non-sensical, it simply doesn't add up

If we're delivering on equality...how can you justify running a first class train service down the Eastern Seaboard while sitting here tonight offering the west the option of closure

If the Belfast-Londonderry line closes it will be the greatest centre of population in the whole of the UK without a rail network, so why on earth close it, there's a social need there

You can't take things out of a country and expect to build it up

Investors would feel we're a backwater

Was the Task Force aware of the fact that if they take off the rail service the damage that it would do to people who are vulnerable - senior citizens, students, young families, people who for some reason or other can't afford a car? By taking off the trains they're turning around and taking away opportunities from people like me

We deserve it after 30 years of the Troubles and no funding at all in our transport system...I think now additional funding should be made available

Task Force conclusions

The Railways Task Force has presented three suggested options to Ministers. They are:

2001/02 £m	2002/03 £m	2003/04 £m	3 yr total £m
Option 1: Close entire network except Belfast-Dublin service			
11	-6	-14	-9
Option 2: Limited enhancement of existing network			
30	85	60	175
Option 3: Consolidation of existing network with priority for Belfast commuter lines			
20	50	35	105

It seems likely that Option 3, 'consolidation', will be the basis of the Minister for Regional Development's bid to the current spending round. The option concentrates new rolling stock and infrastructure improvements on the Belfast commuter routes as far as Ballymena and Whitehead. The thinking is that the 'lesser-used' lines should soldier on with older rolling stock and no immediate infrastructure improvements and their future will be determined by the Regional Transportation Strategy. The line between Lisburn (Knockmore) and Antrim is to be mothballed.

A modest proposal

While the authors of this report believe that enhancement of the network should be pursued, it is recognised that an option which safeguards the future of the network at this stage is more politically realistic. We are concerned, however, that the consolidation option creates a two-tier system of 'core' and 'non-core' lines and we view the loss of services between Lisburn and Antrim as completely unacceptable.

The prospect of no new trains being introduced on the services to Larne and Derry/Londonderry is a dismal one which may only serve to further marginalise these neglected services. *We strongly urge the Assembly to*

add sufficient funding to the consolidation option to ensure that all services are retained and improved and a 'two-tier' system does not emerge.

If £28.4m is added to the 'consolidation' option over 3 years the following would be achieved: new trains and a more flexible and frequent service for Londonderry/Derry; at least a third of services to Larne on new trains; and the retention of the Antrim-Lisburn line.

Consolidation Plus	£m
Passing loop on Coleraine - Londonderry/Derry line enabling more frequent and flexible services	4.0
Infrastructure on Antrim-Lisburn line	10.0
Two additional train-sets each for Londonderry/Derry and Larne lines	14.4
Option 3: consolidation	105.0
3 year total	133.4

Although Belfast commuter services will still receive priority under this proposal, services and, critically, the image of the 'lesser-used' lines will not be relegated to third class status.

Hard choices

As Ministers seek to maximise funding for their own Departments during the current spending round, they could consider the health, employment and wider economic and social benefits of railways. Fewer hospital admissions as a result of cleaner air will save money and lives. Why spend £150m per annum promoting inward investment while allowing 700 jobs to be lost due to lack of investment in our own transport system?

Choices must also be made within the transport budget. In particular investment in rail should take priority over the M1/Westlink proposals which will cost £46m and provide only temporary congestion relief. That amount invested in rail would pay dividends for decades to come.

The consequences of not prioritising rail will be the demise and ultimate loss of the system. It will be a mortal

blow to the future of public transport making us an entirely car dependent society with buses for those who cannot afford cars. In the words of a participant in a Railways Task Force public meeting:

“We’ve got a new government. They’ve got the opportunity to prove that they’re a forward thinking and creative government. We have the opportunity now to either go forward, looking at the overall transport, social and economic future of Northern Ireland or we’ve got the opportunity to destroy it here and now.”

This briefing is published on behalf of

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