



**Submission to Department of Transport from the
Western Development Commission**

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Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Transport on the Public Consultation Document, *2020 Vision – Sustainable Travel and Transport* (hereafter referred to as the Consultation Document).

The WDC cannot claim any particular expertise or knowledge in the area of sustainable travel modes or sustainable transport policies; however we do have considerable knowledge of the Western Region and the role and importance of transport access in the Region. It is in this context we consider it appropriate to offer our insights into this consultation process.

The WDC is a statutory body, established in 1997¹, by government to promote and foster economic and social development in the Western Region². One of the functions of the WDC is regional policy analysis and development where the WDC seeks to ensure that government policy reflects the concerns of the region, for example, in areas such as infrastructure provision, industrial and rural development and natural resources.

The WDC also tracks the implementation of policies and recommends adjustments as appropriate. In monitoring government policy, and ensuring that policy reflects the needs of the Western Region, the WDC has always regarded the provision of quality transport infrastructure and services as critical to the development of the region. Since its establishment, the WDC has highlighted the transport needs of the region through the publication of various reports and submissions.³

Access to quality road, rail and international air transport plays a crucial part in positioning the West of Ireland within a modern global economy. In a higher value, more knowledge based economy, the efficient movement of people and knowledge is absolutely essential.

The WDC will first comment briefly on the Consultation Document generally and then comment on specific issues in which the WDC has some expertise.

Overall the WDC would be concerned that the Consultation Document is very urban oriented. There is little reference to, or analysis of, the transport needs of rural areas. In particular:

- The WDC believes that in the Consultation Document there is little recognition of the rural nature of much of Ireland, and the associated transport requirements and travel

¹ The Commission was put on a statutory basis in February 1999.

² Counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare.

³ Our most recent comprehensive document on these issues was *Western Development for Ireland's Future: Submission to the Consultation on Ireland's National Development Plan 2007-2013*. This, as well as other relevant publications, can be downloaded from our website www.wdc.ie

behaviours in rural regions. For example Census 2006 clearly illustrates that car usage is far higher in more rural counties, in the state as a whole 70% of people use a car or van to journey to work, however in more rural counties such as Leitrim, Roscommon and Donegal it is over 80%. In parallel to this, while 9% of people in the state travel to work by bus or train, in more rural counties less than 2% use public transport⁴.

While there is reference to the Rural Transport Programme in the Consultation Document, there is a need for much more detailed and considered analysis of rural transport needs and networks. With population growth in rural regions, there is likely to be a greater need for improved public transport and this is likely to gain further impetus in light of the increased cost of fuel as well as a need for more sustainable transport.

- The rurality of a region and associated transport provision has implications for the most appropriate type of sustainable travel and policies. A consideration of the policy responses best suited to rural sustainable transport needs to be undertaken.
- The WDC would be concerned that any recommendations or solutions proposed which may be appropriate in an urban context might be applied in a rural scenario with little tailoring to the needs of rural regions. There are of course urban centres within the Western Region where urban specific policies may be appropriate.

4.1.3 Rail Public Transport

The WDC has consistently argued for more and better rail services to the Western Region recognising the latent demand for such services as well as its superior sustainability record. We welcome the increased funding for rail services under Transport 21.

The WDC has also recognised the importance of new services in the promotion of balanced regional development. Research undertaken for the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) concluded that: “*a strengthened inter-regional rail service network has a role to play in regional development*”⁵. The WDC has argued for the re-instatement of services on the Western Rail Corridor, recognising its importance as a transport mode, potentially connecting the NSS Gateways of Sligo, Galway and Limerick with onward connections to Cork and Waterford. The Western Rail Corridor is also important, in that unlike the current radial network serving the Western Region from Dublin, this route is cross radial extending from North to South.

The WDC welcomes consideration of commuter rail projects aimed at improving access to urban centres particularly the planned commuter rail services for Galway.

⁴ CSO, Census of Population 2006, Volume 12, Table 6

⁵ Transport and Regional Development, Goodbody Economic Consultants. (2000).

5.1.2 Rail Freight

In its submission to the Strategic Rail Review⁶, the WDC examined the arguments for and against rail freight in the context of the EU White Paper on Transport, and practice in other European countries. It acknowledged that, as elsewhere across Europe, rail freight revenues and volumes have been declining in the face of competition from road based alternatives, but also noted that it is difficult to compare the real cost of rail versus road freight transport. The WDC submission noted that, *where rail operators are required to justify fully all costs and benefits, rail will inevitably compete unfavourably with road, where costs are distributed differently*⁷.

The WDC welcomed the commitment to rail freight and the initiatives recommended in the Strategic Rail Review which are designed to support rail freight activity in the short-to-medium term. The WDC has been concerned however that the lack of a long-term policy for rail freight will inhibit its development potential and consequently may hasten its decline.

Currently there is one subsidy provided to the combined rail passenger and freight sector with no distinction as to how it is allocated. It is the WDC's view that a separate subsidy should be made to rail freight⁸. The rationale for such subsidies is based on the greater environmental sustainability and energy efficiency of rail transport, the increasing need to reduce road congestion and rail's superior safety record.

5.2 Air Transport

As the Consultation Document notes, there has been rapid growth in air travel in recent years, and as a small open economy, this has contributed to further economic growth.

International air access is extremely important for the future of the Western Region providing speedy access to international markets and suppliers. Ireland West Airport Knock is uniquely placed both geographically and in terms of its international capacity (runway length and supporting infrastructure) to serve the north of the Region.

International passenger growth has been significant and the Airport continues to expand its role in serving the international access needs of both the business and leisure sectors. Shannon Airport has always been recognised as vital in serving the international access requirements of business in the Mid West and continues to be a crucial access point for tourists into the region.

The WDC believes that Government policy should continue to encourage as wide a range of international services from Shannon Airport and Ireland West Airport Knock, so as to ensure the Western Region has optimum connectivity to its markets.

⁶ The Strategic Rail Review (2003) was commissioned by the Department of Transport 'to provide the Government with a basis for establishing a strategic policy framework for the future development of the rail passenger and rail freight sectors in Ireland'.

⁷ WDC Submission to the Strategic Rail Review, April 2002. www.wdc.ie

⁸ This is the practice in most other European states.

Regional and Local Travel Demand and Supply

The WDC is currently undertaking analysis of the Census 2006 POWCAR⁹ dataset, in an effort to better understand travel to work patterns and the size of labour catchments in the Region. This analysis is specifically focussed on identifying regional and local labour markets. In particular it will examine the spatial extent of these labour catchments and their socio-economic profile. This information will highlight the human resource base in the region but is also likely to show the influence of transport networks on labour mobility. This research is an important aspect of travel behaviours in the Western Region and should help underpin future research.

Further analysis of this dataset and the Census of Population 2006, Travel to Work, School and College data would provide important information on current travel patterns and modes of transport used in regional and rural areas and this should inform appropriate sustainable transport policies for the Western Region.

6.1.1 Flexible Working and Broadband Provision

The WDC believes that flexible working can be a valuable tool in promoting work-life balance and can also be important in promoting sustainability. In particular home working can reduce travel demand and lessen emissions. However, as acknowledged in the Consultation Document, the lack of quality broadband can be a barrier.

The WDC has been at the forefront of identifying the issues associated with deregulation of the telecommunications sector and the implications this has for broadband provision particularly in more rural areas. Even though the forthcoming National Broadband Scheme due to be rolled out in June/July of this year provides for full coverage, we are concerned that this may deliver a basic level of service but not be sufficiently 'future proofed' to provide for the capacity (speed) necessary for the next generation of networks (NGNs). NGNs will deliver voice, data and entertainment over a single network but will require much higher bandwidths (50-100Mbit/s) than are available at present. There is a real possibility of a continuing spatial divide in broadband infrastructure between rural and urban areas. Lower levels of broadband capacity will impact on the possibility of homeworking, on the delivery of e-services to rural areas and the applicability of sophisticated IT-based solutions to transport management problems.

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If there are any queries in relation to this submission, please contact Deirdre Frost, Policy Analyst at deirdrefrost@wdc.ie

⁹ Place of Work Census of Anonymised Records, Census of Population 2006, Central Statistics Office.