Public Consultation
on the
Strategic Rail Study

Submission from the

Western Development Commission

April 2002

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1. Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) welcomes the announcement of a Strategic Rail Study which is designed to provide government with a basis for establishing a strategic policy framework for the future development of passenger and rail freight services over the next twenty years. We are glad of the opportunity to make a submission to the Study that is to be commissioned by the Department of Public Enterprise.

The WDC sees the Strategic Rail Study as critically important to the formulation of transport policy in Ireland. Investment in transport infrastructure is a key tool in fostering the government's committed aim of balanced regional development and will have implications for the way Ireland develops and how its residents live and work in future decades. In this context, a strategic approach is essential and we see the proposed Study both as underpinning, and an intrinsic part of, the National Spatial Strategy (NSS).

The WDC believes that, as Dublin's over-development calls for effective planning and infrastructural response, so clearly does the under-development of the Western Region[1]. Our report *The State of the West*, published in July 2001, contains a detailed analysis of recent economic performance in the region. It reveals the nature and extent of the development gap in the productive sectors and the serious deficit in transport infrastructure. The latter is the result of decades of under-investment nationally and adds to the cumulative disadvantage of the Western Region.

A great deal of public expenditure is committed to investment in infrastructure under the National Development Plan 2000-2006 (NDP). However in the case of rail transport, while very welcome, any expenditure following years of under-investment in the railways is starting from a very low base.

This WDC submission will only comment on those passenger routes and services that have a direct impact on the seven counties under its remit namely:

Western Rail Corridor
Commuter service – Athenry - Galway
Commuter service – Ballymote, Collooney, Ballisodare, and Sligo
New service – Ennis - Shannon Airport - Limerick

We will also comment on the development of rail freight services.

We draw on a variety of sources in this document, including research studies commissioned for the preparation of the NSS.

[1] Counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Clare.

2. The Importance of Rail Infrastructure

While rail transport has been losing out to roads in recent decades, there is a growing appreciation of the benefits of this mode of transport. This is acknowledged in the NDP where it is noted that: *increasingly, the transport of goods and people by rail is viewed as an environmentally friendly and safer alternative to road transport.*[2] The NDP also recognises that the lack of investment in rail infrastructure up to the 1990s significantly eroded rail's competitive position relative to road transport.

The current rail network is a key component of national transport infrastructure and is a substantial national asset. For decades there has been little investment in rail and it is only in the recent past that funding has been made available to both maintain and up-grade the existing network.

Rail transport has several advantages over road-based alternatives, particularly its environmental superiority. These include better energy efficiency, lower emissions, reduced congestion costs and a better safety record. Moreover, as Ireland becomes more suburbanised, rail services can address the associated need to transport commuters safely and efficiently.

On the other hand, we need to recognise that some advantages of rail as a mode of transport are less applicable to the Irish situation because Ireland is geographically very small and inter-city rail journeys are shorter than most inter-city services in Europe. The economics of rail are optimised the longer the journey. This is particularly true for rail freight. Economies of scale are lost over shorter distances and Ireland is the only EU country without a land link, which limits the potential for trans-European linkages.

The WDC, in its response to the commitment to balanced regional development in the NDP has always maintained that infrastructure provision in the Western Region must be 'development-driven'. This will promote the growth of towns and existing urban centres in the region, which in turn will facilitate the development of 'critical mass' as a counterbalance to over-growth in the East. Upgrading the railway infrastructure could also significantly reduce the spatial peripherality of much of the Western Region.

The current rail infrastructure in the Western Region is of a radial nature in that all lines emanate from Dublin. It may be argued that hitherto there were insufficient volumes to justify the development of non-radial routes. The WDC believes that the development of such routes is worthy of serious consideration. This view was also cited in research undertaken for the NSS:

> A high level of investment in inter-regional (non-radial) transport links would not be warranted by existing transport volumes. Such a policy must therefore be seen as a stimulus to regional development, not a reaction to predicted demand'[3].

[2] The National Development Plan 2000 – 2006. p58.
[3] Goodbody Economic Consultants (2000) Transport Demand. p.8.

3. Current State of Passenger Rail Services to/from the Western Region

The seven western counties are currently served by four rail lines, as set out in Table 1 below and illustrated in Figure 1. The Dublin-Ennis route is essentially the Dublin-Limerick route with an onward connection to Ennis from Limerick. The Galway-Dublin service is the most frequent reflecting the greater demand for inter-city connections. Apart from an additional Sunday service between Dublin and Westport/Ballina, there has been no change in the number of services on these routes since 1998.

Table 1. Iarnród Éireann Services to the Western Region 2002

Route	Services per Day	Stations Served	Typical Journey Times
Dublin-Sligo	Monday-Thursday, Saturdays - 3 Fridays - 4 Sundays - 3	Sligo - Collooney - Ballymote - Boyle - Carrick-on-Shannon- Dromod - Longford - Edgeworthstown - Mullingar	3 hr 10min
Dublin-Westport/Ballina	Monday-Thursdays, Saturdays - 3 Fridays - 4 Sundays - 3 Sundays (in Winter Season) - 4	Westport - Ballina Foxford - Castlebar Claremorris - Ballyhaunis - Castlerea Roscommon - Athlone Clara - Tullamore	4 hours
Dublin-Galway	Monday- Friday - 5 Saturday - 4 Saturday (Summer) - 5 Sundays - 4	Galway - Athenry Attymon - Woodlawn Ballinasloe - Athlone Clara - Tullamore	2 hrs 30 min
Dublin-Ennis (via Limerick)	Weekdays - 2 Sundays - 1	Ennis via Limerick	3 hrs 15 min

Source: Iarnród Éireann 2002.

Since the beginning of the 1990s there has been significant investment in the rail network nationally, with support from both the EU and the national exchequer. The NDP provides for a €634.9m investment in the rail network comprising two key elements: a rail safety programme (1999-2003) and a renewal/upgrading programme.

Investment covers track renewal, signalling, new carriages, new services, station up-grades, safety-related investment and investment in mobility-impaired facilities. Table 2 provides details on track type, passenger numbers and committed investment for those rail lines serving the Western Region.

Figure 1. Rail Network in the Western Region 2002

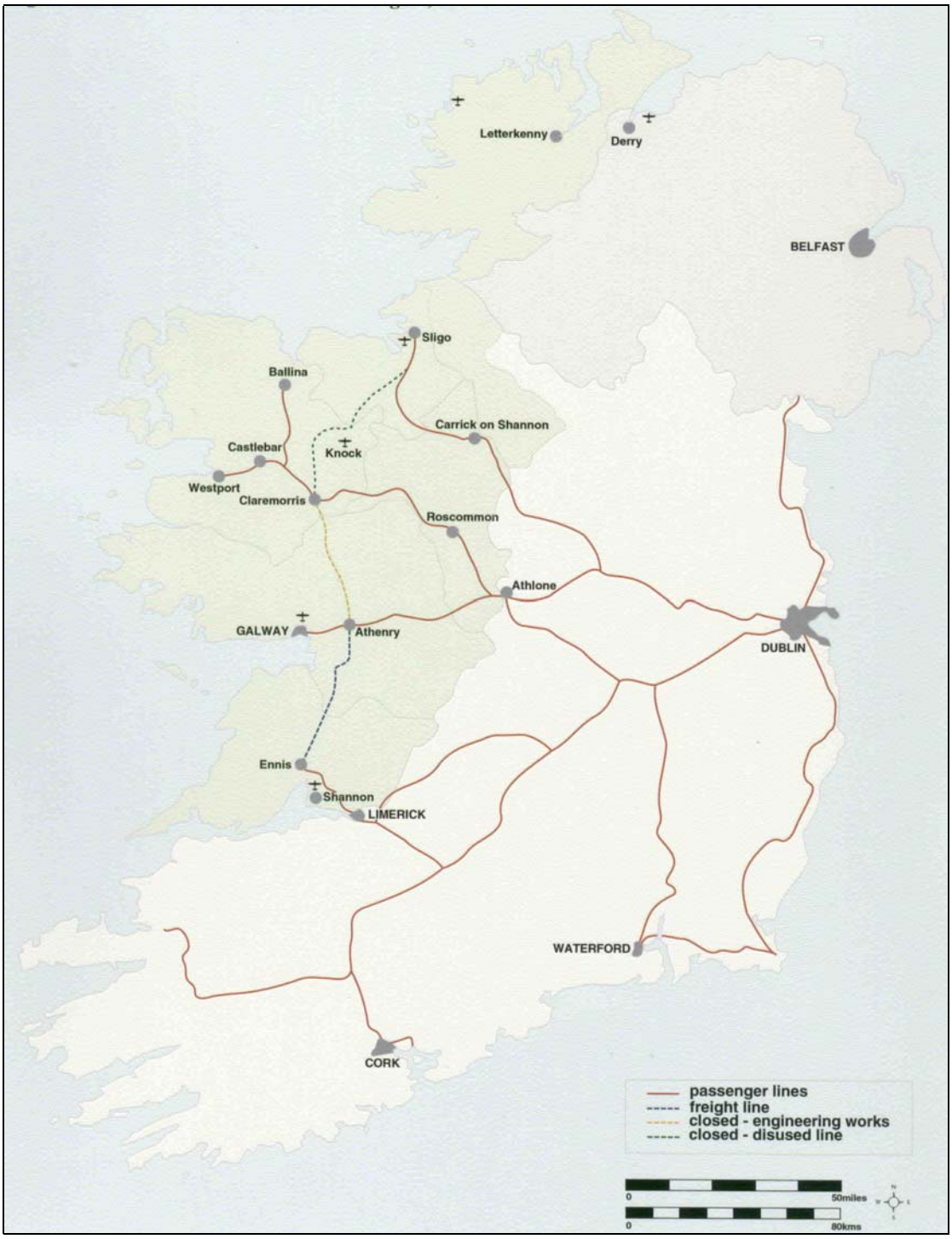


Table 2 Iarnród Éireann Details of Investment in the Western Region 1999-2003

Rail Line	Track type % continuously welded	Passenger numbers (per year)	2001 Investment € Million	Completion date
Dublin - Galway	100%	1,000,000		1999
Dublin - Sligo	86%	600,000	€40.0	2002
Athlone -Westport Manulla - Ballina	54%	450,000	€54.6	2002/2003
Dublin - Limerick	100%	650,000	-	1999
Limerick - Ennis	27%	65,000	€8.89	2003
Total		**2,765,000**	**€103.49**	**-**

Source: Iarnród Éireann 2001.

Track Renewal between 1999 and 2003 is expected to cost €237.4 million. This investment programme has enabled an increase in the proportion of each track that is continuously welded, which allows for greater train speeds. All routes are due to be fully upgraded to continuous welded rail (CWR) by the end of 2003.

The development of new radial routes from the Western Region to Dublin requires additional capacity at stations there. Extra platforms are being created at Heuston. There is a strong case for an additional daily service between Galway and Dublin, however until new rolling stock is available and the additional platform capacity is completed at Heuston, consideration of additional routes cannot proceed.

The WDC believes that significant improvements in terms of new rolling stock, additional services, better timetabling and increased speeds on the radial inter-city services from the Western Region to and from Dublin are required. We have estimated that the cost of replacement of existing rolling stock on three routes would amount to €76.5m[4].

Research conducted for the NSS pointed to the **major deficiencies** on radial routes out of Dublin to the west and northwest, notably in the towns of Sligo, Ballina, Castlebar and Westport, and to a lesser extent Galway[5]. One of the conclusions of this study was that the future share of passenger traffic going to rail will reflect the extent to which new and expanded services are introduced[6].

Clearly, if Sligo, Ballina, Castlebar/Westport are to be designated as 'gateway' or 'hub' towns in the NSS, it is crucial that they have reliable, efficient and sufficient rails links to Dublin and other major centres.

In the following section we turn to the question of expansion of the current network both in terms of routes served and new services.

[4] Five trains comprising forty-five carriages at €1.7m per carriage.
[5] Goodbody Economic Consultants (2000) Transport and Regional Development. p.30.
[6] Ibid. p.7

4. Western Rail Corridor

The term Western Rail Corridor (WRC) refers to a possible passenger and freight route from Sligo and/or Ballina through to Limerick with onward connections to the south-west and the port of Rosslare. The proposed rote for this corridor is illustrated in Figure 2. In line with the general orientation of the NSS, this route could prove very valuable in linking the towns of the Western Region and thereby enhancing the development of 'critical mass'. It could also facilitate tourism to develop on the railway route thereby dispersing tourism growth to more inland centres, which has to date been heavily concentrated in the coastal areas.

For the Western Rail Corridor to carry both freight and passenger traffic, three sections of track need to be upgraded significantly. These are:
Collooney - Claremorris
Claremorris - Athenry
Athenry - Ennis

The Collooney to Claremorris track is disused and has been closed to all traffic since 1975. It is in a state of disrepair but is still owned by CIÉ. The Claremorris to Athenry track is closed to all passenger and freight traffic, however it is used by Iarnród Éireann for engineering purposes. The Athenry to Ennis track is open for freight traffic only. If these lines were upgraded to allow passenger traffic, they would provide a greatly strengthened inter-regional rail service. Goodbody's, in a study for the NSS, have pointed out that such a network has a role to play in regional development[7].

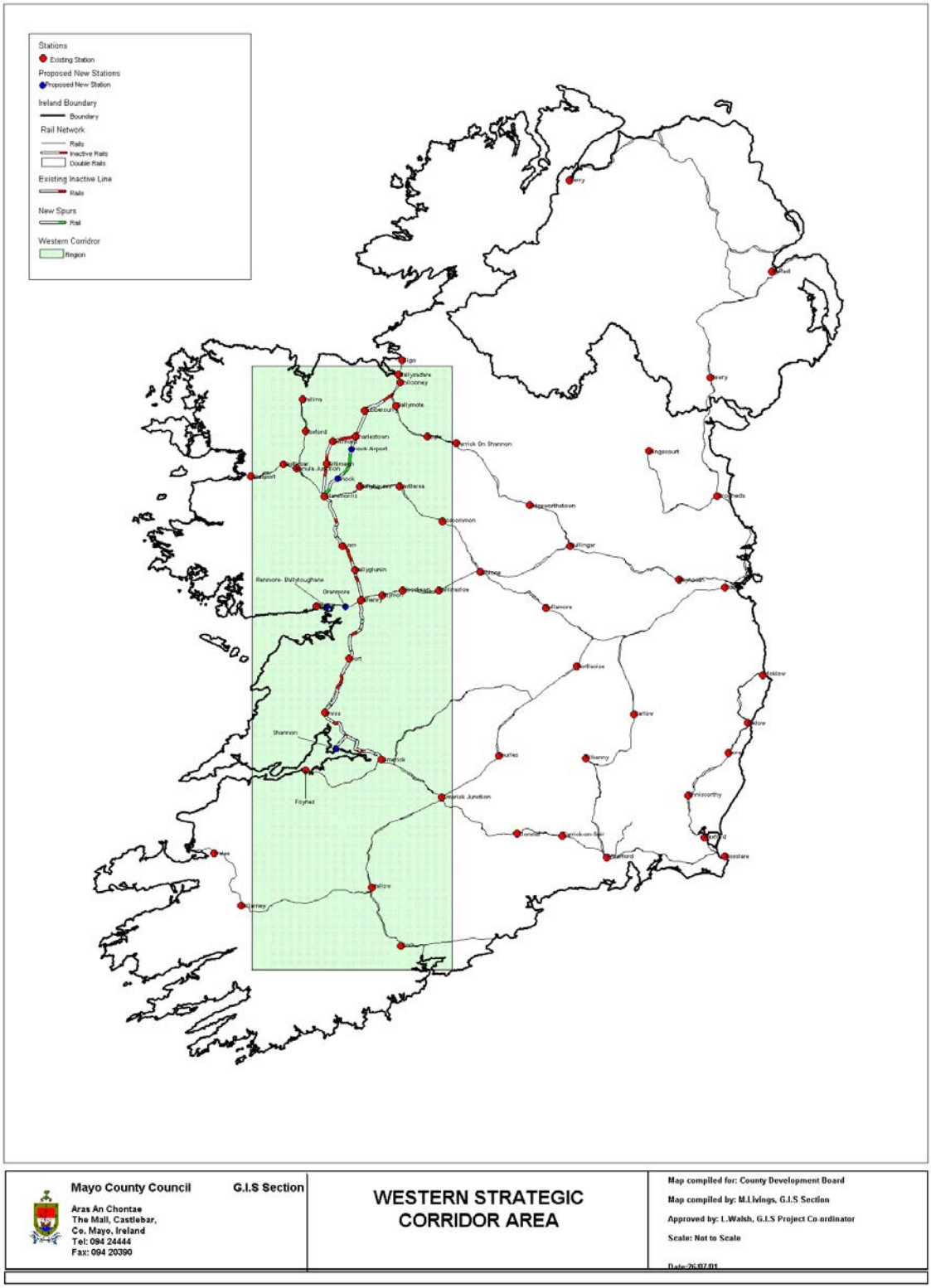
Estimates of the costs of reopening and upgrading the Western Rail Corridor from Collooney to Ennis, to allow passenger traffic at speeds of 60-70mph vary but are generally considered to be in the region of €150m. This includes the cost of ancillary works. This corresponds to less than 1 per cent (0.84 per cent) of the transport initiative for Dublin, *A Platform for Change* which has been costed at €17.78bn.[8].

In this context the WRC is significant, not just in providing an economic corridor with the potential to develop critical mass and a counterbalance to the East, but also in allowing the development of extended commuter routes between towns along this corridor.

Given all these considerations, the WDC believe that a detailed feasibility study of the WRC is justified.

[7] Goodbody Economic Consultants (2000) Transport and Regional Development. p.30, 31.
[8] A Platform for Change; Outline of an Integrated Transportation Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2000-2016, p.18. The £14 billion is at 2000 prices.

Figure 2. Western Rail Corridor/Western Strategic Corridor Area



5. Commuter Services

Various local and regional groups in the Western Region are actively promoting the development of commuter services along the existing rail network. This interest in and support for local rail services is a response to the enormous growth in car-based commuting, the relatively poor road network on some routes and inadequate bus services. To date, government transport policy has primarily focused on improving the road network, thereby enhancing the possibilities for road based public transport and continued car-based commuting. However, increasing road congestion on some routes in the Western Region and environmental considerations, together with the possibility of developing rail links as stimuli to investment locations make the development of commuter rail routes attractive. The key arguments against development of this mode have been concern over the extent of government subvention required to promote commuter rail.

In developing a strategic framework for rail policy, consideration should be given to other consequences of the development of rail-based commuting. Provision of commuter services along the existing rail network could underpin land-use policies, particularly in the current tight housing market and prove beneficial in terms of promoting balanced regional development. This view was expressed by Goodbody's in research undertaken for the NSS:

> It is important to recognise that the existence of a commuter rail service is in itself a spur to land use development within its catchment. This raises the issue, in the context of regional development, as to whether rail system improvements should precede land use developments[9].

Moving from car-based commuting to rail requires a considerable shift in consumer attitudes and behaviour. To be a realistic counter-attraction rail must be cost effective and not incur out of pocket expenses for potential customers. For the proposed routes to be successful, it is also necessary to ensure that the services are frequent, efficient, comfortable and reliable, competitively priced, and that there are efficient linkages to customers' final destinations. Other facilities such as 'park and ride' may also be required.

Commuter service – Galway

Galway County Development Board is proposing the Galway 'Heavy-Rail' Commuter Service Phase 1. This would involve the provision of one two-car ARROW train providing an additional 13 services to/from Galway, mainly from Oranmore and Renmore[10].

This new ARROW service would be complemented by the existing five inter-city services daily resulting in a total of 18 return services between Galway and Oranmore. It is also proposed that a new Park and Ride facility would be developed in Oranmore.

[9] Goodbody Economic Consultants (2000) Transport and Regional Development. p.34.

[10] The first service would originate in either Dublin or Athlone and arrive in Galway at 8.20 am. Following this there would be 12 services throughout the day serving Galway, Renmore and Oranmore. The train would then return to Athlone or Dublin at 17.55 pm.

Commuter service – Sligo
A study was undertaken by Halcrow Rail[11] to examine the feasibility of a Sligo commuter service on the existing Dublin to Sligo rail line serving the stations of Ballymote, Collooney and Sligo. The possibilities of re-opening the station at Ballisodare and providing new stations at Carrowroe and at Finiskilin were also considered.

The consultants estimated that a half-hourly commuter service between Sligo and Ballymote and serving the stations of Collooney, Ballymote and a new service at Ballisodare would incur a cost of €4.44 million in capital expenditure. Most of this capital cost (€2.54 million) would be in rolling stock. It is estimated that the annual operating deficit would be in the region of €507,900- €634,900 per annum which would require a subsidy. It is argued that the estimated economic benefits (savings on passenger time, vehicle operating costs, parking charges, accidents etc.) more than offset the capital and subsidy costs. The service would also have positive environmental benefits and would subsidise an estimated 15% of commuters to Sligo.

In the context of Galway's position as the key population and growth centre in the Western Region and the probable designation of Sligo as a gateway town in the forthcoming NSS, the WDC considers that it is opportune for the Strategic Rail Study to examine the feasibility of rail-based commuter options for these centres.

[11] The study was commissioned by South Sligo Rapid Transit Group and funded by Sligo Corporation, Sligo County Council, Sligo County Enterprise Board and the Western Development Commission.

6. New Passenger Services

The provision of a new service from Limerick to Shannon Airport and Free Zone has been promoted by interests in the Mid-West region[12]. This link would complement the existing Limerick-Ennis route and provide alternative transport options in the heavy commuter route of Limerick-Shannon-Ennis. It would also support access to and from Shannon Airport.

The WDC have argued that air access is extremely important for both tourism and business interests in the Western Region and that there is a need to prioritise Shannon and Knock airports for international access[13]. We recognise that efforts made to enhance Shannon's position and capitalise on its role in the region should be furthered. A rail link serving Shannon would alleviate the current congestion on the road network and provide additional capacity for both tourists and commuters.

As Goodbody's have pointed out:

> The introduction of basic commuter services to Ennis would be a valuable first step in the development of the rail system in the area. Increased commuter patronage on the line would act as a spur to eventual re-opening of the line north of Ennis, and the possible introduction of a spur to Shannon[14].

The Shannon Rail Link Partnership has appointed Parsons Brinckeroff (Ireland) Limited to examine options for providing a rail link to Shannon Airport and Free Zone from the national rail network. We understand that they will also be making a submission to this Strategic Rail Study and have recommended particular route options.

In order to promote balanced regional development, enhance the capability of Shannon Airport to serve the region and ease congestion on the road network, the Western Development Commission supports progressing the proposed Shannon Rail Link and its connection to Ennis.

[12] These include Shannon Development, Clare County Development Board and the Shannon Rail Link Partnership.
[13] Western Development Commission (2001). p77.
[14] Goodbody Economic Consultants (2000) Transport and Regional Development. p.34, 35.

7. Rail Freight

As noted above, successive governments have failed to invest in railway infrastructure and it is only in the recent past that this policy has been reversed. However, the focus to date has been on upgrading passenger services and little attention or resources have been directed at rail freight. Several reasons can be suggested for this.

Firstly, demand for passenger service upgrading is more pressing, visible and immediate so that available resources have, in the first instance, been directed towards improving these services. Ireland has relatively low utilisation of rail freight mainly due to the volume and nature of the goods carried and the nature of the rail network.

Secondly, unlike passenger services, there is no state subvention for rail freight in Ireland. As rail freight is not commercially viable, there is less incentive to invest in and develop rail freight services.

Thirdly, to the user, rail freight is often more costly than road freight. It is somewhat difficult to disaggregate the exact costs associated with rail freight because there is usually a road component to the rail freight cost (from rail depot to final client). Moreover, the total cost of rail freight is borne by the user. This is not the case for road freight. Consequently it is difficult to ascertain and compare the costs of rail versus road freight.

In the last decade there has been a dramatic growth in freight exports via Irish ports. However most of this increase (259%)[15] has been in roll-on/roll-off (Ro/Ro) traffic most of which is transported internally on the road network. Lift-on/lift-off (Lo/Lo) traffic is container traffic which travels by rail. Ro/Ro traffic has been increasing at a faster rate than Lo/Lo traffic both because of time and cost savings and flexibility (door-to-door service) and this is in line with trends across Europe.

Rail Freight in Europe

Transport statistics indicate that across the EU there has been a steady decline in the proportion of goods transported by rail rather than by road. The table below illustrates the relative decline in rail as a mode of freight transport in selected European countries.

Table 3: Rail as a Proportion of Total Freight in selected EU countries

Country	**1989**	**1998**
Ireland	9.3	7.3
Belgium	25.2	17.8
Denmark	11.2	11.9
Germany	25.5	18.9
Greece	6.0	1.9
Spain	13.3	10.3
France	21.8	18.0
UK	11.3	9.8
EU - 15	**19.2**	**16.0**

Source: Eurostat Yearbook 2001.

[15] Atkins McCarthy, (2000), p.6.

In 1989, 19.2 per cent of goods traffic was transported by rail[16]. In 1998[17] this proportion was down to 16.0 per cent. This pattern is evident in many countries. Within Ireland the proportion of goods transported by rail was 9.3 per cent in 1989. It rose steadily to 10.9 per cent in 1992 but thereafter declined to 7.3 per cent in 1998 and has remained at around 7 per cent since then.

Rail Freight within the Western Region

In the Western Region much freight has been lost from rail in recent years and is currently transported by road. Table 4 illustrates the decline in rail freight traffic in the region since 1992.

Table 4: Rail Freight Traffic lost since 1992 in the Western Region

Route/Station	Products/Clients	Current Arrangements
Dublin-Sligo		
Sligo	Timber (Coillte) 2001	Road
	Bagged cement (Irish Cement Ltd.)	Road
	Tar 2001	Road
Dromod	Molasses 2000	Road
Longford	Fertiliser status 2001	Road
	Bagged cement 2001	Road
Mullingar	Bagged cement 2000	Road
	Molasses 2000	Road
	Fertiliser 1995	Road
Enfield	Molasses 1999	Road
Dublin – Wesport/Ballina		
Ballina	Fertiliser 2000	Road
	Coal 1997	Road
	Acrylonitrile 1997 (Asahi)	Company closed
Westport	Timber Nov 2001	Road
Castlebar	Timber	Road
Ballyhaunis	Closed 1990	
Roscommon	Timber 2001	Road
Dublin - Galway		
	Timber Nov 2001	Road
	Mail 1994	Road
Athenry	Fertiliser 2000	Road
	Bulk Cement May 2001	Road
Ballinasloe	Closed 1990	
Tullamore	Fertiliser 2000	Road
Limerick - Claremorris		
Ennis	Timber Oct 2001	Road
	Liner 1993	Road
Gort	Fertiliser 1996	Road
	Bagged cement 1996	Road

Source: Hassard Stacpoole, Editor, Irish Railway News 2002.

[16] 100 basic indicators from Eurostat Yearbook 2001, The Statistical Guide to Europe, Data 1989-99.
[17] The latest year for which data is available.

As is evident most of the traffic has been lost due to a switch to road transport with the exception of the closure of the Asahi plant in Ballina in 1997.

Currently there is very little rail freight traffic in the Western Region. There are four routes – Dublin to Sligo; Dublin to Ballina; Dublin to Galway; Dublin to Claremorris. Ballina serves as a freight terminal for the Castlebar and Ballina region. There is one outbound and return journey five days per week on each of these routes. These carry dry freight containers (for manufacturing companies) and kegs (for the Guinness Group). In addition, one to two trains per week transport oil from Dublin to Sligo.

The possibility of a Western Rail Corridor from Sligo to Limerick and then on to Foynes, Cork or Rosslare would also allow for freight movements along this economic corridor. Another alternative is a freight route from the West, via Portarlington to Waterford. This would allow a switch from road to rail along these routes. It has been noted that *there are significant road freight movements along a western corridor from the south-west region to the west and north-west*[18]. As suggested above, investigation of the feasibility of a Western Rail Corridor should be undertaken.

Rail Freight Policy in Europe

Many European governments have adopted rail freight policies, aimed at diverting an increased volume of freight from road to rail, in recent years[19]. The range of measures adopted are in line with the EU's current transport policy which is discussed further below. First, we turn to some initiatives taken in recent years in several European states.

The **UK** have adopted a ten-year Rail Freight Transport Plan, aimed at achieving a 75% increase in rail freight tonnage and encouraging a significant transfer of freight traffic from road to rail. The 1992 Railway Act introduced grant aid incentives to rail users under two headings: Freight Facilities Grant (FFG) and Track Access Grant (TAG). The FFG includes subsidies to building or adopting railway infrastructure, the acquisition of dedicated handling equipment, rolling stock and freight containers purchase and the provision of cargo warehouses at rail depots. TAG subsidises service operators' fees to Railtrack for access to the rail network with 100% of the access tariff recoverable in most cases. To date, 250 grants worth in excess of €250 million have been allocated under the scheme.

The **Danish** government passed a law to regulate railway transport activities in 1998. This provides for an environmental grant to national freight transport businesses on condition that the cargo originates/terminates within Danish territory. The underlying principle of the rail freight subsidy is to compensate rail cargo transporters in Denmark for the extra costs not incurred by the road haulage sector. The level of grant aid is based on Danish and international research on evaluation of external costs, ratios of tonnes per kms. transported and the comparison of impact between highway and railway transport. Data is evaluated annually on: CO_2 emissions, air pollution, noise pollution, number of accidents and the level of road congestion measured against the amount of investment earmarked annually for the road network. Grants

[18] Goodbody Economic Consultants (2000) Transport Demand. p.15.
[19] This section is based on information kindly provided by Iarnród Éireann.

are applied on a tonne/kilometre basis, subject to minimum/maximum thresholds and cannot exceed 50% of net profit declared by the railway operator.

In 1999, **France** introduced guideline laws relating to the development of transport and provided for an intervention fund to apply to rail freight and combined freight transport providers. In 2000, the fund provided approximately €95m in subsidies to compensate for the difference in external costs between highway and railway transport and €18m for the creation and renovation of combined transport facilities. Both of these subsidies were used exclusively by SNCF which, as a combined transport operator, also received grants per tonne kilometre of traffic conveyed.

In **Germany** an ecology tax on consumption of energy products (electricity, oil and gas) in order to reduce consumption, protect the environment, promote renewable energy sources and stimulate energy efficiency measures, was introduced in 1999. Germany promotes the use of rail transport on environmental grounds giving a 50% discount on energy taxes to the railways. This indirect form of state aid is considered legitimate by the European Commission which adopted the same reasoning in the Danish case i.e. in the absence of a method for charging the external costs of various modes of transport, tax measures aimed at reducing the cost of railway transport activities at least provide a partial competitive re-equilibration and concur with EU environment policies of encouraging environmentally cleaner modes of transport.

Following on the application of a combined transport freight plan over the period 1995-1999, it has been estimated in **Austria** that 2.7 million tonnes of freight have been diverted on to the rail network with a corresponding reduction of up to 200,000 heavy road vehicle movements. New financial assistance measures were introduced over the planning period 1999-2002. The combined freight transport sector is eligible to receive subsidies for construction and adoption of intermodal terminals; equipment and rolling stock for combined transport; investment in innovative transport systems for management and development of combined transport as well as logistic chains; and, training for innovative technology.

In **Switzerland**, the movement of freight in heavy road vehicles is subject to special taxation based upon three factors – distance travelled, axle weights of road vehicles and polluting emission levels. The taxation regulations explicitly require revenues from highway tariffs to be used for investment in the more eco-compatible competing rail transport sector. Up to two/thirds of the revenues generated are redirected towards new rail construction projects and towards adding modal re-equilibrium of cargo transport in favour of rail. In order to achieve modal re-equilibrium in cargo transport, cross-subsidies are endorsed as a way of moving closer to a fairer infrastructural tariff system, in which both internal and external costs are paid in full.

The EU White Paper on Transport

Revitalising the railways is a top priority in EU Transport Policy which is based on increased use of sustainable, energy-efficient modes of transport such as rail. The EU is anxious *to create conditions in which rail transport can once again be efficient and competitive, particularly for freight*[20]. The EU White Paper on Transport was adopted by the European Commission in September 2001. Three lines of action are proposed

[20] Europa website, *Introduction to EU Railway Policy*.

to both revitalise the railways and shift the balance between different modes of transport.

1. Establish a fair system of charging for all modes of transport.
2. Develop trans-European networks giving high priority to rail.
3. Complete construction of a legally and technologically integrated European railway area.

Ireland has limited potential to increase use of rail freight without significant investment particularly at ports. Moreover, freight users would need some encouragement to shift to rail and this would be likely to require the introduction of subsidies as is the case in other European states. Such subventions/grants could be directed at the consumer rather than the rail operator.

Key Rail Freight Issues

The declining use of rail freight in recent years reflects rail's inability to compete on a commercial basis with road carriage. The nature of the goods carried, the distances involved and the availability of services are among the reasons for this decline.

It is difficult to compare the real cost of rail versus road freight transport. Overheads associated with rail include costs of maintaining depots, equipment and labour costs. Where rail operators are required to justify fully all costs and benefits, rail will inevitably compete unfavourably with road, where costs are distributed differently.

In other European countries subventions to rail freight have been introduced to enable rail freight operators to compete with road hauliers and encourage the use of rail freight. The rationale for such subsidies is based on the need to reduce road congestion, the superior safety record, and the greater environmental sustainability and energy efficiency of rail transport. State aids and other public contributions to the railway sector in the EU amounted to almost €32 billion in 1999[21].

EU transportation policy is based on the promotion of sustainable energy efficient modes of transport. Given the existence of a substantial (if somewhat in need of upgrading) rail freight infrastructure in Ireland, it would seem appropriate to follow the current trends in European policy and promote this sustainable mode of transport. This will require state subsidies, as elsewhere. At minimum, a programme of care and maintenance for the existing non-passenger freight lines should be put in place.

[21] Europa website, *Introduction to EU Railway Policy*.

8. Summary and Conclusions

- The WDC sees the Strategic Rail Study as critically important to the formulation of transport policy in Ireland. Investment in transport infrastructure is a key tool in fostering the government's committed aim of balanced regional development and will have implications for the way Ireland develops and how its residents live and work in future decades.

- The current rail network is a key component of national transport infrastructure and is a substantial national asset. Rail transport has several advantages particularly its environmental superiority. These include better energy efficiency, lower emissions, reduced congestion costs and a better safety record.

- The WDC, in its response to the commitment to balanced regional development in the NDP has always maintained that infrastructure provision in the Western Region must be 'development-driven'. This will promote the growth of towns and existing urban centres in the region, which in turn will facilitate the development of 'critical mass' as a counterbalance to over-growth in the East. We believe that such thinking should inform the SRS particularly in light of other development strategies such as the NSS.

- The WDC believes that significant improvements in terms of new rolling stock, additional services, better timetabling and increased speeds on the radial inter-city services from the Western Region to and from Dublin are required. Clearly, if Sligo, Ballina, Castlebar/Westport are to be designated as 'gateway' or 'hub' towns in the NSS, it is crucial that they have reliable, efficient and sufficient rails links to Dublin and other major centres.

- The WDC have consistently supported a detailed feasibility study of the proposed Western Rail Corridor. We believe such a route could be significant, not just in terms of providing an economic corridor with the potential to develop critical mass and a counterbalance to the East, but also in allowing the development of extended commuter routes between towns along this corridor.

- Regarding commuter routes, the WDC believes that given Galway's position as the key population and growth centre in the Western Region and the probable designation of Sligo as a gateway town in the forthcoming NSS, it is opportune for the Strategic Rail Study to examine the feasibility of commuter options for these centres.

- Moving from car-based commuting to rail requires a considerable shift in consumer attitudes and behaviour. To be a realistic counter-attraction rail must be cost effective and not incur out of pocket expenses for potential customers. For the proposed routes to be successful, it is also necessary to ensure that the services are frequent, efficient, comfortable and reliable, competitively priced, and that there are efficient linkages to customers' final destinations. Other facilities such as 'park and ride' may also be required. Any feasibility study should examine all these issues in detail.

- In order to promote balanced regional development, enhance the capability of Shannon Airport to serve the Western Region and ease congestion on the road network, the Western Development Commission supports progressing the proposed Shannon Rail Link and its connection to Ennis.

- The declining use of rail freight in recent years reflects the inability of rail to compete on a commercial basis with road carriage. The nature of the goods carried, the distances involved and the availability of services are among the reasons for this decline.

- It is difficult to compare the real cost of rail versus road freight transport. Overheads associated with rail include costs of maintaining depots, equipment and labour costs. Where rail operators are required to justify fully all costs and benefits, rail will inevitably compete unfavourably with road, where costs are distributed differently.

- In other European countries subventions to rail freight have been introduced to enable rail freight operators to compete with road hauliers and encourage the use of rail freight. The rationale for such subsidies is based on the need to reduce road congestion, the superior safety record, and the greater environmental sustainability and energy efficiency of rail transport.

- EU transportation policy is based on the promotion of sustainable energy efficient modes of transport. Given the existence of a substantial (if somewhat in need of upgrading) rail freight infrastructure in Ireland, it would seem appropriate to follow the current trends in European policy and promote this sustainable mode of transport.

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