



**Western Development Commission (WDC) Response
to the All Island Strategic Rail Review
January 2022**



Introduction

The Western Development Commission (WDC) is a statutory body with a remit to promote and encourage economic and social development in the Western Region (counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Galway, Roscommon, and Clare). The WDC operates under the aegis of the Department of Rural and Community Development. The WDC also has a lead role in promoting the Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) in the context of Project Ireland 2040, which extends from Donegal to Kerry. The WDC works in co-operation with national, regional and local bodies involved in western development to ensure that the Western Region maximises its full development potential.

The WDC welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to the All Island Strategic Rail Review. This submission sets out the views of the WDC, following the format of the Consultation paper questions.

The WDC regards the provision of quality transport as essential to underpin the economic and social activity and development of the Western Region. Likewise, the WDC recognises the importance of the low carbon transition¹ and has published a report in relation to this in 2021.

The Western Region (the seven counties under the WDC remit) is largely rural. Using the CSO definition 64.7% of the population live outside of towns of 1,500 or more. Using the definition in [Ireland 2040 the National Planning Framework](#), 80% of people in Western Region live outside of towns of 10,000. Thus, WDC work has a particular focus on the needs of, and opportunities for, more regional and rural areas and is particularly interested in improvements in regional and rural transport.

1. Of the goals listed below, please rank them in terms of importance to you (by clicking and dragging), with the first being most important and the last least important.

1. Enhance Regional and Rural Accessibility
2. Encourage sustainable mobility
3. Foster economic activity
4. Contribute to Decarbonisation
5. Improve All Island Connectivity Between Major Cities
6. Achieve economic and financial feasibility

2.1 Are you responding as an individual or on behalf of a group/organisation?

Organisation

2.2 What is your personal or organisational vision for the future of rail in your area, or across the island?

A key issue for the development of all regions is transport accessibility. Improved transport accessibility to and in the regions will be critical to supporting wider Government policy.

The Government's overarching policy, the National Planning Framework (NPF), Project Ireland 2040, sets out an ambition to achieve 75% population growth in the regions. The NPF notes the *"need to manage more balanced growth between these three regions because at the moment Dublin, and to a lesser extent the wider Eastern and Midland area, has witnessed an overconcentration of population, homes and jobs. We cannot let this continue unchecked and so our aim is to see a roughly 50:50*

¹ <https://westerndevelopment.ie/insights/making-the-transition-to-a-low-carbon-society-in-the-western-region-2/>



distribution of growth between the Eastern and Midland region, and the Southern and Northern and Western regions, with 75% of the growth to be outside of Dublin and its suburbs” (Sec 1.2, NPF).

The WDC supports these objectives. Ensuring that the national rail transport network enables this overarching vision is a key priority.

The WDC considers that changes and improvements to the rail network can be categorised broadly as strategic and operational. Strategic considers changing the network, building and reinstating lines, or closing lines, while operational changes largely focusses on the network as is but improving its operation. Usually it may be considered that it is less expensive to fund operational changes rather than strategic change but given the wide ranging remit of the Strategic Rail Review, the WDC considers both. The WDC would consider that relatively inexpensive operational changes should be done as a matter of course.

Strategic Change

The rail network is extensive and there are regular services to the four cities outside of Dublin and to towns in the West and to Sligo (a designated growth centre) in the North West and as such serve the population growth centres identified in the National Planning Framework. The rail network is a critical part of the public transport infrastructure and investment in it is needed to support the NPF goals.

The All Island Strategic Rail Review consultation paper (November 2021), provides useful data and analysis however it is somewhat limited, in that passenger demand reflects the provision of services and often higher frequency services. Usage or demand for rail services cannot be identified if the service is not there. Passenger demand reflects the provision of services and often higher frequency services. As the consultation paper notes low service levels might actually dampen the demand for rail as in the case of Rosslare. Therefore service availability and service levels are key considerations which need to be considered when measuring demand.

It is welcome that the Review will look at ways to improve our current rail infrastructure, including the feasibility of high/higher speeds and electrification, better connections to the North-West, and role of rail in the efficient movement of goods.

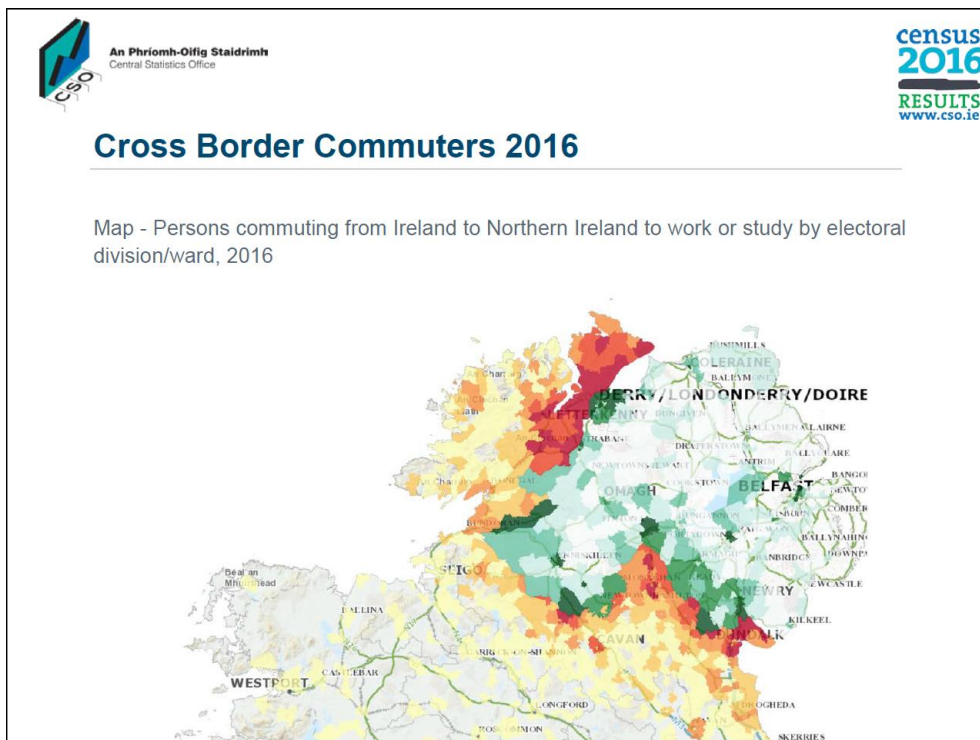
The WDC understands that *the Review will consider how the rail network on the island of Ireland can improve to promote sustainable connectivity into, and between the major cities, enhance regional accessibility and support balanced regional development.* The WDC supports this but believes that in addition to the cities, the regional growth centres of Sligo, Athlone (and Letterkenny) in the Western Region need also to be included in the considerations as much as the seven cities across the island. In particular Sligo and Athlone, on the existing rail network are regional growth centres whose performance will be instrumental in delivering on the Project Ireland goals. Improvements in the rail services to other urban centres such as Castlebar, Westport and Ballina will also be very important in this context.

New lines and re-instatement of lines

If the Review is to consider investment in new lines/ reinstatement of lines and services, a key route that should be considered is Derry-Letterkenny-Sligo-Claremorris-Tuam-Galway and onwards to existing services to Limerick, Cork and Waterford. The following are some key benefits that could be realised, many of which are aligned to the six strategic goals of the Rail Review.



1. There is a legacy of relatively weak transport links in the north west. Accessibility to parts of the West and North west by road is poor relative to other parts of the country. This in part reflects the lack of a motorway network serving much of the Region – north of Tuam there is no motorway and there have been continual delays in upgrades to the A5 connecting the North West to the N2 and onwards to Dublin. Improved transport infrastructure here will support the policy goals of Project Ireland 2040 and the population and employment growth targets for the NWRA region. <https://www.nwra.ie/pdfs/NWRA-RSES-2020-2032.pdf> The following goals will be supported; **Goal 2: Improve All Island Connectivity between Major Cities**, **Goal 3: Enhance Regional & Rural accessibility**, **Goal 5: Foster Economic Activity**.
2. Investment in new interurban rail services providing better connections to the urban centres in the West and North West will align with NPF Project Ireland growth targets. The following goals will be supported; **Goal 2: Improve All Island Connectivity between Major Cities**, **Goal 3: Enhance Regional & Rural accessibility**, **Goal 5: Foster Economic Activity**.
3. This route aligns with the promotion of the AEC in Project Ireland 2040 (for which the WDC has a coordinating role with DCRD. As noted in the NPF there is *A particular focus on improving accessibility and connectivity northwards on the emerging Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) network, that links a network of major centres on the western seaboard*; NPF p.29. p.43. **Goal 2: Improve All Island Connectivity between Major Cities**, **Goal 3: Enhance Regional & Rural accessibility**, **Goal 5: Foster Economic Activity**.
4. More rail transport use will be consistent with **Goal 1** of contributing to decarbonisation.
5. Investment in cross border rail links between Derry and Letterkenny can provide a sustainable alternative to car based cross border commuting between Letterkenny & Derry with a relatively low carbon mode. As Census 2016 data shows the extent of commuting across the border is highest in the Letterkenny/Derry region, see CSO map below.
Goal 1: Contribute to Decarbonisation, **Goal 4: Encourage Sustainable Mobility**, **Goal 5: Foster Economic Activity**.



Source: CSO <https://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/newsevents/documents/census2016profile6-commutinginireland/Cross Border Commuters 2016 v2.pdf>



6. Investment in rail lines will support more rail freight from the north west to ports in south and south east, discussed further below. This will support the following goals; **Goal 4:** *Encourage Sustainable Mobility*, **Goal 5:** *Foster Economic Activity*.

Consideration of investment in new lines across the network would need to ensure that service levels and journey times would be high enough to attract passengers from alternative modes. The active promotion on marketing of new services would also be required.

Transport is a multi-modal activity and integration of modes is critical when considering the value of various investments in specific modes, e.g. rail. This may be more important in regional and rural locations where there are lower service frequencies and more interconnections may be required.

Intraregional Commuting

The Review indicates it will consider the interactions between proposed improvements to inter-urban rail and existing or proposed commuter rail services.

It is important to consider the rail network as an asset with the potential to enable development in many regions. While intercity rail services are often considered as point to point destinations, the rail service can also be an important transport mode for shorter distance commuting (e.g. Athenry and Oranmore to Galway city service). There is likely to be potential for further expansion of commuting services along the existing intercity lines, serving Galway, Athlone, Sligo and other centres. Use of mainline rail for commuting to work' services must arrive into regional towns at times that allow for work travel. For example, currently the arrival time into Sligo is 10.15, which precludes commuting to Sligo from centres such as Carrick-on-Shannon or other towns along the route.

There could be additional demand arising from the increase in remote working and access to regional working hubs.

Similar to the bus network, when considering the rail network, there can be a tendency to focus on connectivity between regional centres and the capital. Higher line speeds and frequencies would be welcome on many routes but the focus should also be on accessibility to and between the regional centres and stops en route.

Access to work and services

New, and developing travel patterns to work are also important in the context of regional accessibility. Transport investment should encourage and facilitate new work practices such as remote working in hubs located closer to where people live. This can help manage and reduce future travel demand sustainably and cost effectively. Given the likely considerable increase in more flexible and more remote working, post-pandemic, there are opportunities for employees to reduce their commutes and work closer to home in regional hubs for example. Many of these are located in town centres and accessible by foot from the local train station.

The WDC considers access to services as an important area for improved transport provision. Improving connectivity for regional and rural areas is essential as access to education, employment, services, and markets are all necessary to strengthen the regional and rural economies. Travelling for work, business or educational purposes is important, but most journeys are made to reach services.

Changes have been taking place in service provision with centralisation and consolidation of some service provision meaning longer journeys are required. For example, health services are increasingly



concentrated in centres of excellence, usually the cities, especially for critical illness such as cancer and various specialist services. In the Western Region, for example Galway University Hospital, serves the entire West and North west regions.

2.3 Are there any key gaps in rail provision in your area, or elsewhere where you would like to travel by rail?

The WDC recognises that investment in transport infrastructure will not achieve regional growth by itself, but quality transport infrastructure is a necessary element of any strategy for regional growth. To achieve the vision of Project Ireland 2040 regional and rural accessibility must be enhanced. Improvements in services and reliable journey times to are needed for better accessibility and connectivity which are vital for growth.

Much of the West, north west has a relatively poor transport infrastructure. If there is consideration of new lines the priority should be along the AEC corridor (see discussion on p 3, 4).

Where the rail infrastructure exists there needs to be investment to optimise its use and maximise patronage levels at an operational level.

Operational Improvements

Service levels. As the consultation paper notes, on some lines, service levels are low enough to discourage demand. Given the value of rail as a low carbon transport mode, serving a population projected to grow and with an increasing need to reduce carbon emissions, improved service levels should be delivered to ensure maximum take-up.

Scheduling. To improve public transport use, the level and timing of rail services are important. Regularly scheduled services are crucial, but to allow the use of mainline rail for commuting to work' services must arrive into regional towns at times that allow for work travel. For example, currently the arrival time into Sligo is 10.15, which precludes commuting to Sligo from centres such as Carrick-on-Shannon or other towns along the route.

Fares. Fares need to be competitive and priced to incentivise shorter journeys on mainline rail to encourage travel between regional cities and towns by rail. Rural commuters using the mainline service should be able to avail of the Tax saver incentive to use public transport to and from work. For example, in the Western Region, it is currently only available on services between Athenry and Galway.

Line Speeds. It appears that those lines earmarked for further investment in improving line speeds are those lines already with the highest speeds such as Dublin-Cork. It would be appropriate to first improve the line speeds on other lines and this would be consistent with the aims of Project Ireland 2040 and rebalancing population growth towards the regions.

Active Promotion

The development of new services and expansion of existing services is needed but current demand may be latent as it takes time for people to respond to and take up new service provision. When considering the introduction of new services, on existing lines as well as on any new/reinstated lines, apart from requiring very good service levels, there is also a need for very active promotion to ensure take-up.

An example is the establishment of the Oranmore rail station which experienced low patronage levels in the first few years. It was only following active marketing and



promotion, the introduction of free car parking and strong employment and economic growth, that passenger levels grew considerably.

Improved network connectivity- Better linkages and timetabling

Better linkages on existing lines with better timetabling could help increase patronage levels and make more use of the existing network. There needs to be better use of connections outside Dublin, for example travel from Cork to Castlerea, Co. Roscommon – is possible changing in Portlaoise and Portarlinton, but many of the services require a trip all the way in to Heuston and changing there. And vice versa. Public transport connectivity includes access by bus and rail and many parts of regional and rural Ireland will not be served by the rail network and will therefore rely on the public and private bus network. Better integration of all modes is needed. In this context the WDC has recently submitted a consultation to Bus Connects, see [here](#).

Connectivity to Ports and Airports

The rail network should be examined to identify ways in which it can support rail freight and decarbonise transport.

The rail network should be examined to identify ways in which it can support international passenger and freight traffic via our ports and airports. Currently none of our airports have a rail connection, however several ports are rail connected and there is opportunity for continued growth which can also help decarbonise transport.

Brexit has had a greater impact on traffic from and to Irish ports and the UK landbridge became a much less attractive route to continental Europe. At the same time, Covid has also brought changes in consumer behaviour highlighting the importance of supply chains and logistics. This had significant impacts on port traffic highlighting the value and importance of ports across the regions, particularly Rosslare, Cork and Waterford. Both Cork and Rosslare have increased direct freight services to Europe as an alternative to the UK landbridge, with significant growth at Rosslare.

Rail is particularly suited to high volume freight, carried over relatively long distances and for import/export via the ports. The largest rail freight volumes originate in Co. Mayo. Waterford Port has expanded its rail freight offering with a new twice-weekly rail freight service in each direction between Ballina, County Mayo and Waterford Port. As well as an alternative transport mode for business in the North-west, this has potential to decarbonise freight transport; rail freight generates 76% less emissions than road haulage. The development of these routes also highlights their geographic benefit to parts of the western seaboard in accessing European markets.

The WDC welcomes the publication of the Irish Rail Freight Strategy 2040, which recognises the alignment of the objectives in Project Ireland 2040, Regional population growth targets, the need to decarbonise transport and support regional businesses. It is unfortunate (though understandable), that the Rail Freight strategy is confined to the Republic and it is hoped that any wider benefits to the promotion of rail freight on an all-island basis will be captured, recommendations identified along with scope for implementation in the forthcoming All Island Rail Strategy.



The potential growth in rail freight identified is also very welcome such as the potential to increase the savings on CO₂ emissions fivefold by 2040. (The 2015 WDC report on Rail freight and the Western Region² indicated the prospect of an increase in rail freight modal share from 1% to 4%).

The development of infrastructure and intermodal terminals is also very welcome including the Tactical Rail Freight terminals at Galway, Sligo and Ballina. These should be developed at the earliest opportunity to support further regional industrial investment.

Better surface connectivity including rail can support international air access to and from the regions which will support the Project Ireland 2040 regional growth targets. Exporters are concerned with the ever-increasing concentration of traffic through Dublin Airport. The Irish Exporters Association (IEA) advocate for support for better air connectivity from the West of Ireland such as direct access to a European hub airport. IEA research³ noted that of those IEA members surveyed many said that they would use a different Irish airport as their primary route to move goods from Ireland if there were better services and better surface links to airports. Rail connectivity could be part of the solution also.

4. Please select your Council/Council Area:

WDC Region – Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway and Clare.

The Atlantic Economic Corridor – the seven counties above plus counties Limerick & Kerry. The WDC is the co-ordinating body for the development of this corridor in conjunction with its parent Department, the Department of Rural and Community Development.

The WDC is pleased to make this submission to the consultation on the All Island Strategic Rail Review. If there are any queries concerning this submission, please contact me.

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² <https://westerndevelopment.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/WDC-Rail-Freight-Study-Final-Report-18-12-15.pdf?dl=1>

³ <https://irishexporters.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/IEA-Draft-Transport-Paper.pdf>