



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Comprehensive Transport
Delivery Structures: Northern Ireland
Transport Working Group Briefing

24 April 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Inquiry into Comprehensive Transport Delivery Structures: Northern Ireland Transport Working Group Briefing

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Alex Easton
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr David McNarry
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Dr Stephen McCabe	Northern Ireland Transport Working Group
Mr Steven Patterson	Northern Ireland Transport Working Group
Dr Joanna Purdy	Northern Ireland Transport Working Group

The Chairperson: I welcome Dr Stephen McCabe, who is the policy projects officer at the Northern Ireland Environment Link; Dr Joanna Purdy, who is the public health development officer at the Institute of Public Health; and Steven Patterson, who is the Northern Ireland director of Sustrans. As you know, your comments will be recorded by Hansard as part of the inquiry. You have 10 minutes to make a presentation, and then leave yourselves open to questions.

Dr Stephen McCabe (Northern Ireland Transport Working Group): Thank you, Chair, for having us present to you today. As you know, we represent the Northern Ireland Transport Working Group, which is co-ordinated by the Northern Ireland Environment Link. The transport working group is a cross-sectoral group comprising members with interest in transport policy, planning and delivery. The group advocates best practice transport planning and appraisal approaches, including proper consideration of cross-sectoral benefits in a number of key areas — for example, health and well-being, economic development, environmental protection and targets, energy security, social justice and inclusion, and mobility. All those things will lead naturally to the development of a more sustainable, more integrated transport system.

The group is responding to three of the terms of reference in the inquiry — namely, 3, 4 and 5. I will make the point at the outset that with appropriate policy objectives, sustainable transport and active travel can play a very significant role in the delivery of the Programme for Government. In fact, they can deliver on all five priorities and 20 of the 80 key commitments. An annex to our submission details that. So, for example, public transport can help us to deliver on environmental targets. That should

be reflected in public transport policy objectives for Northern Ireland. The transport sector now accounts for 25% of Northern Ireland's total greenhouse gas emissions. So, greater investment in sustainable public transport is a key way forward in reducing that and meeting targets.

Before I pass over to my colleague, I will comment briefly on term of reference 4 on current structures and Transport NI proposals. The Transport Working Group welcomed the published proposals for a new independent middle-tier public transport authority that is responsible for translation of high-level policy objectives into meaningful operation standards for Translink. We agreed with the Department's preferred option in that the independence of such a body would be an important factor in bringing together all the stakeholders, providing a cohesive voice for them and bringing about the best possible service. We have some concerns that the latest proposals result in combining public transport responsibilities with those of Roads Service. In that transition, we stress that there is a need for monitoring to ensure that delivery of public transport does not come off as the poor cousin in that relationship. We suggest that the budget is already weighted towards roads where the regional transport strategy (RTS) suggests a 65:35 split. It is drifting towards roads rather than public transport. We therefore recommend a significant shift in budgetary emphasis towards public transport. I will now pass to my colleague Joanna Purdy.

Dr Joanna Purdy (Northern Ireland Transport Working Group): Good morning, Chair and Committee members. Following on from Stephen's comments, I will talk briefly about public transport and active travel, which is walking and cycling, in the context of improving health and will also outline some recent policy developments at a UK level and in the Republic of Ireland that might be helpful in informing the development of transport policy and delivery for Northern Ireland. Transport is one of a number of social, environmental and economic factors that are outside the remit of healthcare but known to influence health. Well planned and designed transport policy and delivery structures can help to promote access to facilities and services, as well as facilitating walking and cycling, all of which have a positive impact on health. That is particularly important in the context of providing fair and equal access to public transport for all members of society and helping to address health inequalities. If we consider areas of Belfast in particular, or even Northern Ireland, we find that people in deprived areas are less likely to have access to a car, so there is a greater need for a public transport system that serves those communities well. It is also important to look at transport poverty. For those who do own cars, we have to consider the cost of fuel, running a car, insurance and maintenance, and balance that against access to public transport and how that could be promoted. It is worthwhile to highlight the point about rural dwellers, who are, clearly, more reliant on cars. They may well be at an increased risk of social exclusion because of poor infrastructure for active travel or poor public transport networks.

As part of the inquiry into comprehensive transport delivery structures, I want to draw attention to the links between public transport and active travel. If we look at the current levels of those who are obese and overweight in Northern Ireland, we see that over half of the adult population and one third of children are either overweight or obese. That is coupled with low levels of physical activity among adults. Just over one third of adults in Northern Ireland participate in the recommended 30 minutes of physical activity five times a week. Currently, 1% of journeys are made by bicycle and 16% by walking. Those percentages are lower than those of our counterparts in Great Britain. I know that that is addressed in the active travel strategy. We encourage the promotion of active travel for the obvious health benefits of reducing the number of people who are overweight and obese and helping to tackle chronic conditions, such as coronary heart disease, cancer and strokes. International evidence demonstrates that countries with the highest levels of active travel have the lowest levels of obesity. You will find details in the institute's report on active travel.

I want to highlight some current policy developments in the UK. The Department for Transport in England recently published its door-to-door strategy, which sets out how it wants to achieve more sustainable transport through public transport, walking and cycling. The strategy focuses on access to reliable information; affordability of public transport; straightforward connections; and comfortable and safe facilities. Wales takes a different approach, focusing on active travel, and has introduced the Active Travel (Wales) Bill, through which it wants to make active travel the safer, more practical option. It is anticipated that the Bill's provisions will come into effect in January 2014.

I want to make a final point about the Republic of Ireland's transport strategy, which was published in 2009. The Republic of Ireland wants to reduce private car usage and make transport accessible to all members of society. A number of its initiatives are outlined in the briefing paper. Steven will, probably, refer to some of the additional benefits through job creation. Thank you.

Mr Steven Patterson (Northern Ireland Transport Working Group): As Joanna said, Northern Ireland fares badly when compared with the UK average for the number of walking and cycling trips. We are at 17%; the UK average is 25%. There is a lot of potential to get people walking, cycling and linking into public transport. One third of the trips that we make are journeys of less than two miles, which could easily be cycled or walked, yet 50% of these trips are made by car. So, immediately, we could target short journeys.

No doubt, the Department presented the active travel strategy for Northern Ireland to you. It sets targets to double walking and cycling trips by 2020. We have had some successes. The Northern Ireland census figures show a 60% rise in cycling in the Belfast area over the past 10 years, with up to 5% and 6% of commuter journeys now being made by bike in some wards of South Belfast and East Belfast. This is because of good infrastructure, such as greenways and bus lanes, and the Government's cycle-to-work scheme.

There is a difference between the delivery of active travel and that of roads and public transport. All roads are owned by Roads Service, whose engineers deliver that service, whereas the infrastructure for walking and cycling may include roads, parkland owned by councils, riverside paths owned by the DCAL or pavements being upgraded by Department for Social Development. Behavioural cultural programmes, such as cycle training and motivational programmes for walking, involve the Public Health Agency, the Department for Regional Development (DRD), local councils, the Tourist Board and Translink. Most of the Department's and the Committee's emphasis is, of course, on regional initiatives, but what is hugely important in active travel are the local, council-based or town-based strategies with local targets and local forums. They bring together all the government agencies that I have just listed, along with the third sector, in a co-ordinated approach that delivers cross-departmental benefits but requires cross-departmental involvement, local councillors and the third sector coming together on the local, town-based strategies and plans.

Finally, I thought it prudent to let you know that the UK's all-party parliamentary cycling group produced its report today and has come up with 18 points. No doubt, the Committee will have an opportunity to hear a bit more about that in late June when the cycling conferences take place.

Just to finish, there are four —

The Chairperson: Very quickly, draw your remarks to a close. Time is up.

Mr Patterson: There are four summary points in the paper. The first is that public transport involves more than just buses; it is about the door-to-door journey, which, inevitably, has a walking or cycling element. The second point is the importance of local, short journeys. The third is the cross-departmental benefits, and the final point is that the delivery of short journeys requires cross-departmental structures.

Mr Lynch: Thank you for the presentation. Most of it covered active travel. Recently, we were in the Netherlands, where they have been very successful in implementing active travel strategies, and you see that everywhere you go. What are the main barriers here? Are you happy with the planning here?

Mr Patterson: I will start off with the structural side. A lot of the transport work in Northern Ireland is done on a regional basis, so much of the focus is on inter-urban dual carriageways and railways. The focus is on long journeys. We feel that much more focus is needed, in addition to that, on short journeys. As I said, 65% of journeys are under 5 miles, so we think that the regional approach to this is not really the appropriate approach for delivery. That is why I say that the local town targets, the local town partnerships and the local town forum should deliver. Structurally, we need to get that right and involve elected council members, who will be picking up local transport issues such as traffic calming and the state of roads and pavements. There is no natural way for councillors to feed into the delivery. I do not think that, under RPA, councils will take over roads, but maybe one of the Committee's recommendations will be to examine how, through RPA, to encourage that integration.

The Chairperson: In fairness, councillors and local government play a very significant role in feeding back into government centrally, but I will not get into that debate today.

Mr Lynch: You mentioned the South of Ireland. In County Cavan, which I live beside, any roads that have been upgraded recently now have cycle lanes, no matter how small the upgrade.

Dr Purdy: It is also important to highlight the local employment benefits for the construction industry. There are opportunities and learning to be gained from that. If I may add to Steven's comment about barriers, we need to ensure that people have information on the transport facilities and services that are available. People need to know that, if they choose to cycle, a cycle route and cycle map are available; there are facilities at bus and train stations to safely store their bike; or they can bring their bike with them on the next leg of their journey.

Mr McNarry: That was an excellent and informative presentation on encouraging people to use public transport. The value for money of hybrid electric cars received very poor press recently. Have you thought about introducing hybrid buses here? Will you comment on increasing the use of electric-powered bicycles?

Dr McCabe: On buses, the first thing that we have to do is change the mindset of people so that they use public transport more. I am not an expert on electric vehicles, but we are some way off bringing in that technology in buses.

Mr McNarry: What about bicycles? I am thinking about older people.

Mr Patterson: Absolutely, especially for hillier environments. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNarry: I am not so old; I am just thinking ahead.

Mr Patterson: You are right. The Netherlands was mentioned, which is almost entirely level. That is not the case in Northern Ireland, although parts of the east, south and centre of Belfast, where a good cycling culture has begun, are fairly level. Obviously, in other towns and cities, there are hills. Bicycle brochures advertise electric bicycles much more now, even in Holland. So Sustrans is piloting a scheme in one of the national parks in Scotland to trial electric bicycles.

Mr McNarry: If you want to lend me one for a couple of weeks, I am up for testing it.

Mr Patterson: You would pilot one?

Mr McNarry: Yes.

The Chairperson: You could lend him your Brompton.

Mr Patterson: I would need to get a battery put on it.

Mr McNarry: Is there a satnav with it as well? There are plenty of hills in Strangford.

Mr Patterson: There are issues of social inclusion. About 40% of households in Belfast, 25% across Northern Ireland, do not have access to a car. One has to ask how much the Government should be investing in electric cars. They still cost £25,000, and maybe they could give a £5,000 subsidy. I work beside the DRD office, and I have never seen anything other than a DRD promotional electric car at the charging points. So that may be one for the future. Are we giving households without access to cars enough alternatives to encourage them to get to jobs and services?

Dr McCabe: The Department's recent consultation on future rail investment included an option for electrification of the railways, but that was over a 30-year timescale. We suggest bringing that forward, but it must go hand in hand with the development of renewables.

The Chairperson: Maybe you could explain that to us another day. I understand that it would cost several billion pounds.

Mr McNarry: I have more chance of getting a bike to Comber than getting a train to Comber.

The Chairperson: John is next to ask a question, and he does have trains in his area.

Mr Dallat: Thanks for your presentation. Steven, I have met you several times. Has the time not come for legislation to force the Department, when designing roads, to make provision for cycle lanes?

Mr Patterson: Infrastructure is crucial, Mr Dallat. The 18 points on which the UK parliamentary inquiry reported can be split into infrastructure, legislative issues and behavioural change programmes. Four or five of the 18 are on infrastructure. The Connswater Community Greenway commissioned research by the UK Clinical Research Collaboration Public Health Research Centre of Excellence, which found that 60% of all households around the greenway think that the roads are unsafe for cycling. So getting the infrastructure right must be at the core of this. We are starting to see shoots of cycling kicking in. A total of 6% of adult trips to work in the council wards of Ballynafeigh and Woodstock is a start. They have good greenways — the Chairperson will know and use them — and they have good bus lanes. So it is all about the infrastructure.

The Chairperson: That lets you into a secret that I am active on the greenway, John — not so much in the past few months, but I do use it.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you for your presentation. At least two of you mentioned short journeys in particular. Am I right in thinking that the targets for active schools are at the whim of boards of governors or headmasters? If so, have you ever analysed the aims and objectives or done any promotional work to encourage others?

Mr Patterson: As you know, the Committee held one of its meetings in Gilnahirk Primary School, and some of your colleagues got on a bike. The Programme for Government (PFG) and the active travel strategy now have targets. I am aware of only two transport targets out of 80 in the PFG, one of which is about school travel and increasing the numbers walking and cycling to school. There is a big demand from children to walk and cycle to school. Our research shows that 45% of kids want to ride a bike to school but only 4% do, so there is lots of potential there. Hopefully, because the issue is cross-departmental, involving transport, health and education coming together, there is a real chance to have a major impact on school travel if adequate resources are put into that Programme for Government target.

Mrs D Kelly: Yes, but the targets are very much led by schools rather than their being incentivised by the Department.

Mr Patterson: Yes. Sustrans runs a range of practical projects in schools. The Bike It project has increased the rate of cycling to school from 4% to 17%. Our approach is school-centred, but the school principal, boards of governors and teachers need a bit of support to guide them through that. You are absolutely right that the school is key, but schools need infrastructure support. The Department of the Environment is initiating a cycle training review, which will, we hope, mean that kids will get cycle training, not just in the playground but in practice out on the road. There is a range of measures that will come together. That PFG target provides a great opportunity to focus on cycling.

Dr Purdy: I will add one final comment. It might be helpful to look at the Green-Schools initiative in the Republic of Ireland, whereby the schools set their own targets. They look at walking and cycling using what they call "park and stride" facilities, car pooling and public transport. It is probably worth looking at that example because they operate within the wider Eco-Schools programme, which also runs here in Northern Ireland, as part of a holistic environmental approach.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Joanna, Steven and Stephen for your presentation. I am sure that we will talk to you again in the future.