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Transport governance and the management of car dependency in Belfast

1 Introduction

Statistics show that Northern Ireland is heavily reliant on the private car as a means of travel. This paper outlines the extent of this problem, comparing rural and urban areas and looks at some of the key causes. This paper then analyses the policy response to managing car dependency over the last ten years, and provides a brief insight to how this will proceed in the context of budgetary constraints.

2 Background

- The average person in Northern Ireland makes 81.5% of all their journeys by car,¹ compared to 63% in the UK² and just over 50% in the Republic of Ireland (ROI);³
- Commuting, defined as travelling to or from work, is where most miles (21%) are accrued; shopping accounts for 15%; visiting friends homes 13%; and personal business, defined as travelling to access services such as banks, doctor etc. accounts for 11%. The remaining 40% was made up of various social activities.¹

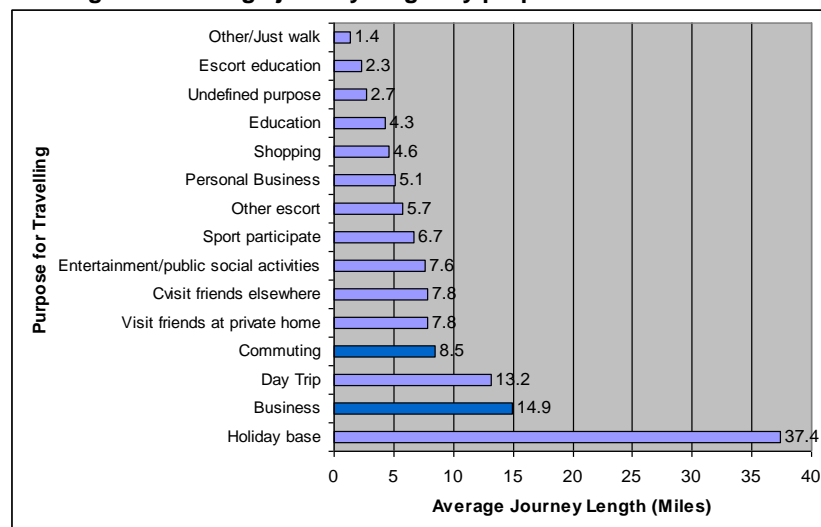
¹ (NISRA) Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2008) "Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2006-2008". (DRD) Department for Regional Development: Belfast

² (DfT) Department for Transport (2009) "National Travel Survey 2009" [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cg>

³ (CSO) Central Statistics Office (2006) "Census 2006 - Volume 12 - Travel to Work, School and College- Entire Volume" [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cr>

- Outside of occasional day trips and holidays, commuting and travelling for business, account for the longest journeys (see figure 1);⁴
- Belfast, where 30% of the total employment in Northern Ireland is based, is the main destination for commuters.⁵
- Among commuters there is a prevalence for single occupancy journeys (68% of journeys),⁶ contributing to Belfast being the third most congested city in GB and tenth most congested in Europe.⁷
- The average person in Northern Ireland makes 30% of their journeys, less than one mile, in a car; 68% of journeys between one and two miles by car; and 85% of journeys from 2 to 5 miles by car. Encouraging “Smarter Travel choices” i.e. walking, and cycling, for these short journeys has been a policy target in recent years.

Figure 1: Average journey length by purpose: 2006-2008



Source: NISRA (2008)⁸

Car ownership

Proximity to employment has traditionally been one of the major determining factors of whether or not to own a car, along with other variables such as age, gender, geography and income levels. Often the decision to own a car will also depend on the viability of alternatives, such as public transport, with the decision whether or not to use this based on service quality, availability, reliability and cost.

In 2009/10, three quarters of households in Northern Ireland (77%) owned a car or had access to a car while the proportion of Northern Ireland households owning or having access to more than one car, has more than trebled from 11% in 1983 to 35% in

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Belfast City Council (2008) “Belfast: A Profile of the City 2008-2009” [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/4w>

⁶ McKibbin, M. (2006) *Correspondence with Mr. Gregory Campbell*, Dated 6 April 2006 [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cs>

⁷ Olson, P. and Kelly, N. (2008) “Europe’s Most Congested Cities”. *Forbes Magazine* [online] 28th April 2008 available from: <http://nia1.me/ct>

⁸ (NISRA) Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2008) “Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2006-2008”. (DRD) Department for Regional Development: Belfast

2009/10. Car ownership is clearly associated to social class, as only around half of the households (51%) living in the most deprived areas owned or had access to a car, compared to 90% of households living in the least deprived areas.⁹

The proportion of Households in Belfast who owned or had access to a car (57%) is significantly lower than the rest of the country.¹⁰ There are a number of reasons for this, not least that Belfast is the most deprived out of the 26 Local Government Districts (LGDs) while it has eight of the 10 most deprived wards in Northern Ireland.¹¹ In contrast Belfast benefits from viable alternatives to the car, including a comprehensive public transport network as well as the options to walk or cycle, given the relative proximity to services and employment.

Table one highlights the options available to urban dwellers; while the car remains the dominant mode (75%) for travelling to work, public transport (8%) and walking (13%) are well used. In contrast 90% of people in rural areas use a car to travel to work¹² and only 2 per cent use public transport.

Table 1: Method of travel to work by urban-rural1 split 2006-2008

Method of Travel to Work	Living in		All Northern Ireland
	Urban areas	Rural areas	
Car/van (include minibus/works van)	75%	90%	81%
Motorbike/Moped/Scooter	1%	0%	<1%
Bicycle	1%	0%	1%
Bus (include coach, private bus)	7%	2%	5%
NIR train	1%	0%	1%
Walk	13%	6%	10%
Other	2%	2%	2%
All methods of travel to work	100%	100%	100%

Source: Source: NISRA (2008)¹³

Public Transport Usage

Belfast is currently served by Metro, a subsidiary of Translink that came into operation in 2005, replacing City Bus. The rebranding, which included new modern rolling stock, new routes and increased service frequency was designed to reverse the decline in passenger journeys experienced by City Bus. The rebranding contributed to a 28% increase in passenger journeys between 2004-05 and 2010-11, as well as an overall

⁹ (NISRA) Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2010) "Continuous Household Survey 2009/10 Bulletin" [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cu>

¹⁰ (NISRA) Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2008) "Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2006-2008". (DRD) Department for Regional Development: Belfast

¹¹ Belfast City Council (2010) *Deprivation in Belfast* [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cw>

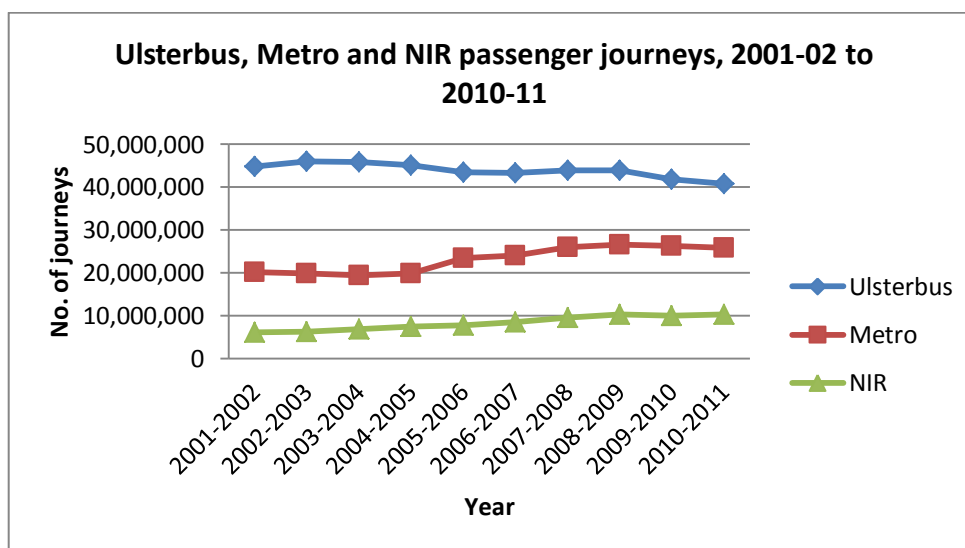
¹² Urban-Rural classification is based on the settlement bands defined in the Report of the Inter-Departmental Urban-Rural Definition Group: Bands A to E = Urban (settlements with a population of 4,500 or more) - Bands F to H = Rural (settlements with a population of less than 4,500 or open countryside).

¹³ (NISRA) Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2008) "Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2006-2008". (DRD) Department for Regional Development: Belfast

8.1% increase in public transport passenger journeys. However, Ulsterbus, which operates across the country and accounts for the greatest number of all passenger journeys made, actually experienced a 9.0% decrease in passenger journeys over the ten year period (2001-2 to 2010-11). The growth therefore was due to:

- Metro passenger journeys: these fell slightly from 20.2 million in 2001-02 to 19.9 million in 2004-05 before increasing sharply to 25.9 million in 2010-11, an increase of more than a quarter (28.0%); and
- NI Railways: proportionally NIR passenger journey saw the biggest increase of 67.1% from 6.2 million in 2001-02 to 10.4 million in 2010-11.

Figure 2: Ulsterbus, Metro and NIR passenger journeys 2001-02 to 2010-11



Source: Translink

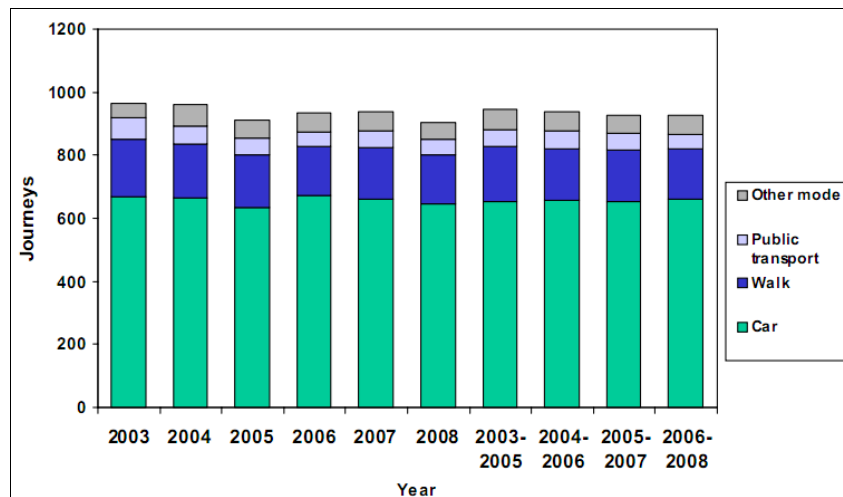
Belfast v Rural NI

These figures show that within the greater Belfast area and those areas with access to rail services (the East), the use of public transport is increasing. However, overall since 2003 the proportion of journeys made on public transport, compared to the car, has at best stagnated (see figure 3), with our reliance on the car showing no signs of decline.

Sub-Regional Transport Plans which were produced as a follow up to the 2002 Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) committed to increase public transport services in towns and cities outside Belfast, however, it was noted in the 2011 revised RTS that “...*funding constraints have either prevented their implementation or meant that services which were initially introduced have subsequently had to be withdrawn.*”¹⁴

¹⁴ (DRD) Department for Regional Development (2011) “Regional Transportation Strategy 2011 – Consultation Document [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cx>

Figure 3: Journey per person per year by main mode



Source: Source: NISRA (2008)¹⁵

The lack of public transport services outside of Belfast is evidenced through looking at the average distance travelled per person, per year and what mode they use (see table two). This shows that within Belfast 24% of all distance travelled is on something other than a private vehicle, including Translink (10%) and walking (7%). However, in both the East and West of the country, private vehicles are used to cover 90% of the total distance travelled and outside of Belfast public transport is used for only 6% of our total distance travelled, while the average person walked only 159 miles, compared to 267 miles in Belfast.

Table 2: Average distance travelled per person per year by mode & area: 2006-2008

Mode	Belfast		East		West		All areas	
	Miles	%	Miles	%	Miles	%	Miles	%
Walk/cycle	267	7	150	2	137	2	159	2
Private vehicle (car, etc.)	2675	76	5772	90	5719	90	5378	89
Translink	382	10	394	6	344	5	374	6
Other	182	5	89	1	145	2	122	2
All	3505	100	6405	100	6345	100	6033	100

Source: Source: NISRA (2008)¹⁶

¹⁵ (NISRA) Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (2008) "Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2006-2008". (DRD) Department for Regional Development: Belfast

¹⁶ Ibid.

While rural transport services dawdle, the rural population of Northern Ireland is growing.¹⁷ The centralisation of jobs and services will mean many will have to make regular, if not daily journeys back into urban centres, particularly Belfast. As things currently stand 90% of these journeys will, most likely, be made in a car.

This provides a challenge for policy makers: clearly our reliance on the car is unsustainable, carbon emissions have risen steadily in the last 20 years with cars contributing approximately 54% of the CO₂ from transport in 2008. Transport is now the only sector within Northern Ireland whose emissions have actually grown since 1990.¹⁸

Managing car dependency

The Regional Transportation Strategy published in 2002 aimed to halt the decline of public transport services, infrastructure and passenger levels, but as shown it was not successful as public transport use remains low, particularly when compared to the rest of the UK.¹⁹ The (then) Minister for Regional Development introduced what was called ‘a new start for public transport’ in 2002, stating:

“I want to see a new start for public transport in Northern Ireland. I want to begin a planning process that will lead to a public transport system fit for the needs of the years ahead - one that will meet the needs of rural and urban passengers and be capable of spearheading a successful and innovative pilot rapid transit system in the Belfast Metropolitan Area.”²⁰

The travel survey statistics indicate that that this vision has yet to be realised while infrastructure such as the Rapid Transit System has been slow to materialise. Nine years on, the revised Regional Development Strategy²¹ lays out the Executive’s vision for Belfast and its surrounding area in its Strategic Guidance. It is to: *“develop a thriving Metropolitan Area centred on a revitalised City of Belfast to ensure that it can compete internationally as a place to locate business, work and visit”*.

Managing Travel Demand plays an important role in this guidance. The Strategy recognises benefits of an efficient public transportation system and it identifies the congestion problem as one that requires ‘radical steps’. Measures proposed to discourage car dependency include:

¹⁷ (DARD) Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (2007) “Northern Ireland Strategy Plan For Implementation Of The EU Rural Development Regulation In 2007 – 2013” [online] available from: <http://tiny.cc/3hh5o>

¹⁸ Cross Departmental Working Group (2011) “Northern Ireland Greenhouse Gas Emissions Action Plan”. DOE: Belfast

¹⁹ (PWC) Price Waterhouse Coopers (2010) “Bridging the Gap: Transforming Public Transport in Northern Ireland”. PWC: Belfast [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cz>

²⁰ (DRD) Department for Regional Development (2002) “A New Start for Public Transport in Northern Ireland” DRD: Belfast [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/d0>

²¹ (DRD) Department for Regional Development (2011) “Shaping our Future: Regional Transportation Strategy 2025”. DRD: Belfast. Consultation Document [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cy>

- reducing the supply of long term car parking spaces in Belfast City Centre;
- pricing policies: This could include congestion charges;
- Innovative work practices: promotion of remote or flexible working;
- Improvements to public transportation: This will include innovative route and service options, rail feeder services, integrated transport facilities and orbital urban services;
- Introduction of rapid transit system: This will offer improved speed, reliability, comfort and access and will provide connection to the wider key transport network within the BMUA.
- Better land use planning: This will include the siting of new developments in locations, well served by public transport.²²

While these measures will indeed reduce congestion within Belfast City Centre the RDS says little about how it intends to encourage people from outside the city to be less car dependent. With regards public transport in rural areas, the RDS states that it will: *“Promote integrated rural transport initiatives which meet the needs of those living in isolated areas and in particular elderly and disabled people”*. This measure will ease ‘transport poverty’ among those who do not have access to a car but on its own is unlikely to achieve modal shift among those who do.

Regional Transportation Strategy (Draft)

While the RDS identifies high level policy direction with regards transport, and focuses somewhat on Belfast, the revised RTS provides a more specific strategic direction for the entire region. DRD recognises that it cannot rely on the public’s sense of social and environmental responsibility to achieve modal shift and states that *“Public transport and active travel options should be safer, convenient and reliable alternatives to the car making them the first choice for people.”*²³ Therefore, the areas DRD plans to concentrate on in the next ten years include:

- better integration of transport services;
- better public transport;
- encouraging more car sharing and active travel;
- greater accessibility for both business and communities; and
- new roads infrastructure at pinch-points on the network.

This combination of hard (infrastructure) and a soft (education) measures is not new. Since 2005, the DRD Travelwise initiative has engaged with businesses, schools and commuters to promote and encourage sustainable modes of travel as alternatives to the private car. It focuses on promotional events, such as bike week and walk to school week, while www.carshereni.com provides commuters with a platform to meet people making a similar journey, which they can potentially share. Based on data in the travel

²² Ibid (page 97)

²³ (DRD) Department for Regional Development (2011) *“Regional Transportation Strategy 2011 – Consultation Document* [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cx> (page 25)

survey these soft initiatives, while welcome, have not achieved a critical mass to make a significant impact, therefore their impact on managing car dependency going forward remains to be seen.

Strategic objectives

The (Draft) Revised RTS has identified a number of strategic objectives which combined, can address many of the current problems with our transport provision and how we as consumers use it. The objectives include making improvements to public transport in terms of access, service, price and reliability; making improvements to roads in terms of addressing bottlenecks and improving safety; making cars less attractive by increased road and car park pricing; and encourage active travel. Examples of these objectives include:

- Selective Road Improvements to address Bottlenecks;
- Improved Connections Between Different Modes of Transport;
- Maximising the Efficient Use of All Transport Assets;
- Active Management of the Transportation Networks;
- Prioritisation of Road Space for Public Transport;
- Introduction of more Park and Ride Facilities;
- Maintenance of Transport Infrastructure to Best Practice Standards;
- Good Transport Solutions to Growth Areas and Town and City Centres;
- Reduction of Speed Limits In Rural And Urban Areas where appropriate;
- Introduction of Further Innovative Public Transport Services which meet the Needs Of Communities;
- Expansion of Travelwise Initiatives;
- Promotion of Walking and Cycling;
- Restricting Car Parking in Towns and Cities;
- Enforcing Parking and Traffic Offences;

Belfast on the Move

Belfast on the Move is a scheme currently being developed by DRD to manage car dependency in Belfast City Centre through implementing a variety of Sustainable Transport Enabling Measures (STEM). The STEM measures are based on the principles set out in the Department's documents, The RTS, The RDS and the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) which place an emphasis on the need to create a modal shift away from private vehicle dependency in a bid to reduce congestion levels.²⁴

²⁴ (DRD) Department for Regional Development (2011) "Belfast on the Move Transport Masterplan for Belfast City Centre". DRD: Belfast

The key for Belfast on the Move going forward is to get through the relative statutory processes, which will require making a series of Traffic Regulation Orders. This will enable Road Service to setup:

- priority for public transport on existing road space within the city centre;
- 40 new disabled parking bays in the city centre;
- 2.6km of new bus lanes than can also be used by taxis and bicycles;
- 1.3km of new dedicated cycle lanes; and
- 390m of new dedicated service bays.

The redistribution of existing road space within Belfast City Centre will allow the Department to progress with its plans to deliver a Bus Rapid Transit system into Belfast, subject to funding.

Funding

Historic under-investment in public transport has led to Northern Ireland's dependency on the private car. In view of the Departmental Strategies discussed, The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI) had committed to increase investment in public transport to £725m over the ten years from 2008-18, compared to a proposed £3.1bn on road spending over same period. On a per capita basis, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland invest at least twice as much as Northern Ireland on public transport.²⁵

This type of comparison must however be taken in context, as the historic underinvestment in public transport was also experienced in roads and these require significant investment also.²⁶ Whether the current balance of 3:1 in favour of roads is appropriate, is open to debate. It is certainly not common with EU regions.

Regardless of the Investment Strategy, the latest budget brought about an end to what has been a prolonged period of public expenditure growth and seriously altered these plans. Northern Ireland's block grant has been cut with the capital budget taking the biggest hit, reducing from £1.2 billion in 2010 to £0.8 billion by 2014-2015. This represents a cut in real terms of 37 per cent.²⁷ The ratio of spend between roads and public transport has also been cut dramatically with transport's allocation now less than one fifth (see table 4).

Current spending proposals will allow the DRD to fund further development of its Rapid Transit system as well as allowing them to 'plan to invest' in a number of sustainable transport initiatives. There are, however, plans cut spend on improving walking and cycling infrastructure and public transport. This will ultimately mean less money will be spent on bus replacement affecting quality, comfort and reliability of service while some

²⁵ (PWC) Price Waterhouse Coopers (2010) *"Bridging the Gap: Transforming Public Transport in Northern Ireland"*. PWC: Belfast [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/cz>

²⁶ Forster, A. (2009) "Roads for prosperity alive and well in Murphy's land". *Transport Xtra* 28th. August – September 10 2009

²⁷ Northern Bank (2010) *Comprehensive Spending Review Analysis* [online] available from: <http://nia1.me/3v>

of the less profitable routes are likely to be cut. These type measures are likely to increase car dependency.

Table 4: Department for Regional Development – Capital Expenditure

	2011-12 £m	2012-13 £m	2013-14 £m	2014-15 £m	Total over period £m
Roads	144.9	254.5	387.4	324.7	1,111.5
Transport	90.7	25.7	13.3	53.9	183.6
EU Structural Funds	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.7
Total objective	235.8	280.3	400.9	378.8	1,295

Summary

- Car dependency in Northern Ireland is escalating, despite its reduction being targeted by policy over the last ten years;
- The rural nature of the country is of course a major factor, however, land use planning, centralisation of employment and services and a lack of investment in public transport, particularly outside Belfast has exacerbated the problem;
- Although the rhetoric from government has been all about sustainable transport, the reality is that transport is the only sector whose emissions have increased in the last ten years;
- The latest budget has served to highlight that despite the sustainability rhetoric, road building is a greater priority than reducing traffic;
- Measures have been identified which are proven to reduce car use, including road pricing, reduced car parking, car parking charges and higher taxes, but these are politically sensitive;
- Measures such as more frequent/accessible/reliable/comfortable/affordable public transport are expensive and the money does not appear forthcoming;
- Managing car dependency is one of key issues facing the DRD and as such requires an adequate policy response. The revised RTS, currently out for consultation provides this, however, two elements are crucial to its success:
 1. Securing sufficient funding; and
 2. Encouraging/facilitating a huge cultural shift.