



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Comprehensive Transport
Delivery Structures: Transport Planning
Society Briefing

8 May 2013

The Transport Planning Society administers its own professional development scheme for transport planners, which leads to the award of the Transport Planning Professional qualification. That is the only professional qualification uniquely aimed at transport planners. The society has almost 1,000 professional members in the UK and elsewhere.

Transport planning covers the first stages in the development of transport policies, plans and projects. It is about identifying solutions to transport problems; assessing the likely outcomes of alternative solutions; and testing those outcomes against a range of desired objectives, whether those objectives are economic, financial, environmental, social or whatever. The results of those transport planning analyses give decision-makers the information needed to make informed decisions about transport strategy or investment. Most importantly, transport planners are acutely aware of the links between transport and other facets of life. One of our specific skills is to identify the wider impacts of changes to transport or to identify how transport can best serve wider objectives.

The Transport Planning Society also reaches out to other organisations that are active in the promotion or operation of transport and seeks to offer its experience more widely. It is for that reason that we respond to consultations such as the present inquiry into comprehensive transport delivery structures, and that is why we were pleased to make a written submission and to be here today.

Our members are involved in the planning and procurement of public transport services in many parts of Great Britain. Transport authorities have been set up, particularly in the major cities, for that specific purpose. Those authorities take the wider objectives of local government — employment, development aspirations, environmental and health objectives and so on — and identify the way in which public transport can best support them — what route network and level of service is most appropriate and so on. Transport authorities can also seek to integrate public transport with other aspects of transport, such as parking provision and parking control. Appropriate public transport services can then be specified and procured. That clearly has to pay heed to financial constraints, but the planning process undertaken by the transport authorities aims to ensure that the best value is obtained from the available funds and that the best possible support is given to wider local government objectives. That approach has worked well where transport authorities have the most control over transport.

Transport for London is the authority in London, which was referred to this morning, and is perhaps the shining example. Public transport in London is largely regulated, and Transport for London has been very successful in procuring the services needed to serve and support life in the capital. I think that the outstanding performance of public transport during the Olympics last year perhaps exemplifies the benefit of having a strong transport authority that is able to exert considerable control over transport services within its area and which has the professional skills needed to identify the demands for transport and the best means of satisfying them.

Outside London, where bus services are deregulated, transport authorities have less control, and the provision of bus services, in particular, is more governed by the operators themselves. That has led to mixed results, but, overall, it is noticeable that, since bus services outside the capital were deregulated in 1986, regulated bus use in London has more than doubled, while deregulated bus patronage elsewhere has fallen by about a third. In a small number of urban areas, there is good co-operation between bus operators and the local authorities, and competent and stable route networks have emerged to suit the wider interests of the community. More generally, however, bus operators have been found to produce a less than satisfactory service when left to pursue their own commercial objectives. For example, under deregulation, the opportunity has been lost for cross-subsidy between profitable commercially operated services and socially desirable but non-profitable routes. The introduction of a number of independent operators in most areas has resulted in a lack of network connectivity in both timetable and ticketing terms. That is clearly an obstacle to passenger use, and it is one reason why patronage has declined.

We use that evidence to support our contention that the best public transport results from having a separate transport authority, supported by professional transport planners, which understands the wider needs of the community and can specify public transport services accordingly. That approach also offers the opportunity to invite the private sector to tender for the operation of services or packages of services as specified by the transport authority, should that be seen as an advantageous way of reducing service provision costs.

We note that that approach is not currently taken in Northern Ireland, where we understand that, by and large, Translink is left to develop its own network and to operate its own services. We would recommend the introduction of a transport authority, backed by professional skills, to specify and

procure public transport services. We consider that that could result in public transport provision that is better aligned to the wider needs of Northern Ireland. I see that what we are proposing is not dissimilar to what was previously proposed for Transport Northern Ireland, with the middle tier in a three-tier set-up being responsible for tactical planning, specifying service requirements and securing their provision. Our experience in Great Britain would lead us to recommend that that is a good way forward to procure the best possible public transport.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. How critical is transport planning to the economy of Northern Ireland, and do you think that Northern Ireland has missed the boat, bus and train?

Mr Morton: That is a good question. Transport planning is a skill or discipline that has only been around for about the last 50 years. Prior to that, transport investment decisions tended just to be made by those with political power or by transport operators. Transport planning arose because of a general dissatisfaction about the way in which transport decisions and investments were being made. The feeling was that the general, wider interests and objectives of the community were not being fully taken into account. One of the other benefits of transport planning is the ability of transport planners to look at the pros and cons of a range of options and to weigh up the outcomes of doing plan A or plan B.

My view is that transport planning has certainly introduced much better value for money in terms of transport investment and, at the same time, has ensured that the wider interests of local government or the community are well served. Obviously, Northern Ireland has had a degree of transport planning, but it has probably not been as strong an influence here as in Great Britain. There has probably been some disbenefit resulting from that.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. I apologise, but I have to leave for some other urgent business that has just come up, so the Deputy Chairperson is going to take over. Thank you very much for your presentation to the Committee. It was very helpful. It has been recorded for the Hansard report, and it will certainly be helpful to the final report when we eventually report to the Assembly on this matter.

(The Deputy Chairperson [Mr Lynch] in the Chair)

The Deputy Chairperson: Sorry about that, Tim. I have just one question to do with regulation and deregulation. You said that, following deregulation, bus use had fallen by about a third, but that it had doubled in London, where it is regulated. Were you talking about passengers?

Mr Morton: Yes, I am talking about passenger journeys.

The Deputy Chairperson: In your opinion, regulation is the best option?

Mr Morton: Yes, that is certainly my opinion. What one finds with deregulation is that the provision of transport is then designed to suit the commercial objectives of the transport operators. The fact that bus patronage has fallen by about a third in deregulated areas indicates that the provision of those services is not meeting the wider needs of the community; the opposite being the case in London, where services are regulated.

Mr Ó hOisín: Tim, you were fairly scathing of our integrated transport planning here, and perhaps that is not unjustified. You recommend a transport authority. In real terms, what sort of animal would that look like?

Mr Morton: Transport for London is on a different scale, but it is the sort of model that one might look at. It is an executive agency of the Greater London Authority. The organisation contains professional skills: a lot of public transport experts, engineers and planners who are able to look technically at the provision of transport. It also includes teams that are responsible for procuring public transport services and setting up contracts with service providers. It is an organisation that has to be politically responsive, and it reports to the London Assembly, but it includes a wide range of very skilled people.

Mr Ó hOisín: You accept that this is not London.

Mr Morton: Yes.

Mr Ó hOisín: Or even Londonderry, sometimes. *[Laughter.]* That throws up its own challenges. A certain type of model would have to be crafted for here.

Mr Morton: Absolutely. Yes. I think that one could look at models in other parts of England as well, and it would be a matter of looking at the specific requirements of Northern Ireland and designing an authority that was really well-suited to the situation here.

The Deputy Chairperson: There are no more questions. Thank you for coming, Tim. Your contribution was very useful.

Mr Morton: Thank you very much. It was my pleasure.