

IPI submission on the future of Northern Ireland's railways

submitted to NI Rail, August 2000

The Institute is seriously concerned to learn of the doubts that have been expressed in relation to the future of the Northern Ireland railways network, particularly the Belfast suburban lines and the line to Londonderry. Our concern as an organisation that represents professional town planners stems from our strong belief in the role that public and particularly rail transport has to play in

Providing modal choice in both urban and inter-city passenger contexts thereby furthering the objectives of sustainable development,

Furthering accessibility to rapid and efficient transport to those sections of society who do not have access to a car thereby furthering the objectives of social inclusion,

Strengthening the physical linkages that underpin the economic development of areas in a strategic and spatial sense thereby permitting communication, interaction, innovation and competitiveness.

The Institute is aware of the scale of investment required to bring the northern network outside of the premium Dublin-Belfast "Enterprise" service up to standard and it is understandable that Government should consider carefully the merits of such a scale of expenditure before committing itself. The Institute is confident, however, that when the issues raised by partial closure of the network or curtailment of services is considered, the benefits of a high quality rail network in the future will be clear to see.

The Institute's comments are structured to address the case for particular segments of the network and are detailed as follows.

BELFAST-LONDONDERRY/DERRY

This line, through continual underfunding, has lost its competitive position on this corridor and probably serves more as an internal communications link for the towns along its course. This is complicated by the circuitous route the line must take, in comparison to the more direct road alternatives.

It is at this point that the Institute would argue that a more strategic perspective should prevail. This line, in the context of the peace agreement, should be seen more as a strategic corridor between the northwestern corner of the island of Ireland and other urban centres such as Dublin or even Cork, as well as Belfast and other centres within Northern Ireland.

In a spatial sense, if one accepts the potential role of a Letterkenny-Londonderry/Derry axis as a key element of the spatial arrangement of settlement centres in Ireland and particularly with all other centres that are rail served, the absence of rail access in the future would be a strategic blow to such an axis and development that might take place within it.

Putting this point in a different way, given that the competitive position of rail improves over distance, this line is potentially a strategic link between the northwest, both in Northern Ireland and Donegal, and many points on the rail network of the island. The Institute would argue that with investment in track and lightweight high speed Diesel Multiple Units (DMU's), additional benefits could be drawn from the considerable investment in the Dublin-Belfast line by providing either through services or efficient connections to services all over the island's rail network. Over long distances, rail could therefore again compete with road.

Considering the issue of freight, the Institute is aware that this line is increasingly being used for bulk freight movements to and from the northwest. In particular, timber moves increasingly from Londonderry/Derry to timber processing plants in the south thereby offering significant environmental advantages over the road alternative.

Finally, the Institute would point out that this line also provides access to the University at Coleraine via the rail network on the island as a whole thereby aiding cross-border participation in third level education.

BELFAST REGIONAL LINES

The Institute would argue that in reviewing the future of the Northern Ireland rail network and particularly the Belfast regional network, the Task Force should pay close attention to the manner in which the southern rail network around Dublin has been historically regarded in strategic transport and land use policy terms. Historic underfunding and poor commitment to integrating land use and transportation policies has now led to a situation of chronic congestion in a climate of unparalleled economic growth. This contrasts with the strong positive benefits that have flowed from occasions where investments have been made such as DART. This service is now so successful that route extensions and extra rolling stock are being commissioned to meet rapidly expanding demand. It is now recognised that the delivery of similar benefits in other areas to address congestion can now only be realistically addressed by massive investment in what the Dublin Transportation Office terms a "Public Transport Grid".

For this reason, the strategic role that the network around Belfast will inevitably play should not be lost sight of. The ongoing Bleach Green – Antrim upgrade, together with a circular service on the Lisburn – Antrim branch serving Aldergrove Airport has the potential to provide a high quality rail service right along the northern element of the Dublin Belfast economic corridor.

This would complement proposed enhancement of the Dublin suburban network including a link to Dublin Airport and other areas in the Greater Dublin Area. Together, these public transport systems would have the capacity, in an interconnection sense, to create a highly sustainable transport grid for the eastern part of the island, aiding efficient movement, trade and competitiveness in a European and strategic sense.

The provision of an efficient, environmentally sustainable public transport system within the Greater Belfast area i.e. Belfast Metropolitan area and beyond, to Larne Bangor Craigavon Banbridge Newtownards etc would be a key step in this regard.

BELFAST-DUBLIN

The Institute understands that the future of this line is not part of the Task Force's review. The success of the "Enterprise" service illustrate the benefits of investment in high quality public transport. Nonetheless, echoing the views outlined above, it is argued that upgrading of this service will be needed in the future to maintain competitiveness with an ever-improving road network. Over 100mph running or even electrification should be considered in a strategic sense and could be considered for Public Private Partnership.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The choice for Government on the future of the rail network in Northern Ireland can be summarised as considering short-term expenditure commitments against the long term strategic benefits of a rail service that will enhance the economic competitiveness of the whole of Ireland within a European context.

The Institute was of the opinion that these benefits had been clearly signalled by the strategic development framework for Northern Ireland represented by the "Shaping Our Future" document. It is hoped that adherence to the principles in this document will prevail as well as a valuing of the strategic over the short term.

The Institute wishes the Task Force every success in its deliberations and hopes that the comments above will be carefully reflected upon.