

Delivering Balanced Regional Development

A Challenge for Policy

Western Development Commission

Address by Julie O'Neill, Secretary General

Department of Transport

The Western Development Commission's third strategic plan, published last September recognises that the western counties of Ireland have seen many positive developments since the establishment of the Commission in 1999.

Economic growth has led to the ending of the persistent, forced emigration of past decades, which so significantly depleted the population of Ireland's western counties. In fact, recent economic development has resulted in a welcome population growth in many parts of the West. Investment under the previous National Development Plan 2000-2006 (NDP), and supported by the National Spatial Strategy launched in 2002, brought about much needed improvements in infrastructure, which have contributed to economic growth and development throughout the region.

The Western Development Commission clearly recognises that the commitment, in the NDP, to balanced regional development and the rural economy is of fundamental importance to the region as a whole. Furthermore, the role of investment policy under the NDP is to build on the strengths of the regions and address infrastructural deficits. This will be critical to delivering the type of balanced development that we all wish to see.

I propose to outline the approach of my Department to the transformation of Ireland's transport system under our 10-year investment plan – Transport 21. Investment in

transport infrastructure is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for balanced regional development. Challenges will remain, particularly in regard to exploiting the full potential of the infrastructure to achieve sustainable transport and travel solutions. The related spatial challenge of aligning land use and transport policies will also remain. Ensuring that travel and transport is sustainable is a key priority for Government and my Department is currently preparing proposals for a Sustainable Travel and Transport Action Plan, which the Minister for Transport, Noel Dempsey, T.D. proposes to publish later this year. I will outline later in my presentation how the Department is addressing sustainable travel and transport issues.

Transport 21

Transport 21 is the most extensive programme of investment in Ireland's transport system that has ever been undertaken. Running from 2006 to 2015, Transport 21 is investing €34 billion in the radical improvement of Ireland's national road, public transport and regional air links to deliver the type of transport system that we will need in the decades to come.

Very importantly, from the point of the western counties, Transport 21 will significantly enhance connectivity across the island, will make it far easier to do business in the West, and will facilitate the attraction of inward investment to the region. It will also link communities, and have an important social impact on the island, as well as an economic one.

The Transport 21 investment programme has two primary objectives: to address past underinvestment in our transport infrastructure and to create a transport system that will meet the economic and societal needs of our new modern Ireland in the decades ahead. The recent and very welcome economic development that our country has witnessed highlighted the inadequacy of our existing transport links and networks. As our economy grew, it quickly became clear that our transport infrastructure was under pressure, and that a network of road, rail and bus links designed at a different time, and for a different Ireland, would not be sufficient for the 21st century.

We also need a transport system that is fit for purpose for the future. First it has to help sustain the economic competitiveness that has got us where we are today. But that is no longer enough. It also has to help improve our quality of life through, for example, reduced congestion in our urban areas and faster and more reliable journeys on our longer distance network. It has to support the spatial development objectives set out in the National Spatial Strategy and the NDP. Above all it has to be sustainable.

Transport 21 has already delivered almost €5 billion for transport improvements in the first two years since it was unveiled. Last year alone, €2.8 billion was invested in transforming national road, rail, bus and regional air links, an increase of 33% on 2006. Over the lifetime of the plan, Transport 21 will deliver tangible improvements in road, rail and air infrastructure.

Road developments

Already, this investment is transforming the linkages between West and East. Transport 21 provides for the development of five Major Inter-Urban road routes or MIUs linking Dublin with Northern Ireland, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. Last year, the first of these MIUs was completed, with the opening of the final section of the M1 Dublin – Border motorway.

Over 600 of the planned 738 kilometres of MIUs are now either open to traffic or under construction. All of the remaining projects are through the statutory approval process and just about all remaining contracts have been awarded. Significant work has already been done in the development of the Galway to Dublin MIU, which is on schedule for a 2010 completion. The completion of the MIUs is the Government's overriding national roads priority up to the end of 2010. The benefits of this investment are becoming increasingly evident and it is easy to forget that only a decade ago we only had a small length of motorway in the country.

Over the lifetime of Transport 21, significant funding will be invested in the development of the national road network in the BMW Region, complementing the substantial investment in the region from the previous NDP 2000-2006, which was over €2 billion. This year alone, €420 million will be invested in the national road network in the Region.

The Government decided in the current National Development Plan to accelerate the Atlantic Road Corridor, recognizing its importance for regional balance and the development of the whole Western seaboard. This year over €63 million will be spent on the Donegal to Galway section of this strategic Corridor. This investment will support planning and design work on the Ballybofey to Stranorlar section and the Tuam Bypass and it will also allow construction to commence on the Oranmore to Gort section and the Gort and Crusheen bypasses.

A central element of the BMW development strategy is the improvement of national secondary road network in order to enhance regional connectivity. This year's investment has, for example, allowed construction to start on the N52 Tullamore Bypass which is one of a number of strategic national secondary routes identified in the NDP, Transport 21, and the National Spatial Strategy.

This year over €200million is being allocated for national road investment in the counties for which the Western Development Commission has specific responsibility. We are also spending very heavily on maintaining and improving our regional and local road infrastructure, with €4.3 billion allocated in the NDP for this purpose. This year Exchequer and Local Government Fund assistance for the Western counties will total €180million.

Road networks are understandably vital to support more balanced regional development. They allow for people to access easily all parts of the west and northwest, and also for the transfer of goods both into and out of the region. They are, however, only one part of the package of Transport 21 investment that is benefiting the western counties.

Public Transport

The enhancement of rail and bus services for the western counties is also essential to delivering balanced regional development. Alongside the work on very significant, headline projects - like the Western Rail Corridor – there is an ongoing programme of investment in new rolling stock and service enhancements that is greatly improving the quality of rail services to the west.

Rail services

It is important to recall that less than a decade ago, our railway infrastructure was in very poor shape and badly in need of renewal. This seriously impacted on the quality and reliability of rail service, particularly in the western counties. We were faced with a stark choice from a safety perspective – closure or investment. We chose to invest and embarked on a major infrastructural renewal programme, especially under the first Railway Safety Programme 1999 – 2003. That Programme alone saw over 400 miles of track renewal and that investment is particularly evident in the west. Now that we have renewed the infrastructure the focus is on service development.

In 2007, delivery commenced of 183 intercity railcars to be used on intercity routes including Galway, Limerick, Ennis, Sligo, Westport and Ballina. To date, 114 railcars have been delivered and 54 are in service. The first of these entered service on the Sligo to Dublin line last December and services on this line increased in frequency from 5 each way daily to 8 each way daily at the start of this year. I understand that there has been a tremendous response from the public to the new trains and the early indications are extremely positive in terms of increased patronage. The Westport line is now also served by the new railcars and as the year goes on and more are commissioned, they will be introduced into service on the Galway line also.

One of the most exciting rail developments which is part of Transport 21 is the Western Rail Corridor. Work is now underway on phase one of the Western Rail Corridor.

Trackwork began last October, and the work is on schedule for services to begin in early 2009.

The Ennis to Athenry railway will deliver a new level of connectivity across the western seaboard. It will deliver direct, regular Galway to Limerick services, timed to meet commuter needs. It will serve the existing station at Ennis and new stations at Sixmilebridge, Gort, Ardrahan, Craughwell, Athenry and Oranmore. It will expand commuter links to Limerick and Galway. It will provide connections, a range of inter-regional services currently not available, through linking with Limerick-Dublin and Galway-Dublin services. It will promote balanced regional development, in line with National Spatial Strategy objectives, by linking two Gateways - Limerick and Galway - and serving the hub of Ennis. Planning for subsequent phases to Claremorris is continuing and the line from Claremorris to Collooney has been protected, with funding assistance from the Department of Community, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs.

The decision to proceed with the construction of the first phase of the Western Rail Corridor was very strongly driven by regional development and spatial planning considerations. It would not have got the go-ahead if the decision was based on economic considerations alone. The challenge for the region now is to demonstrate that this decision was the right one.

Bus services

Turning to bus services, Transport 21 is funding bus priority measures in Galway City, and a significant renewal of the fleet. Over the course of 2007 and 2008, funding for the acquisition of 160 new buses for Bus Éireann is being provided, and some of these are already in service in Galway. These new buses, principally a combination of single deck city buses, single deck commuter buses, and double deck commuter coaches, are all wheelchair accessible. These buses also enable services to be expanded, such as on the Doughiska route in Galway which now runs every 15 minutes instead of hourly.

My Department is also working closely with Galway City Council and is part-funding the establishment of a Galway Transport Unit to give greater priority to public transport. In this regard we are jointly looking at the feasibility of a light rail or bus rapid transport system for Galway.

Another important initiative in bus transport is the Rural Transport Programme. The Programme is administered on the Department's behalf by Pobal and thirty-four rural community transport groups, including 11 in counties covered by the Western Development Commission, are currently being funded for the provision of services. The main objective of the Programme is to encourage community-based transport initiatives in rural areas to address social exclusion arising from unmet public transport needs. The provision of transport services for older people and people with disabilities is a core feature of the Programme. It is also evidence that a relatively small amount of money, €11 million in 2008, used properly can make a huge positive difference to the lives of so many people.

Air Services and Regional Airports

The regional airports also have an important role in supporting balanced regional development. In February 2007, the Government approved a package of investment for regional airports totalling €86 million. The bulk of this investment is in the Western Development Commission's area: €27 million has been allocated to Ireland West Airport Knock, €3.8 million to Donegal, €8.5 million to Sligo and €6.3 million to Galway.

This investment will improve safety and security at these airports, and will underpin investment in essential infrastructure and equipment upgrades including better fire-fighting equipment, the installation of new Instrument Landing Systems and other navigational aids, and the provision of Runway End Safety Areas at a number of airports. It will also be used to develop new business at the regional airports supporting runway, apron and terminal improvements.

The Government is also supporting the provision of air services linking the regional airports in Knock, Galway, Sligo, Donegal, Derry and Kerry with Dublin to ensure direct and convenient access to worldwide aviation networks. Minister Dempsey recently announced new PSO contracts for these services for the three year period from July 2008 involving a subvention of nearly €45 million.

As an island nation on the fringes of Europe, international air links are of much greater importance for Ireland than for countries with land transport connections to their neighbours and trading partners. Ireland's aviation strategy is therefore to promote regular, safe, cost-effective and competitive air services linking the country with key business and tourism destinations. Clearly, this policy is of particular importance to the West of Ireland. For many years, Ireland has been to the forefront in supporting the development of a more liberal, pro-competition international regulatory framework for aviation. The success of this policy is demonstrated by the dramatic increase in the number of services into and out of Ireland, the emergence of new Irish carriers and rapid growth in passenger numbers at our State and regional airports. A key challenge for the future is to ensure that our State and regional airports are well positioned to provide the infrastructure and services cost-effectively to support the retention and development of international air services. The restructuring of the State airports under the State Airports Act will enable Shannon airport to better serve the needs of the Western region regions and the country as a whole.

State Commercial Port Companies

Although not directly funded under Transport 21, it is worth making reference to the two significant commercial ports that serve the Western region.

Galway has long been a significant maritime gateway to the West with its principal cargoes of petroleum products, coal, bitumen and chemicals.

Galway Harbour Company has continued to make progress on its proposal for a new port development and a detailed capital appraisal for the project has been supplied to my Department.

In addition to the very large investment envisaged, the proposal raises overarching policy issues affecting spatial planning and landside transport, which the Department and Minister must consider carefully, in conjunction with other Government colleagues as appropriate and this is underway.

Meanwhile, Shannon Foynes Port Company is fortunate in having one of the best deep-water port locations in the State. It is very important for the regional economy that the port company makes the most of this asset and continues to develop the port.

There are a number of important developments in the pipeline that are relevant to the company. The Shannon LNG project is the first piece of infrastructure to get planning permission under the Strategic Infrastructure Act, and has the potential to generate significant additional traffic in the estuary. Another positive development is the Atlantic Fuels project, which is due to be launched later this month.

Transport 21 necessary but not sufficient?

As you will appreciate from what I have said, there is a real determination to provide the level of modern high quality infrastructure in the West that will attract economic development and tourist activity to the region and contribute to balanced regional development but, even with this massive investment in infrastructure, there are at least two significant challenges that have to be met: the challenge of sustainable transport development and the spatial challenge. Both of these have to be faced against the backdrop of more difficult economic circumstances and tightening public finances which, inevitably, will lead to constraints on increased public expenditure in the years immediately ahead.

The sustainability agenda

The challenge of delivering a truly sustainable transport system for Ireland is a key priority for Government. This agenda is vital not just to meet our international commitments in relation to climate change strategies; it is also crucial to enabling us

address traffic congestion in all our cities and major towns and to enhancing our quality of life through better linkages between spatial planning and transport networks as well as for healthier lifestyles.

The Minister launched a consultation paper earlier this year seeking views from the public on how our transport system can be developed in a sustainable way, asking in particular how we can make a major shift from traveling by car to public transport, cycling and walking.

To create a sustainable model for transport we have no choice but to introduce measures that will bring about fundamental changes to travel behaviour in the coming years. These will require buy-in from all sectors of society.

I'm very glad to say that there has been a very high level of engagement with the consultation process, which ended recently. While the Department is still reading and evaluating the views received, I can say that we received nearly 450 responses and that a substantial number of these came not only from representative groups but also from individual members of the public who submitted very helpful suggestions as well as some quite imaginative ones.

Of course, in many respects we already know some of the important measures that will have to be addressed to deliver the sustainable transport agenda. A properly structured and organised public transport system throughout the country, in both urban and rural areas, that addresses mobility, accessibility and integration will go along way to achieving the sustainability goals we must set to protect future generations.

However, public transport is only viable if it is used and supported. That in turn raises questions about spatial and land use planning which we cannot avoid. High quality public transport can only be successful where there is a sufficient population within its catchment area to use the services provided. The challenge for all of us here today is how best to achieve this.

While I fully accept that travel by car will remain the only realistic travel option in many circumstances, we can by creating the right conditions make a significant shift away from cars to using public transport, cycling and walking. Even where cars remain a necessity we can develop practical options for car sharing. We also need to identify and implement the practical steps necessary to facilitate cycling and walking, not only for commuting to work but also for leisure and other travel, as these trips represent about two-thirds of car trips at this time. Radical measures to ensure a quantum increase in cycling and walking will also, I believe, make our living spaces more attractive.

You may be wondering what relevance this has to the west of Ireland, thinking that this may be all be very fine for Dublin but makes no sense in a rural context. There is some truth in this and I am not naïve enough to think that we can go back to the era where people cycled 10 miles to a dance!

The sustainable transport agenda has a particular relevance for the larger urban areas like Galway and Sligo. However, we all have to ask do we really need to use the car as much as we do. The stark reality is that rural travel accounts for 86 percent of vehicle-kilometres driven annually and therefore comprises a very large share of passenger car CO2 emissions. Not surprisingly, the use of a car or van for travel to work at 77.9 percent is higher in the Western Region than the national average of 70 percent and is higher still, at over 80 percent, in Leitrim, Sligo and Donegal.

It is striking to note the high proportion of short journeys that are made by car which would previously have been made by bicycle or on foot. Our Safe Routes to School Programme shows that teachers, parents and particularly the children themselves have the creativity and ingenuity to reduce car use for school travel, even in rural areas. Workplace and individual travel planning initiatives also have a role to play, as has been demonstrated in other countries. They ask us to stop and think, no more than that. Doing so leads many people to change their travel behaviour in a more sustainable

direction and often results in important fringe benefits such as a healthier lifestyle and reduce transport costs. I ask you to reflect on this.

There are challenges too for policy makers to develop the rural transport policies which will build on Transport 21 and the Rural Transport Programme to provide integrated rural transport services that offer value for money. The Sustainable Travel and Transport Action Plan provides us with an opportunity for innovative policy approaches which support sustainable rural transport and communities.

Conclusion

Our transport networks are the lifeblood of our economy and our communities. These networks link our cities, villages and rural areas. They knit our communities closer together. They bring Ireland to Europe and the wider world, and bring the wider world to our doorsteps.

If we are to bridge the gap between East and West, between urban and rural, and if we are to be successful in delivering a more balanced regional development than Ireland has ever seen before, then travel and transport decisions play an important role. Transport 21 provides the infrastructure investment programme to enable us to do this. By adopting sustainable travel and transport policies to complement investment under the Transport 21 programme we can address emissions challenges, tackle traffic congestion, enhance road safety and improve the quality of our living and working environment.

By adopting appropriate spatial and land use policies we can underpin investment in public transport and encourage greater use of sustainable travel modes. Balanced regional development is about more than investment in economic and social infrastructure. It is about creating the conditions that will enable the west attract domestic and mobile international investment. Dublin is the engine of the Irish economy and remains crucial to our continued economic well-being. The challenge for the western seaboard is not so much to offer a counter attraction to Dublin but to offer

something different that builds on the strengths of our gateway cities, working together as a network rather than as individual entities. We are ready to work with you to meet that challenge, as our commitment to the Atlantic Road Corridor and Western Rail Corridor have already shown.