



Border, Midland & Western
Regional Assembly
Shaping the Region

**Briefing Paper for Meeting between the BMW
Regional Assembly and Iarnrod Eireann**

29th January 2004

Introduction

The Border, Midland and Western (BMW) Regional Assembly welcomes this opportunity to meet with Iarnrod Eireann to discuss the role of the rail network in the BMW Region. The Assembly recognises some recent progress which has been made in improvements in the rail service across the country, including track and signalling improvements, slightly shorter journey times on some routes and some increased timetabling. The Assembly is concerned however that the vast majority of improvements appear to be taking place outside the BMW Region and are mainly concentrated in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA). In Ireland and the BMW Region in particular, people use the car because they are denied real choice and access to alternative modes of transport. Many who wish to use public transport receive inadequate services. The forecast growth in road traffic is clearly unsustainable because of its economic and environmental effects. Forecasts suggest that in less than 20 years, traffic levels in Ireland will be between 80% -100% higher than the current figures, unless a change in policy and travel habits occurs.

This brief paper sets out a number of issues in relation to the provision of rail services in the BMW Region. The first section reviews expenditure under the ESIOP under the public transport priority in the BMW Region and its unacceptably low levels in comparison with the S&E Region. The second section presents a case for the re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor, and the third section considers some general issues arising from the Strategic Rail Review. The fourth, fifth and sixth sections look at commuter services and related pricing structures and the need to integrate different forms of public transport and meet consumer needs. The seventh section raises some general issues about the implementation of the National Spatial Strategy and the investment in rail infrastructure.

These issues have been consistently raised with Iarnrod Eireann, the Government and at meetings of the ESIOP monitoring committee as well as in its submission and response to the Strategic Rail Review. Whilst the BMW Regional Assembly is aware that some progress is being made, the repeated pattern of under-spending in the BMW Region is serving to frustrate the goal of balanced regional development and is hindering the implementation of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS).

1. Under-investment in Public Transport in the BMW Region

There are major discrepancies in the expenditure and output in public transport, particularly in rail between the BMW and the S&E Regions. The total expenditure in public transport from January 2000-June 2003 under the ESIOP was €1497m (90%) in the S&E Region, compared with only €168m in the BMW Region (10%). This represents expenditure of 43% of forecast in the BMW Region, as compared with 149% of forecast expenditure in the S&E Region. This amounts to a shortfall of €222m compared with forecast expenditure in the BMW Region to date. If this is broken down on an annual basis, a deterioration of the level of spending in the BMW Region can be evidenced, as shown in the table below. The figure of 14% expenditure of forecast for the first half of 2003 is particularly worrying.

It is also a matter of concern to the Regional Assembly that the majority of the new rolling stock that is being acquired is being put to use in the Southern and Eastern Region, and in particular the Greater Dublin Area.

Public Transport Investment 2000-02 BMW Region

€m	Projections	Actual	Expenditure as % of OP Forecast
2000	97.1	59.6	61%
2001	104.6	58.7	561%
2002	100.5	37.1	37%
2003*	91.4	12.79	14%
Total 2000-2003	391.13	168.19	43%

* to end June 2003

Source: ESIOP Monitoring Report to End June 2003

2. Western Rail Corridor

The BMW Regional Assembly along with most agencies and local authorities in the Region are united in their opinion that the Western Rail Corridor (WRC) needs to be re-opened as an immediate priority. The Regional Assembly has recently part-funded the publication of a feasibility study of the WRC, which assessed the financial and physical viability of re-opening the line. Contrary to the Strategic Rail Review, this report demonstrated a strong case for the re-opening of the line, based on forecast usage and financial viability. This report proposes that it should be re-opened on a phased basis over a period of five years and that if managed effectively it has the potential to generate substantial income for Iarnrod Eireann. It is estimated that the total cost of the re-opening of the line (including rebuilding the track, signalling and purchase of rolling stock) would amount to €249.72m as opposed to €572m suggested in the Strategic Rail Review.

A firm commitment by the Government to reopen the route would encourage and stimulate development along the line and would be in keeping with the National Spatial Strategy as there are five gateway towns along the route and four airports (Shannon, Galway, Knock and Sligo). The recent decentralisation announcement now means that there will be further decentralisation to a number of towns along the route, including Knock Airport, Claremorris, Furbo (outside Galway), Limerick and Sligo. Not only would the re-opening of the line stimulate an increase in critical mass, but it would also stimulate enterprise and tourism, thus giving a huge boost to areas, which have consistently suffered from a lack of investment, poor infrastructure and population decline. It also offers enormous tourism potential and would help to expand the regional spread of tourism. A rail tour package could be operated along the route, using some coach transfers to some of the more coastal areas along the route. It could also provide crucial access to the various airports along the route (Cork, Shannon, Galway, Knock and Sligo). Overall the BMW Assembly urges the Government to carry out an immediate review of this route.

3. Strategic Rail Review – General Issues

The BMW Regional Assembly submitted a detailed response to the Strategic Rail Review, which was published during early 2003. A number of inadequacies in the review were pointed out by various bodies, which shall not be reiterated in detail as we are sure that Iarnrod Eireann has been made fully aware of these discrepancies. There are however a few general issues, which can be pointed out and which are elaborated on in more detail in the following sections.

- The Review did not take full cognisance of the National Spatial Strategy (NSS) and failed to provide for adequate rail services in the BMW Region.
- The Review failed to justify the re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor, which the Assembly believes should be given immediate priority. This is expanded in greater detail below.
- The review could have placed greater emphasis on the role of freight transport, which would also help to alleviate traffic congestion and provide an effective way of transporting bulk and heavy
- Overall, there are many inaccuracies in the costings in the Review and the basis for such calculations is not explicit. The Assembly hopes that such costings are being reviewed and that any future decisions regarding rail can be made on the basis of more accurate and realistic information.

The Assembly hopes that these issues are already being addressed by Iarnrod Eireann and that they will be integrated into any future plans.

4. Commuter Services

Whilst great improvements have been made in the provision of rail commuter services in the GDA and to a certain extent in Cork, there is no city or town in the BMW Region with any form of rail commuter services. This is particularly pertinent in Galway, which suffers from major traffic congestion, particularly on inbound/outbound routes during rush hours, many of which could be served by commuter rail. The obvious lines, which should be made available to commuter trains, include the Athlone - Galway line (serving Ballinasloe, Athenry, Oranmore and Renmore) and the re-opening of the Tuam-Galway line, which forms part of the Western Rail Corridor. Traffic congestion along these routes has reached exceptionally high levels. In the case of the N17 (Tuam – Galway) there has been a 38% increase in the volume of traffic between 1998 and 2003 (NRA 2003). Between 7a.m. and 9:30a.m. each weekday more than 3000 vehicles travel on a single lane road into Galway, causing major tailbacks of over 3 miles.

Whilst there is a current train service from Athlone to Galway, which forms part of the Dublin – Galway line, it is of no benefit to commuters or those wishing to travel to Galway for early morning meetings, as the first train arrives in Galway at 10:14am. Passengers wishing to travel from Galway to Dublin on the other hand, can avail of an early morning train service, which arrives in Dublin at 8:20am.

5. Pricing Structures

Linked to commuter services is the issue of pricing structures, which differ throughout the country. Even if someone were to use an existing route for commuting purposes, they would be unfairly disadvantaged due to the high fares on short distances outside the GDA. e.g. a 48km round trip between Ballymote and Sligo costs €11, whereas the same distance journey costs €4.50 between Maynooth and Dublin. Similarly there are major price discrepancies in the price of a commuter pass between the GDA and other parts of the country. As a national body, providing a national service, Iarnrod Eireann should ensure that its customers throughout the country are provided with the same conditions of service and that those living outside Dublin and Cork are not unfairly disadvantaged in terms of costs.

6. Integration of Public Transport & Meeting of User Needs

Preliminary analysis of current rural transportation suggests that coverage and frequency, particularly in more rural areas is patchy. There is little evidence of integration between different modes of transport. For example, there is little co-ordination of service provision between Bus Éireann, Iarnród Eireann, Private Bus Operators, the School Bus system, health transport, rural pilot schemes and airlines. In addition, there are few linkages between the different modes of public transport in terms of timetabling, thereby proving an additional disincentive.

The Assembly urges Iarnrod Eireann to work more closely with other transport providers to provide a more integrated and user-friendly system of public transport, with effective linkages in terms of timetabling, ticketing, commuter services, stations and the provision of information.

There should also be increased consultation with public transport users and the adoption of a more customer friendly approach, to provide a service which is geared towards meeting the needs of its users. This could be done through increased information provision, customer feedback surveys, public meetings and newsletters.

7. Implementing the National Spatial Strategy

The provision of public transport is an integral part of the NSS, a cornerstone for the spatial development of the country over the next twenty years. A number of recent documents such as the Strategic Rail Review and the Mid-Term Evaluation of the ESIOP do not take sufficient cognisance of the NSS. As well as the re-opening of the WRC, improvements could be made to other routes, which would enhance the linkages between gateways and hubs in the Region, a prime example being the development of linkages between the towns in the Midland Triangle – Athlone, Mullingar and Tullamore.

9. Conclusions & Recommendations

- Iarnrod Eireann must bring forward proposals to the next meeting of the ESIOP Monitoring Committee, as to how it intends to address the shortfall in expenditure in the BMW Region.
- The findings of the feasibility study on the Western Rail Corridor should be taken on board and work on the route should commence as soon as possible.
- There should be increased emphasis on the improvement of timetabling, integrated ticketing, fair pricing systems, improved information provision and the adoption of a more customer friendly approach.
- Commuter services to the major centres in the Region should be developed as an immediate priority, particularly on the routes to Galway.
- Additional tracks and new links in the Midland Region should be developed to service the growing commuter towns and facilitate the development of strategic gateways, particularly for the Midland Triangle.