

BORDER, MIDLAND AND WESTERN REGIONAL  
ASSEMBLY

**RESPONSE TO  
THE STRATEGIC RAIL REVIEW**

July 2003



## **Introduction**

The BMW Regional Assembly welcomes the publication of the Strategic Rail Review (SRR), but has a number of questions and issues of concern in relation to it and the role that it can play in bringing about more balanced regional development. The Assembly made a submission to the Rail Study in May 2002, in which it put forward a number of proposals. The submission reviewed the public transport system in the BMW Region and found many deficiencies, which led to increased amounts of private car usage and little rail freight in the Region. The Assembly proposed the reopening of the Western Rail Corridor, the development of the Midlands and Border rail networks. It also emphasised the importance of cross-border rail links in order to maximise the potential for North-South trade and tourism. The Assembly is disappointed that many of these proposals were not taken on board in the SRR and urges that many of its sections should be reviewed.

A number of issues relating to the SRR were addressed at the Western Development Commission seminar on the SRR in Claremorris on Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> April. The Assembly is concerned at the overall lack of commitment in the document to providing an effective and efficient rail service in the BMW Region (with the exception of the radial routes from Dublin) and its almost complete disregard for the National Spatial Strategy. The objective of balanced regional development, which is an important priority of Government policy is not sufficiently incorporated into the document and there appears to be an over-emphasis on the transport needs of the Greater Dublin Area, to the detriment of other regions of Ireland.

This paper provides an outline of the role of the BMW Assembly, some general comments in relation to the SRR, followed by a more detailed analysis of particular sections and it concludes with a number of recommendations.

### **1. Background to the Border, Midland & Western Regional Assembly**

The Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly was established in 1999 arising from the decision to divide Ireland into two regions for structural funds purposes. The Assembly is comprised of 29 elected representatives from throughout the thirteen county region. The Regional Assembly has been designated as the Managing Authority for the Border, Midland and Western Regional Operational Programme in the objective one region. The Assembly has three broad roles:

- 1) To fulfil the Managing Authority functions for the Regional O.P., as set out in the EU structural fund regulations
- 2) To monitor the impact of all NDP/CSF Programmes on the BMW Region in order to ensure balanced regional development
- 3) To co-ordinate the delivery of public services in the region, highlight issues of regional concern and ensure that national policies take the regional dimension into account.

## 2. Socio-economic Context of the Region

The Border, Midland and Western Region is one, which consists of 47% of the land area, 27% of the population and 19% of the GDP of the country. With the exception of Galway City, it is predominantly rural and has a lower percentage of the high value-added economic activities than the Southern and Eastern Region (S&E). Since the division of Ireland into two Regions, a growing economic divergence between the two Regions can be discerned. This is evidenced in areas such as the slower growth of Gross Value Added (GVA) per person and the decrease in disposable income per capita in the BMW Region.<sup>1</sup> Employment however has grown at a faster rate in the BMW Region (2.9% in the BMW Region in 2002 compared with 0.4% in the S&E),<sup>2</sup> but most of this has been concentrated in low value-added industries, where the output per person is lower and the rate of unemployment in the BMW Region still continues to be 0.7% higher than in the S&E Region. Unemployment is particularly high in the Border Region, where it is currently at 6.8% (2.6% above the national average).

Some basic socio-economic indicators of the two Regions are outlined below:

**Table 1: Regional Socio-economic Indicators**

	Year	State	BMW	S&E
<b>Population (000s )</b>	2002	3197.3	1038.0	2879.3
<b>Labour Force (000s)</b>	2002	1827.0	464.3	1,362.8
<b>Unemployment Rate</b>	2002	4.2%	5.5%	3.8%
<b>Out of State Tourism Revenue €m</b>	2001	3133.3	764.8	2368.5
<b>GVA per capita (state =100)</b>	2000	100	71.9	110.1
<b>GVA per capita (EU = 100)</b>	2000	115	82.7	126.6

In relation to infrastructure, the Assembly is concerned that there is a growing deficit between the two regions and this is particularly evidenced in the area of transport (roads and rail) where the majority of money spent to date under the NDP has been in the more prosperous S&E Region.<sup>3</sup> It is well documented that good physical infrastructure is one of the key determinants of economic growth and the low level of infrastructure in the BMW Region is often a determining factor for companies not to locate in the Region.

The Assembly welcomed the publication of the National Spatial Strategy, which we believe is an very important strategic policy document, which should help to alleviate congestion in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and bring about more balanced regional development for the whole country and particularly the BMW Region.

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. CSO (2003) County Incomes and Regional GDP, which shows how the disposable income per person in the BMW Region as a percentage of the national average, decreased between 1998 and 1999.

<sup>2</sup> CSO (2003) Quarterly Household Survey December 2002.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. in the Economic and Social Infrastructure OP, there was €385 less spent per capita in the BMW Region than in the S&E Region between 2002 and June 2002.

### 3. General Comments on the SRR

- There are some positive features of the SRR, which include some commitment to reform the existing rail system, an awareness of the current difficulties and challenges, a concerted effort to reduce congestion in the GDA and an overall commitment to higher levels of service on most existing routes.
- The Strategic Rail Review however **does not address the issue of balanced regional development** and is therefore very disappointing from the perspective of the BMW Region. If the recommended investment strategy is followed, at a cost of €10.2bn over a 20 year period, there would be a number of new schemes introduced in the S&E Region (Dublin Suburban, Cork Suburban) and none of the new schemes proposed for the BMW Region (Western Rail Corridor, Athlone – Mullingar or Derry Letterkenny).
- Overall the Rail Review **does not go far enough to stimulate the radical overhaul of the rail system, which is required**. It has a strong Dublin bias and it does very little to address the needs of people in the BMW Region. It makes assumptions about critical mass preceding infrastructure and does not consider the need for infrastructure and government policy as an incentive to economic and demographic growth in less developed regions. Its basis for analysis is almost entirely economic and whilst we recognise the importance of cost-effectiveness and value for money, the social, environmental and safety considerations need to be afforded a much higher degree of priority.

### 4. Specific Concerns

The Assembly has a number of comments in relation to specific sections of the SRR:

#### *Executive Summary*

- (p.ii) “Central to the Strategy is...” These points should also include a reference to **balanced regional development**, a central aim of the Government as outlined in the National Spatial Strategy.
- (p.viii) “The focus of the railway into the future should be...effective mass urban transit operation in Dublin..and a good mix of quality intercity radial and ‘fit for purpose’ non radial services.” Again the emphasis appears to be on urban transport in Dublin. Intercity transport is also mentioned but the **needs of commuters outside the GDA** do not seem to be a priority. Whilst ‘fit for purpose non-radial services are mentioned, the recommended investment strategy does not recommend any single new non-radial services (with the exception of Cork suburban).
- (p. xviii) the Concluding Remarks mention the needs of those travelling “to many regional and rural areas of the State” but no reference is made to those travelling “from” such areas. The emphasis appears to be on **the needs of people living around Dublin** who may travel occasionally “to the regions”.

## *Chapter 2*

- **Reference to the NSS should be more specific** and not merely “with the broad philosophy of the NSS in mind” (p.20). The Rail Review should have made a concerted effort to link the gateways and hubs with an effective rail service if they are to function effectively. It is essential that the gateway towns are linked to each other and not just to Dublin i.e. Sligo, Galway, Limerick and Waterford. Provision should also be made for a rail commuter service at least for the larger gateways of Limerick, Galway and Waterford. In relation to the NSS, it is stated that rail should continue to offer alternatives for key intercity routes, but again it is only in terms of from Dublin and not rail interconnecting them and therefore it is difficult to speak of “intercity” when it only implies connecting other cities to Dublin and not to each other (p.24). Sligo and Letterkenny are not mentioned at all, despite being gateway towns under the NSS. The SRR therefore almost completely ignores the NSS through failing to recommend relevant connections between the various gateways and hubs.

## *Chapter 6 – Priorities for Action*

- **Further clarification is required on the range of tests carried out** and the justifications for the rankings e.g. Western Corridor ranks eight under baseline testing and fourth under Sensitivity Testing (p.157). A number of concerns have been raised in relation to the accuracy of the data used (e.g. number of kms and the inflated costings). These inaccuracies obviously influenced the results of the Cost Benefit Analysis. The methodology and figures used for the Cost Benefit Analysis are not displayed in the document, which limits the transparency of the results.
- (p.161) **Western Rail Corridor:** It seems unfair to claim that the awareness of this scheme is not matched by intent to encourage development along the line. As was evidenced in the SRR Seminar in Claremorris, there are a number of groups who have been lobbying for such a scheme for several years and the County Development Boards along the route are united in their goal of re-opening the Western Rail Corridor. The Western Rail Committee have shown that the costs of re-opening such a line would be significantly lower than those envisaged by Booze, Allen and Hamilton and that the inclusion of the Cork Limerick leg of the route in the costings is misleading as there is already an operational line in place between those two cities. The issue of costings for the route is very confusing in the report and as shown by Frank Dawson of Galway County Development Board, it could be reopened at a cost of €215m and not €572m as suggested in the report.

In relation to the argument that there is not the requisite critical mass on the line north of Galway, it would be difficult to obtain the requisite critical mass ahead of infrastructure and services. A commitment by the Government however to reopen the route however would encourage and stimulate development along the line. Not only would there be an increase in critical mass, but it would also stimulate enterprise and tourism, thus giving a huge boost to areas, which suffered from a lack of investment, poor infrastructure and population decline. Along the full

Western Corridor, there are already 5 gateway towns along this route, which can be linked by rail at a cost of €215m<sup>4</sup>, which is less than half the estimated cost of service enhancement required on the Dublin Rosslare route (€536m) and only a small fraction of the cost of the service enhancements suggested for the DART service in Dublin. The Western Rail Corridor is essential for the balanced development of the Western part of the country and as well as offering a vital service to people living in those areas. It also offers enormous tourism potential, an issue overlooked in the SRR. This would help to expand the regional spread of tourism and 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 and it welcomes the invitation by the Minister for Transport to authorities along the route to prove its case.

- The **Athlone-Mullingar route** should also be given a greater priority, especially if the Midland Triangle is to function effectively as a gateway. There should also be a link to Tullamore, with commuter services between the three towns. The Athlone Mullingar route would not only serve to connect these two midland towns, but would also provide an important national linkage, which would allow trains from Galway and Mayo to depart from and arrive in Connolly station, thus freeing up the lines out of Heuston Station.
- (p.162) **Galway-Cork:** The Statement that it “does not serve the lightly populated area to the north of Galway, which may be better served by good road and bus connections, integrating with rail at Galway” does not make sense and half a Western Corridor would not help to solve the regional imbalance between the BMW and S&E Regions. Despite seeming to recommend the Galway Cork link however, it is not even included in the recommended investment strategy, which is surprising given the seemingly positive attention it receives elsewhere in the report.

### **Chapter 7 Freight**

- A variety of options for freight transport are proposed and it would seem to be the most logical to use a combination of options 3 and 4 (active involvement of Government to grow rail freight and the introduction of new logistics partnerships). The combination of these two options would have the added advantages of increased public support for rail freight as well as new and innovative approaches, which would ultimately reduce the cost and increase the competitiveness of rail freight. **Rail freight is essential** not only for economic development, but also has many advantages in terms of the environment, road safety and with proper planning and initial investment it could offer a more cost-effective alternative to road transport.

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<sup>4</sup> Revised costings suggested by Frank Dawson of Galway County Development Board

## ***Chapter 9 Recommendations and Implementation Plan***

- (p.247) The new schemes that fit particularly well with the NSS should also include the **Galway-Sligo** link and the **Mullingar-Athlone** link. The Western Corridor should definitely be in the priority list (p.249) and there does not appear to be sufficient justification for excluding it.
- The **basis for the Recommended Investment Strategy** (p.249) is not clear and all new schemes for the BMW Region are omitted. It is surprising that even the Cork – Galway link is excluded (although it appears to be recommended elsewhere in the document) and there appears to be little justification for these decisions.
- The recommendations in relation to freight seem to concentrate exclusively on economic considerations and do not pay sufficient attention to **environmental and other considerations**, such as road safety and overall incentives for more balanced economic development.
- p.262 **Transition to New Operational Model**: This component is extremely important for the success of any new rail strategy. Much more emphasis needs to be put on other issues such as marketing, customer care, integrated transport systems for rail and bus (ticketing, timetables etc.), on-line services, discount and commuter fares and passenger services (including stations). Pricing is another issue, which does not feature per se in the review, but needs to be urgently reviewed due to the discrepancy in fare prices between urban and rural area (as pointed out in the WDC Rail Seminar, the price of the same length journey ranges from (€2.50 Dublin – Maynooth and €11.50 Ballymote – Sligo).

### **5. Recommendations**

- Due to many of the inaccuracies and misleading information presented in the SRR, we suggest that many of its sections should be reviewed and the various tests carried out with more realistic and accurate figures. The basis for the calculations should be more transparent. It might then emerge that schemes such as the Western Rail Corridor are not as economically unfeasible as originally claimed.
- A full review and a feasibility study of the Western Rail Corridor should be undertaken immediately with consultation with relevant groups who have already carried out studies to assess its feasibility.
- The timeframe outlined in the SRR should be readjusted to include more progress in the first five and ten years of the plan.
- Alternative and more cost-efficient methods should be explored for many aspects, such as the introduction of public private partnerships and public tendering of projects, development of more rail based tours, peak and off peak time pricing structures and the renovation of stations in line with increased usage (e.g. no urgent need to spend €40m on Galway station).

- More emphasis should be placed on cross-border rail linkages and the border counties should be given a greater priority. The Derry-Letterkenny link should be investigated further, with a possible view to also extending the Western Rail Corridor to Letterkenny.
- Commuter services should not only be a priority in Dublin in Cork, but in all urban centres, which experience congestion. There is a clear case for advocating commuter services around Galway and the current Athenry-Galway line could be used as a starting point, which would also serve Oranmore and the Eastern suburbs of Galway.
- Freight transport should be afforded a greater degree of priority and where feasible new forms of public-private partnerships should be explored.
- The whole SRR should be reviewed in light of the National Spatial Strategy and its priorities reassessed in line with the objectives of the NSS. Whilst the Assembly recognises that good urban transport is essential for Dublin, the services should not focus exclusively on the GDA, which would ultimately lead to the over-expansion and further congestion of Dublin to the detriment of other areas.