

**BORDER, MIDLAND AND WESTERN
REGIONAL ASSEMBLY**

Submission

To

Strategic Rail Study

24th May, 2002

1. Introduction

This submission sets out the proposals of the Border Midland and Western Regional Assembly for consideration as part of the Strategic Rail Review. The Regional Assembly submits that investments in rail services are critical in order to improve access to and from the region.

1.1 Background

The Border, Midland and Western Regional Assembly (along with the Southern and Eastern Regional Assembly) was established and came into effect on the 21st July 1999 under the Local Government Act 1991 (Regional Authorities Establishment Order, 1999). The Assembly comprises of (29) nominated elected representatives of the local authorities within the region. The establishment of the Regional Assemblies is a new departure in public administration in Ireland and the Assemblies perform tasks previously undertaken by Central Government Departments. Furthermore, this involves reporting by Departments and Agencies to the Regional Assemblies on their operations which is a positive development for regional administration.

The main roles of the BMW Regional Assembly are to:

- Manage the Regional Operational Programme under the National Development Plan
- Monitor the general impact of all EU. Programmes under the National Development Plan/Community Support Framework in the Border, Midland and West Region
- Promote the co-ordination of the provision of public services in the region.

Since its establishment, the Assembly has achieved several significant milestones including:

- Adoption of the Regional Operational Programme
- Provision of the Programme Complement
- Commencement of the implementation of Measures – over €531m spent in first two years
- Submission and acceptance of the first Annual Implementation Report to the EU Commission
- The Assembly has prepared a detailed submission which includes proposals and recommendations in response to the National Spatial Strategy Public Consultation Paper.
- Four meetings of the Regional Operational Programme Monitoring Committee have taken place and this committee has been reviewing the progress of the various measures in accordance with its remit.

Five sub-committees have been established which are reviewing the implementation of relevant aspects of the Regional Operational Programme and Inter-regional Operational Programmes and will be developing policy positions for submission to Government on significant issues facing the Objective 1 region.

1.2 Balanced Regional Development

The Government's stated objective for regional policy is to achieve balanced regional development in order to reduce the disparities between and within the two regions and to develop the potential of both to contribute to the greatest possible extent to the continuing prosperity of the country¹. The designation of the two regions is part of the process of achieving more balanced regional development, in that it enables a clear focus on the key issues facing each of the Regions and allows for a differentiation and targeting of policies in a manner which recognises their key attributes and needs.

Recent socio-economic indicators show however, that the disparity between the Regions is in fact widening, and more strategic investment is required in the Region in order to bring about a closer convergence and a greater balance in the development of the country.

INDICATOR	STATE	BMW REGION	S & E REGION
% of Population (2000)	100%	26.3%	73.7%
Age Dependency ratio (1996)	54%	60.8%	51.8%
% Unemployed (2001)	3.7%	4.5%	3.4%
Educational Attainment (2000) (% aged over 15 with 3 rd level education)	23%	19.1%	28.2%
Employment in Foreign-Owned State-assisted Companies (2000)	100%	21%	79%
Gross Value-Added per Capita (1998)	100	74	109
Average earnings (£)	16,171	12,948	16,941

1.3 Infrastructure Deficits in the BMW Region

It is generally accepted that the stock and quality of public physical infrastructure is one of the key determinants of the long-term growth rate of an economy or region. The capacity of infrastructure to support and sustain a given level of economic activity has a major bearing on the competitiveness of industry and the optimisation of the potential of the labour force. It is also a significant factor in determining the attractiveness of a region to foreign direct investment. The physical distribution of infrastructure also has a bearing on the spatial pattern of development within the country, thereby affecting the economic and social balance of all of its regions.

The BMW Assembly has identified key strategic investments in its recent submission to the Spatial Planning Unit of the Department of the Environment and Local Government. It is the Assembly's view that that the issue of regional imbalance must be tackled systematically and that an approach based on enhancing the key drivers of economic growth and tackling the constraints to economic growth should be adopted. One of the key drivers is "high quality physical infrastructure, including an inter-urban transport system."

The BMW Regional Assembly submits that balanced regional development and a convergence in socio-economic terms between the regions are possible, provided that strategic investments are made to address infrastructure deficits.

2. Public Transport Needs of the BMW Region

Much of the investment provided for in the National Development Plan concentrates on the improvement and provision of radial routes (both road and rail) from the regions to Dublin. While this investment is obviously required, it reinforces the existing primacy of the Greater Dublin region and thereby limits the possibilities of other regions developing as a counterbalance.

Because the BMW region is so rural, with a widely dispersed population and settlement system, transportation is critical. Commuting in the region, whether it is for economic or social purposes, generally involves relatively longer distances, in many instances along poorer quality non-national roads. Moreover, such travel requires private means of transport because of a lack of satisfactory regional and local public transport systems

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 and rural pilot schemes. In addition, there are few linkages between the different modes of public transport in terms of timetabling, thereby proving an additional disincentive.

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 unacceptable 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.

3. Specific Proposals

3.1 Western Rail Corridor

Railways together with road infrastructure can significantly reduce the geographic peripherality of the Western Region. The National Development Plan notes that: Increasingly, the transport of goods and people by rail is viewed as an environmentally and safer alternative to road transport¹. The NDP also recognises the lack of investment in rail infrastructure up to the 1990s, which significantly eroded its competitive position as a mode of transport in comparison to the road network.

The term “Western Rail Corridor” refers to the possible rail passenger and freight route from Sligo or Ballina through to Limerick with onward connections to the south-west and the port of Rosslare. In the context of a National Spatial Strategy this route could prove very valuable in (1) linking the towns of the Western Region and thereby enhancing the development of ‘critical mass’ (2) allow the possibilities for tourism to develop on the railway route and thereby diversifying tourism growth to more inland regions².

For the Western Rail Corridor to carry both freight and passenger traffic, several sections of track need to be up-graded significantly. These sections include:

- Collooney – Claremorris
- Claremorris – Athenry
- Athenry – Ennis

The Collooney to Claremorris track is disused and has been closed to all traffic since 1974. It is in a state of disrepair but is still owned by CIÉ. The Claremorris to Athenry track is closed to all passenger and freight traffic, however, it is used by Iarnród Éireann for engineering purposes. The Athenry to Ennis track is open for freight traffic only. It is used to transport cement and fertilizer. Traffic is seasonal and averages three trains per week.

It is estimated that to open and upgrade the Western Rail Corridor from Collooney to Ennis, which would allow passenger traffic at speeds of 60-70mph would cost in the region of €127 million. This includes the cost of ancillary works. This corresponds to less than 1 per cent (0.7 per cent) of the transport initiative for Dublin, “A Platform for Change” which has been costed at €17.78 billion³. It would serve a demand for up to 200 passengers per day from Sligo to Cork.

The development of a Western Rail network between Gateway centres would effect the following advantages:

- Increase access to education and training facilities.
- Stimulate greater expansion of indigenous and traditional industries along the Western Rail Corridor.
- Attract more sustainable industry to region, increasing linkages and generating a greater number of spin off industries.

¹ The National Development Plan 2000-2006, p 58

² For example towns such as Kiltimagh and Athenry have untapped tourism potential.

³ A Platform for Change: Outline of an Integrated Transportation Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2000-2006 p.18. The €17.78 billion is at 2000 prices.

- Support cluster industrial development in the Region
- Promote efficient and environmentally sustainable freight transport
- Reduce travel times to and from major ports and airports, generating greater efficiency and competitiveness benefits.
- Create corridors of industrial development through quality transport provision.
- Redirect industrial transport from the national roads to the rail network.
- This link is important in the redevelopment of areas on the fringes of existing links which are devastated and have experienced exclusion.
- Improvement in access would help in the promotion and development of rural tourism – the potential of which is immense.
- The existing Galway-Portarlington line should have two tracks to facilitate increased usage and better services.

A summary of the proposed rail route is attached – Appendix A.

3.2 Midlands Rail Network

The development of the rail network in the Midlands could play a very positive role in the social and economic development of the area and could contribute positively to balanced regional development.

In the first instance, the provision of a second line between Portarlington and Galway will facilitate the development of midland towns such as Portarlington, Tullamore, Clara, Athlone and Ballinasloe. In conjunction with this, Tullamore station and adjoining lands should be developed as a transport (bus/rail) node. This would allow for the integration of local bus services including a possible future town bus service with the rail network.

The foregoing development would enable the development of a commuter network that would re-vitalise the weakest region in the state, as evidenced in the recently published regional income data by the CSO.

In the short to medium term, the BMW Regional Assembly considers that

- (i) Re-opening of the Athlone-Mullingar line to commuter services
- (ii) The commuter train service needs to be extended from Kildare to serve Portarlington, Tullamore, Clara and Athlone.
- (iii) A second platform is required for Clara.
- (iv) Car parking is urgently required for Portarlington, Tullamore and Clara.
- (v) Train users need to be consulted to bring forward proposals for increased frequency of trains, relief of overcrowding and wheelchair facilities and access.
- (vi) A feeder bus service is required to connect West Offaly to the train station at Tullamore.
- (vii) The access to Portlaoise station needs to be improved and the frequency of commuter services increased.

3.3 Border Region Rail Network

The proposed Strategic Rail Study must have regard to the problems created in the Border Region from the over dependence on roads due to the absence of rail in the greater part of the region.

As there are no proposals to up-grade the regions National Roads infrastructure (except the M1 Dublin- Belfast route) to motorway or dual-carriageway standard, and as the existing road network cannot cope with the volumes and load bearing capacity of freight transportation traversing the region, it is imperative that rail be examined as an alternative mode of transport.

The BMW Regional Assembly considers that the study should have regard to opportunities to develop rail in conjunction with the Authorities in Northern Ireland.

The N.D.P. 2000 - 2006 and the National Spatial Strategy, when published, which seek to achieve more balanced regional development, must examine every means of achieving this aim. In the Border Region, this should involve the examination of the economic and social benefits of the establishment of a rail network.

The BMW Regional Assembly fully supports the improvement of the Sligo-Dublin service and also strongly recommends the extension of the rail network from Dublin to Navan to Kingscourt and on to Cavan.

The recommendations of the Western Development Commission- sponsored study into the provision of a commuter service on the existing Ballymote to Sligo line should be given serious consideration.

The absence of a rail service and poor road infrastructure in the Border Region has added to the many problems the region has had to contend with as a result of "the troubles in Northern Ireland". With the peace Process in place, there is an opportunity to look at the Region and Northern Ireland with a view to re-establishing a Cross-border Rail network, which would link the major towns on an all-island basis.

4. Rail Transport – Conclusions

- Rail transport can be a serious alternative to the road network but only if it is a quality service that is safe, reliable and efficient.
- The quality of the rolling stock is a serious issue for the western routes. However, new carriages for routes into the Western Region will not be available until the rolling stock on the Dublin/Cork/Belfast routes has been upgraded.
- Until the “Ontrack 2000” investment programme is completed, capacity constraints in terms of rolling stock and access to stations in Dublin are impeding the upgrading of existing services and the introduction of additional quality services.
- There should be consideration of new timetabling, particularly in relation to early and late express services between major centres.
- The development of a Western Rail Corridor (Sligo-Limerick) has the potential to provide significant freight and passenger transport and facilitate tourism in the region. Serious investigation of the feasibility of a Western Rail Corridor should be undertaken.
- The Western Rail Corridor could also be linked to the development of commuter routes between centres in the region.
- 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.
- Serious consideration should be given to the development of cross-border rail links in order to maximise the potential for north-south trade and tourism traffic.
- As a general point, the Regional Assembly considers that there is a need for greater co-ordination between the relevant public bodies and great representation on the Board of Iarnród Eireann from the BMW region.
- The issue of freight costs needs to be reviewed.

APPENDIX A