



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Key Issues and Future Challenges:
Networks and Gateways**

23 February 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Key Issues and Future Challenges: Networks and Gateways

23 February 2011

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson)
Miss Michelle McIlveen (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Billy Armstrong
Mr Allan Bresland
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Conall McDevitt

Witnesses:

Mr Trevor Anderson	)	Belfast Harbour Commissioners
Mr Uel Hoey	)	Belfast International Airport
Ms Kellie Armstong	)	Community Transport Association
Mr Andy McClenaghan	)	Consumer Council
Mr Ryan Simpson)	
Mr John Friel	)	Federation of Small Businesses
Mr Tom Wilson	)	Freight Transport Association
Mr Brian Ambrose	)	George Best Belfast City Airport
Mr Stephen Gillespie	)	Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners
Mr David McCann	)	Northern Ireland Environment Link

Captain Trevor Wright	)	Port of Larne
Mr Stephen Wood	)	Stephen Wood Consultancy
Mr Bernard Clarke	)	Translink
Mr Malachy Campbell	)	World Wildlife Fund

The Chairperson (Mr Cobain):

Good morning. Thank you all for coming to Parliament Buildings to participate in this evidence gathering event. Invitations were sent out quite late, so I thank you all for making time in your schedules to come along today.

As everyone knows, this mandate ends at the end of March, and the Committee is keen to discuss issues that we have tried to deal with during this mandate. More importantly, it would be helpful if you could identify some of the issues that the next Regional Development Committee will face following the election in May.

Today's events are designed to address three key work streams of the Committee and the Department: networks and gateways; accessibility and sustainable transport; and water and sewerage services. What we would like to do is what we always do; we would like to hear the views of key stakeholders, on what, hopefully, were some gains during the mandate, what is hoped to be achieved over the coming years, and what are the key challenges that lie ahead for the Department.

You are all aware that the issues that we are discussing today are extremely important, and a lot of work is required on the part of the Department, the incoming Committee and yourselves, the stakeholders, to take that forward in a way that, hopefully, will improve the quality of life of everyone in Northern Ireland. Achieving objectives will be even more difficult in coming years, because of the restrictions that we have financially, and a lot of soul searching has been done in the Department in producing the budget, which will, hopefully, be finalised in the next couple of weeks.

The format of the event is quite simple. Each of the organisations will be called to outline its views and concerns relating to the four main questions that we have posed. Those are as follows:

what major gains or significant developments have been achieved over recent years? What opportunities, more importantly, have been lost? That is an issue that the Committee is quite interested in. What are the key strategic challenges that lie ahead? What needs to be done to address those challenges?

Members of the Committee will then provide their comments or ask questions. After all of the organisations represented today have had an opportunity to speak, I will then open the floor for a plenary-style session and give everybody an opportunity to share their views, expand the issues and make additional comments where needed.

We anticipate that the event will last approximately one hour. Hansard will produce an Official Report that you will be able to view. The transcript of today's event will be incorporated in a report to the incoming Committee following the election. To ensure that we have an accurate transcript, it is important that we have people's correct names and organisations. Therefore, before you speak, I ask you to identify yourself and your organisation each time that you speak. Thank you again for coming on short notice; we will kick off. I invite the representative from Translink to speak.

Mr Bernard Clarke (Translink):

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to attend this session. I do not know why I was chosen to speak first; maybe to be provocative, maybe not. I want to highlight a few things from the service transport perspective. It is very easy, with hindsight, to look back and point out the significant gains that have been realised. However, if you review what has happened and what needs to happen, it is like a curate's egg.

There are success stories, where investment has been forthcoming. There has been new railway rolling stock and a reversal of other trends, in that we are not losing or haemorrhaging passengers but gaining them. However, we have physical infrastructure problems. We cannot get people to our networks, for example, and do not have sufficient parking capacity at railway halts. The adage that we use is "build it and they will come", and that has proven to be the case. So, we are lagging behind in that area.

We have had investment of sorts in developing quality bus corridors in the Belfast area. However, complementary policies such as parking restraint are not being introduced. Parking

supply in Belfast is, perhaps, at 2015 levels yet we have incompatible or inconsistent road arrangements for bus transport. That is another area in which we are lagging behind.

Translink has very difficult challenges ahead. The Chairperson referred to the budget. We have an issue with the budget allocation from the Department for Regional Development (DRD), and that from the Department of Education, which will impact on our ability to maintain and develop appropriate networks.

The incoming Committee will pick up a reasonably good pass. However, they will not need to have butterfingers because they will have difficulties trying to maintain and build on any momentum gained due to the problems with budgets. It is not all doom and gloom. There are opportunities out there. Even with the problems in north Africa and the possibility of another oil spike on the way, there is an opportunity for public transport to provide and rise to the challenge. Hopefully, we will be able to do that.

Ms Kellie Armstrong (Community Transport Association):

I thank the Committee for its commitment over the years. The next Committee will have a large job to take forward. The community and voluntary sector provides alternative transport services for older people in particular and people with disabilities in rural areas. There has been increased investment in accessible vehicles. We saw the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, which has certainly helped. However, we are facing very difficult times.

Within the fuel poverty framework, the focus is often on the heating of homes. However, our dependence on fossil fuels will create more difficulty as time goes on, with 13% of the income of the average rural household being spent on car fuel. The best way forward, as the Translink representative suggested, is to make sure that people have access to the appropriate public transport networks, in order to ensure sustainability of that network and to help us to achieve our emissions targets.

Community transport was earmarked in the budget for a substantial cut. Unfortunately, that will lead to us not being able to provide that integration of services to deliver people to Translink's routes so that they can go on to other places in Northern Ireland, whether for employment, education or health. So, we would like the next Committee to look at how transport can be planned more effectively across all Departments, by considering the services

available to health and education. We are finding that if we spread the resources across all Departments we can have a public transport system that will not have to face such massive cuts and that will benefit the whole community.

We would like the next Committee to review public transport reform and to consider not only education transport provided through Translink but all forms of education transport and health transport. We have an ageing community and a lot of people living in rural areas. The next Committee needs to consider their requirements.

My concern with the proposed budget is that by year 4 we will see a drop in capital investment in transport, which could lead to vehicles that are unsustainable for the next budget term. I would have preferred planning for improvement rather than planning for the decimation of services. I would very much like the next Committee to consider that issue and look at how we can work together.

Mr Brian Ambrose (George Best Belfast City Airport):

The gains of recent years have been remarkable but come with a note of caution. The market for the two Belfast airports doubled to eight million passengers between 1997 and 2007, which is massively positive for the region. However, there was a reduction of one million in the past year or so. That is due to economic reasons and other issues. Looked at positively, there is a big opportunity to claw back that market, but we are not immune to wider economic conditions.

Although there is healthy competition domestically, there is no real competition on the international or European markets. Competition tends to grow the pie and does not make life any easier for us, but it does generally benefit the region and the travelling public. We are an island, and the more access there is to here, whether for business or tourism, the better.

The big loss has been some of that business going to Dublin. We are owned by a Spanish company with its headquarters in Madrid. Neither Belfast nor Derry has a direct service to Madrid, so we drive down to Dublin and use the services there. We will continue to lose traffic to Dublin and the region until there is real competition and that market grows.

A key challenge is to find a way to facilitate competition in the international market. We have to look seriously at the huge gulf in taxation because, in the domestic market, departure tax from

Northern Ireland is £12, versus €3 in Dublin and the South. You could almost live with that difference because you will not drive to Dublin just to save a few quid. With international flights, however, which is the area that we need to grow, you are talking £60 versus €3, or £120 versus €3 if you are at the front of the plane. So, there is very good news and great competition on the domestic front, although there has been a bit of a setback but that is the economy that we are in. However, there are big challenges to optimise direct access to Europe for business and leisure.

You will hear another version now.

Mr Uel Hoey (Belfast International Airport):

Brian will be surprised to hear that I will echo most of what he said. I thank the Committee for its work and assistance over the term.

As Brian said, one of our key challenges is the disparity in air tax between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That is a topical issue at the moment, particularly for long haul services, for which the tax in Dublin is about to be reduced from €10 a sector to €3, at the same time as the UK air passenger duty, which is applicable to Northern Ireland, is rising by 33% up to £60 in the economy cabin and £120 in the business cabin for long haul services.

Frankly, that makes us uncompetitive compared with services in Dublin, which are now 90 to 120 minutes away by road. That is a major issue, because I believe that one of the key gains that has been made in the past five or six years for Northern Ireland, in opening up both an investment channel and a major tourism channel, has been the daily New York service. That was launched in 2005 by Continental Airlines and remains a critical channel for Northern Ireland to reach out to the key market of the North American continent. Sustaining that route is a key issue for Northern Ireland, both for practicality, to reach out for investment and tourism, and for perception. Therefore, we really do need some redress from Treasury on the tax disparity that exists.

Heathrow remains critical as a gateway and a transfer point for international passengers to and from Northern Ireland. Another of the gains made in the past few years was Northern Ireland gaining Aer Lingus services to Heathrow. That has helped to bolster our access on that front. That service and the commitment that British Midland has shown to the market for the past 25 to 30 years are very important for Northern Ireland in providing access to that key hub in the south-

east.

I will make a couple of other points on where we are developmentally. There are some key things that may go unnoticed in the air transport sector. Over the past 12 to 13 years we have developed an extensive, high-capacity domestic network in Northern Ireland with a committed carrier in easyJet. We have also a fortified role for Flybe in the short haul, high-frequency market. Those two services have, in many ways, helped to deliver the domestic competition that we now enjoy in Northern Ireland. We have also developed a number of nightly, wide-bodied air cargo services. Those help to give us access to the international world, with key integrators such as UPS, DHL and TNT.

I will move on to some of the opportunities that I think that we may have lost over the past few years. I believe that with a different approach two or three years ago, when there was significant variation in the exchange rate between sterling and euro, we could have gained a lot with tourism coming from Great Britain into the island of Ireland via Belfast. I do not believe that that opportunity was grasped correctly. We also had an opportunity to develop some other long haul services, but, so far, I think that has not been enough structure in how we have looked at bringing carriers such as Delta and Emirates into the Northern Ireland market.

Of the strategic challenges that we see, tax is the main one. Having a coherent and constructive policy with regard to how air transport develops in Northern Ireland is a key issue as far as Belfast International Airport is concerned. We have to live with the fact that we are in a relatively small market and we have to sustain and build on the services that we have, and Dublin is the main competition in that regard. Approach roads to Belfast International Airport remain a bone of contention as far as we are concerned. We realise that money is not plentiful, but we would like to at least see a plan somewhere in the distance to improve access to the airport from the M1 and M2. Lastly, we would like to see the designation of an air route development fund, such as that which delivered Continental Airlines, which could focus on delivering four or five key international destinations. That would assist on the investment and tourism fronts and bring more people into Northern Ireland.

Mr Trevor Anderson (Belfast Harbour Commissioners):

Good morning. First, I thank the Committee for the opportunity to participate in this discussion. I would like to make a couple of points about what has gone well; that is, the significant

developments and major gains of the past few years. Northern Ireland ports are in a healthy commercial position at the moment. Some developments in the roads infrastructure have certainly facilitated that, specifically the Westlink, the Dublin-Belfast corridor, and so on.

There has been investment that has facilitated the movement of trade through the ports. Specifically at Belfast harbour, there has been investment in new ferry terminals, in the Dargan Road dualling, and in deep water quays. All of that has supported the growth requirements of Northern Ireland trade.

Opportunities that have been lost include the lack of completion of the Westlink at the York Street interchange. More specifically, I point to two things. The first is the failure to properly streamline the planning system and the subsequent delays that that causes in development projects. The second is the long-documented issue associated with trust port legislation; that is, getting trust ports off the hook of public corporation status and giving them the opportunity for extended commercial powers. That would have enabled ports to make more wide-ranging investment in the infrastructure required to support trade through Northern Ireland.

Turning to Belfast harbour's specific strategic challenges, it always boils down to being able to understand the long-term needs of the economy. The gestation period for a lot of the infrastructure that is required can be 25 years or more, so it is critical to get a really good handle on how the economy is going to grow and what the impacts of that will be. It is also critical to make sure that we have the wherewithal to put in place the capacity to support the growth that the economy needs. The legislation that I referred to is a key part of that.

More specifically, from a Belfast perspective, considering the Titanic Quarter, etc, promoting Belfast as a foreign direct investment opportunity is another of our key challenges. As for what needs to be done to address those matters, from a foreign direct investment perspective, I could talk about corporation tax, but more specifically, the trust port legislation that I referred to is critical. Streamlining of the planning process is also critical. A broader and more integrated approach to transportation planning is also important.

Captain Trevor Wright (Port of Larne):

You are probably aware that the Port of Larne is the only private port in the Province. We report to P&O in Dover, and then to Dubai Ports World. We are owned by and report through to Dubai

Ports World. The people there probably do not know that we exist, but we report to them anyway.

We align ourselves with all of Trevor Anderson's comments. We are very encouraged by the development of the A8 between Belfast and Larne; we see that as a significant move. Three years ago, Larne and, I am sure, Belfast were extremely busy with the roll-on/roll-off business and congestion was the byword that we were working under. That has slightly evaporated and there is clearly a lot of slack on all the routes at the moment. However, as Trevor said, we have to plan for the long term, and the dualling of the A8 is something that we see as extremely positive.

As an aside, one of the other issues that I know Larne Borough Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council in Scotland are always working towards is the improving of the road network between the Loch Ryan ports and Dumfries. As you may know, it could take two hours to drive from Stranraer or Cairnryan to Dumfries, whereas here, we can drive from Belfast to the north-west in about an hour and 15 minutes. That is the distance that hauliers must take their products from Dumfries to Cairnryan. That was short and sweet: that is all that I have to say at the moment.

Mr Stephen Gillespie (Londonderry Port and Harbour Commissioners):

I want to pick up on a couple of things that Trevor Anderson said, much of which I agree with. There is much that we have in common, so I will not go over it again. We were talking about planning issues as missed opportunities. As Trevor Anderson said, streamlining Planning Service is critical for us. In addition, we face real issues around planners getting statutory consultees to come back within an agreed time. That causes real problems for us. In fact, one statutory consultee took 11 months to come back on a major project. Consequently, that major project got bogged down in planning. The economic recession hit, and we did not get finance for the project, so it was lost. We believe that, if that process had been streamlined and the consultees had come back within the specified eight-week period, that project would not have been lost. That is a major concern for us.

The key future challenges include legislation for public corporation status, which will be critical for us. In the short to medium term, access to finance has not caused us a problem. In the long term, for our growth ambitions and what we want to do as an authority to play our part for the region, the inability to get finance from private sources and being forced, as a public

corporation, to seek funds through DRD is impractical. Without that legislation and the ability to go forward with extended powers to stretch ourselves and play a part as a major economic driver, I am afraid that we will get stuck in the system as it stands.

Mr Tom Wilson (Freight Transport Association):

I want to echo what has been said about the Westlink works, and, in particular, the A8. One thing that the Committee may consider is possible funding opportunities to incentivise the private sector, because it has some very good ideas. I know that money is tight, but when we are looking for money there may be opportunities, as has been demonstrated in the South of Ireland, where the private sector has provided systems that seem to work very well.

From a business point of view, that is what we have to have working well for our future. That means that logistics — the supply chain — has to work efficiently. We know of many parts of the supply chain that are clogged up and where there are opportunities, without building new roads. There are opportunities to improve the existing roads networks.

I accept that the industry needs to review its own practices. It needs to work smarter. We are working with Belfast City Council to consider an urban consolidation centre, which would reduce the number of vehicles delivering into Belfast city on a daily basis, and, possibly, using electric vehicles, which would help to reduce emissions.

The stern measures that have been adopted south of the border to coax commuters to use public transport have worked. The flow of traffic in the centre of Dublin is pretty light now, even with the recession. Fewer vehicles are seen on the roads and public transport is well used and efficient, and people can rely on it. As someone said earlier, parking is freely available in Belfast. In some cases, it is very expensive, but on-street parking must be looked at seriously. We need to consider how we do that. We are competing here, and Belfast needs to be brought into line with what happened in Dublin a number of years ago. Needless to say, the supply chain will work more efficiently if there are fewer cars on our roads.

We need to grasp this opportunity to look at Northern Ireland ports as being attractive places to bring goods into and out of the island of Ireland. A lot of goods that come into and out of the island of Ireland come through the ports in the North. That needs to be investigated to make sure that we do whatever we can to help those ports.

We know that any roads scheme has a very long lead time. We have, surely, been talking about the A8 for 15 or 20 years, and it is still not done. We have also been talking about the A2, which is more to do with cars. We have not performed terribly well in those examples. I conclude by saying that good transport networks help balanced economic growth and that good connections to airports and seaports are vital.

I turn now to planning. The regional development strategy is cumbersome in how it aims to get to the end goal. I believe that the national spatial strategy in Ireland is much more strongly built into government policy. Perhaps we need to look at that on a legislative basis to make the delivery of planning much easier in Northern Ireland.

Mr John Friel (Federation of Small Businesses):

I agree with quite a lot of what has been said already. There has been huge improvement around the airports in the past few years. As someone who is classified nowadays as a frequent flier, I think that it is good to have different choices. The only thing that disappoints me is that Derry airport has not moved on very much at all in the past few years. There are all sorts of reasons for those delays, but it is about time that pressure was exerted somewhere to progress that.

The ports and bus services seem to be quite good, and I could talk tonight about all sorts of different things on behalf of small businesses, such as phone systems, broadband, water, sewerage and floods. However, I want to concentrate mostly on the transport issue, because I travel quite a lot from the other end of the Province and have small commercial vehicles travelling. On a yearly basis, the cost in hours spent on the roads is unbelievable. One road that we use a lot is the A5, on which work was due to start sometime last year. The work is to be done on the short stretch of road from Strabane to Ballygawley, and it was reported recently that there is going to be a public inquiry into the work because there have been over 2,000 objections. I guarantee that there are not 2,000 farmers on that stretch of road, so I do not know who is objecting.

There were claims that infrastructure has been one of the key gains and has been good. I totally disagree with that. We have not spent nearly enough money on roads. We can have good ports, good airports and good stations, but if there are not the roads to get to them, they are not much good. There has to be huge investment, and planning has to be changed so that those works

can progress a lot quicker.

The other big issue for people coming to Belfast from around the counties is parking, especially for commercial vehicles. It is a nightmare for someone working on a site in the city centre during the day. Something has to be done about that to try to encourage business rather than discourage it.

I want to go back to the issue of broadband. On leaving Belfast, broadband becomes very sporadic. Some towns have good broadband coverage, some towns have bad coverage and some towns have good coverage within 100 yards of the exchange, but for every yard that you move away from the exchange it drops rapidly. That is not good enough in this day and age.

The one good thing that I have to say is about the airports: they have both definitely improved in the services that they provide and the destinations that they offer. For me, roads are the number one issue to be dealt with.

Mr Andy McClenaghan (Consumer Council):

Good morning. I note from the handout that we received that one of the key gains listed was the consolidation of the Belfast to Heathrow service with the introduction of Aer Lingus here. That was a welcome development. One of the issues that the Consumer Council is concerned about is ensuring sustained connectivity with Heathrow. Heathrow announced before Christmas that it intends to revise its charging structure. Those revisions will significantly increase the cost of processing domestic passengers travelling from Heathrow to other UK airports. The revisions will slightly reduce the costs for passengers transferring from Heathrow to other European destinations, and slightly increase the cost for passengers travelling on to other international destinations. However, the biggest concern is the significant increase in the cost of processing domestic passengers.

In Northern Ireland we are very heavily dependent on our Heathrow services. The Consumer Council did some calculations, and we estimate that 53% of passengers who travel on Northern Ireland's Heathrow flights travel as origin and destination passengers. That means that they are only travelling between Belfast and Heathrow; their journey ends at either end and they do not connect to other flights. The Consumer Council is concerned that that significant increase in the cost of processing domestic passengers at Heathrow may lead to a transfer of those passengers to

other services to London and away from the Heathrow service. That could, potentially, undermine the economic viability of retaining those services or lead to a reduction in the frequency of services, both of which would be detrimental to Northern Ireland passengers.

One of the other issues that we would encourage the incoming Committee to be aware of is the UK coalition Government's potential plans to revise the UK air passenger duty. They have announced their intention to examine introducing a per plane tax on passengers. Currently, Northern Ireland passengers travelling on a single flight or a single ticket that connects through Heathrow pay air duty once. It is our understanding that the coalition plans to replace the air passenger duty with a per plane duty, which would see passengers charged for each leg of their journey, making it more expensive for Northern Ireland passengers to travel by air. Given our heavy reliance on air travel to reach the UK and to travel onwards to other destinations, we feel that the Committee should be very aware of that issue.

The Committee Clerk:

I am conscious of the time. Will contributors please keep their remarks to three or four minutes?

Mr Stephen Wood (Stephen Wood Consultancy):

I am speaking on behalf of my own consultancy firm and Professor Austin Smyth. More widely, I am speaking on behalf of the transport planning profession, which, unlike civil engineering and other similar professions, does not have a single voice; certainly, not in Northern Ireland. I will keep my comments brief, but as I have the advantage of coming last, I will speak in general terms and will try to pick up on some of the highlights. We also provided written comments.

On the major gains, because we had the regional transportation strategy and the three transport plans, we had a good framework to work through during the past number of years and made specific and balanced improvements to the bus network in Belfast and throughout Northern Ireland. As was said earlier, ports, airports and rural transport also saw quite good infrastructural improvement. Therefore, great progress was made during the past number of years.

On the opportunities that were lost, the funding in later years began to lose balance as we were knocked off course by the investment strategy for Northern Ireland and other, what had been positive, opportunities. That meant that we lost some of the public transport balance, and as result there was less funding for some of the smaller measures such as local transport and safety

and a loss of momentum, even for the development of a rapid transit system in Belfast.

The draft Budget is a great challenge to transport. If it cannot be turned around, the main headline will be to retain a comprehensive public transport network and not lose connectivity. Cross-border rail and competition between car and rail are also issues because of big improvements in inter-urban dual-carriageway speeds in the Province and across Ireland. Also, a lot of attention needs to be paid to the balance between transport objectives and the wider planning objectives of land use allocations and sustainable development patterns. The fact cannot be ignored that if land uses are spread, one cannot have viable public transport.

The incoming Assembly needs to have a strong regional transportation strategy to guide and balance transport planning. The DRD needs to face up to the sustainability challenges and be incentivised to face up to the challenge of greenhouse gases. My final plea is for in-house expertise in what is a technical, as well as purely political, discipline.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for coming along at short notice. I will go through some of the headlines issues that were talked about. The Committee is always pushing for the process to be continuous and tries to work with the Department to come to conclusions on that. Dealing with the Planning Service, especially in large-scale infrastructure developments, can be totally frustrating. Someone said that some consultees in the planning process are holding up major investments here. One planning issue has been going on for four-and-a-half years because of difficulties with the Planning Service. That is not acceptable to anyone.

The difficulty with airport tax, corporation tax or any taxes here is that we have a land border, which the rest of the United Kingdom does not have; and arguing for special circumstances seems to fall on deaf ears. However, this impacts hugely on all of the issues.

The Committee is a champion of public transport and has continually challenged the Department on public transport.

As far as the draft Budget is concerned, the Committee is really concerned about the reduction in subsidy to Translink, Metro and the railway services. There has been a dramatic increase in recent years in the numbers of people who are prepared to use public transport because it is clean, effective, efficient and regular. To get to where we are today and then reduce the subsidy and go

back to square one is horrendous.

Taking cars off the road is another major issue for the Committee. Building more roads is not the answer. How we deal with the car culture here needs to be looked at, but we cannot do so while we are reducing the level of public transport available to people who do not want to use their cars.

The Committee is very supportive of the ports, and has been for a long time. Whether the next Committee will be as supportive of extended commercial powers is a matter for it, but, given the current commercial world, we want Northern Ireland to be as competitive as anywhere else, and we are willing to do whatever we can to support the ports.

There has been a huge amount of investment in roads. However, the big problem with that is that there is no strategy to take cars off the roads. I think that everyone agrees that building more roads is not the answer. The answer lies in how we are going to work together to make sure that there is a proper roads infrastructure that is not suffocated by cars. For instance, there is new lane on the M1, but we do not get a reduction in congestion; what we get are more cars. That leads to calls for another extension, or something else. As a community, we have to get the car culture out of our minds. Let us have alternatives that reflect the direction in which we should be going. A lot of people seem to have put environmental issues to the back of their minds. However, the Committee has seen emission figures, and Northern Ireland is about 30% ahead of anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Should European infractions come here, there will be a price to be paid. Our actions are not without cost.

Mr McDevitt:

I echo the Chairperson's comments. Addressing air taxation will have to be a priority in the next mandate. Hopefully, the precedent set by corporation tax will make that a little easier in that we will break the argument, once and for all, that there is no opportunity for discretion in regional taxation. You will have my support in that. I also put on record that I hear and agree with the arguments on the need to review legislation on trust port designation urgently. That is a very important matter, and we cannot continue to put it on the long finger.

The new regional development strategy will be the policy context within which a lot of conversations will take place, and I wonder whether any of the organisations that have spoken so

far share my concern that there is a great disconnect between the lofty ambitions of the strategy and the practical reality of Executive and departmental policy. Do colleagues have any thoughts about how that can be narrowed, given the benefit of 10 years' hindsight of a previous regional development strategy and regional transportation strategy? I noted the comment earlier about the statutory role that spatial planning has in the Republic: that is perhaps worth looking at further.

Further to that, do the airport representatives think that it is time that we had a regional aviation strategy that would feed into aviation planning across these islands? The objective would not to undermine competition; it would be to have a clear policy framework for the direction in which we want to go over the next decade or so.

Mr Hoey:

On the last point: for a long time, our view has been that there needs to be a coherent strategy on air transport provision, not only locally but within the island, as you said. We see some of the infrastructure development and taxation issues that we have talked about being addressed very clearly south of the border. Roads and public transport there integrate well with the ports and airports, and taxation is designed to help promote investment and tourism, which, in turn, promotes economic development.

We are in a very competitive environment locally and on the island. The view of Belfast International Airport is that competition will exist locally, and it has benefited the consumer as has already been discussed. However, gains can be made by Northern Ireland, as a region, by looking at the huge volume of traffic that is coming in and going out of the island via Dublin, which benefits through tax, infrastructure and all of the other things that help it.

Northern Ireland needs a policy and a direction that cover all of the assets at the region's disposal. We need to decide how they can be best used for the overall good, taking all elements into consideration, their values and upsides, and put them together for the region's overall benefit.

Mr Ambrose:

I always get nervous when I hear talk about strategy. Northern Ireland is very good at strategy; however, we are not so good at execution. The challenge exists. We are losing traffic to Dublin, and it is due to lack of competition and opportunity in Europe. For example, if people did not drive to Dublin in order to fly to Bristol, there would be plenty of opportunities for all three

domestic airports.

Without a strategy, it is clear that things such as planning, and so on, are holding up progress and preventing real competition. I have no problem with a strategy as long as it is articulated clearly, is not being used to thwart competition, and looks at matters such as proper access. The representative from Belfast International Airport highlighted that the road infrastructure does not resemble a major access to an airport. Indeed, I can throw a stone from my office to a railway line, yet we have no rail connection with it. If remedying that is what is meant by a regional aviation strategy, then I welcome it. However, if it thwarts competition, it will simply hold up progress and we will continue to lose opportunities to connect to Europe and improve tourism and business connections. The bottom line is that someone needs to articulate to me what they mean when they say “regional aviation strategy” before we would support it.

Mr Wood:

I think that, perhaps, the strategies are OK; it is that the plans at the level below them take so long to develop and debate. Perhaps the periods that are being planned for are too long and so the plans are, therefore, not deliverable. They might be dealing with schemes covering the next 15 years. It is unmanageable. If the process could be tighter and if plans could be made for shorter periods, aligned with the money that we know will be available, people could start to see progress, and we could all push together.

The Committee may be aware that I appeared before it to try and make transport plans part of the Bill. Perhaps, that is not the answer: we do not want more and more red tape. However, we do need agreement and shorter-term plans. It does not need to be paralysis by analysis. Ballymoney is not Birmingham. We need to think of matters at the level that is useful to us.

Ms Lo:

Competition from Dublin is a big concern. I was talking to a travel agent in Belfast who deals with the majority of Chinese people who go back to Hong Kong and China. There are 10,000 of them, and most travel home once a year. That is big business. He tells me that he advises people to fly from Dublin now, because it is the cheapest route. That cuts out our flights to Heathrow, from which Cathay Pacific and Virgin fly. A huge amount of business is going elsewhere. I share your concerns about the likely increase in taxation. There is no comparison between the €3 and £60 in taxes.

A number of people mentioned planning. You may be aware that the Planning Bill is going through the Assembly. Will that Bill help you? Through it, major developments will be managed directly by the Department, and hopefully, will progress more quickly. A lot of other planning applications, however, will become the responsibility of local councils. Will that be quicker for you, or will it be more of a hindrance?

Mr Ambrose:

From my extensive experience of planning — we had one application that took more than five years and our current application has been in the system for four years. As someone mentioned earlier, statutory consultees are not bound by time lines. The Planning Service seems to add process on top of process. It consults, takes opinion, and then has another round of consultations. It needs to get to the point at which it makes decisions. It is recognised that there will be judicial challenges; that is the world in which we live. The Planning Service must manage the process robustly and make decisions. The issue is more about how the system is managed rather than the system itself. If decisions were being made, everyone in the room could live with those, move on and adjust their strategies. Some of our firms are owned by international companies, and they are alarmed by the length of time and the uncertainty caused due to the lack of decision-making in planning.

Mr F McCann:

The previous two contributors touched on this matter. Is there a mechanism whereby Departments pull together the body of expertise in this room on road, air and rail transport to develop a strategy, or does the strategy come down from Departments to people such as yourselves? Anna said that the Chinese community travels to Hong Kong and China. I know a number of people who fly to Dubai and prefer to travel via Dublin because the Thursday flight to Dubai is far cheaper than they can get elsewhere.

People talk about extending the road network and increasing the volume of traffic on roads. Some of us live in areas that are affected greatly by pollution from motorways, but that has never been taken into consideration. I live 50 yards from the Westlink, but nobody asked me about extending the Westlink, or the effect that that would have on my health or that of my children and other families in the area. I am just an ordinary punter who lives there. So, there are other problems that need to be taken into consideration.

In our previous session, a witness talked about the need to get freight transported from A to B by road, but nobody talked about putting freight on trains to get it from A to B. That would take a lot of traffic off the roads.

Mr B Clarke:

I will try to pick up some of the points that have been made. There are strategies and transport plans, which were in implementation mode. However, it was fraught and difficult, and there are quite a lot of case studies that show the difficulties, whether brought on us by the system that the Planning Service imposes or by the new obstacles that are created, as we get closer to implementation.

I will give you one example, of which you are probably well aware, which is the park-and-ride scheme at Cairnshill. The plan was developed in the 1990s, the land was assembled by the Department's Roads Service, and the facility was built. Then there was a lag before the bus service was provided. Therefore, we have a system in which there was an imbalance in the quality of service offered, and that is why it is not particularly attractive, never mind the problems with parking supply. All along, there were difficulties. There was a plan in the 1990s, which was implemented in 2010 and the difficulties in trying to achieve success were numerous.

The biggest problem that society has with the way that it is governed and with the Departments that oversee it lies in buy-in and linkages. Conall McDevitt asked about the new regional development strategy and whether there will be buy-in from the other Departments that impact on transport services. I hope so, but on past evidence I doubt it very much, and I do not think that anyone will disagree with me.

Mr F McCann:

I live in inner-city Belfast, and I know that one of the big problems is parking, which was raised this morning. Do you have suggestions about how we should deal with it?

Mr Wood:

I will try to answer that. As I understand it, one issue with parking is that although Roads Service would like to introduce proper parking management, reduced parking, and so on, a lot of residential parking schemes are needed because of where people live in inner-city Belfast. That

requires legislation, consultation and effort, and it needs to be paid for, which is one of the issues. The other problem is that if we displace to public transport those who travel to Belfast by car public transport would be unable to cope. Therefore, it is not something that can be switched on and off; there is some way to go.

Bernard Clarke made the point about park-and-ride schemes. One issue that I see from the outside is that road schemes, which are run by Roads Service, or pure public transport schemes, which are run by Translink, can be delivered reasonably efficiently because those organisations are well geared to deliver within their own modes. However, we run in to a bit of a quagmire when it comes to cross-modal initiatives such as park-and-ride schemes because those require co-operation between the two organisations and compromises need to be made on priorities.

The Chairperson:

I think that that is something called an integrated transport plan. The difficulty in this place is that people operate in silos, but that is no use anymore. The Committee's big thrust is to take cars off the road, but that cannot be done if people can park in city centres for £1 a day or if public transport funding is cut, fares are increased and services decrease. Everything is running contrary to what we want to do.

The Committee wants the Assembly to establish clear and definitive lines about what it wants to do. Currently, we are pulling against one another, with one Department saying that it needs one thing and another saying that it needs something else that runs contrary to the first Department. We are all over the place. We have strategies for everything, but none of them ever gets delivered. We spend millions on a simple thing like a park-and-ride scheme, yet we cannot integrate it with a bus service to take people into town. For God's sake, it is not rocket science.

Mr Friel:

It is important to differentiate between the car and the commercial vehicle. We also need to distinguish between public transport and commercial transport. For example, someone who is going to work in an office, to the shops, or to visit somebody, can get a bus if there happens to be one in their area. However, it depends on where you live. In some places, people can get buses and trains quite easily, but the only time that I see a train is on the TV or when I come to Belfast.

For me to travel from Strabane to Belfast, I have to drive to Derry to reach an airport or get a

bus, sit around there for perhaps an hour and then stop at the International Airport before I get into the city. I have no way of getting home again at night. That is not much good. We have to be realistic and practical about such things. Public transport is great for anybody who can use it, but it is about getting the right balance between those who want to use it and the supply. For commercial travel it is totally different.

Mr McCann mentioned pollution. What difference is there from pollution due to trucks crawling along a bad road or speeding along a motorway? I do not think that there is much difference. As was said, the idea is about getting goods from A to B. That is what it has always been about since day one.

Mr F McCann:

Very few trucks go through the area in which I live in, but thousands go along the road that is 50 ft from where I live.

Mr Friel:

That is the same issue. What is the difference between pollution from a truck that is going slowly in a queue and from one that is going fast?

Mr F McCann:

The difference is between one and thousands.

Mr Friel:

Pollution?

Mr F McCann:

What I am saying is that very few trucks go along the street in which I live, but, 50 yds to 100 yds away, thousands of trucks are going along the road system. As the Chairperson touched on earlier, there are a number of key sections on the Westlink where pollution is very high. I happen to live beside two of those, which are within 200 yds of each other.

Mr Friel:

I am asking about the difference between a fast moving and slow moving truck as far as pollution is concerned. It does not really matter whether it is 50 yds away or 500 yds away; it is still

pollution. I would rather that trucks could move fast —

Mr F McCann:

If you live there, it makes a difference.

The Chairperson:

We are talking about the same issue; the two points are complementary. We are talking about freeing up roads to make it easier and cheaper to transport goods. To do that, cars have to be taken off the roads. We cannot keep going along the way we have been going or we will end up in the same situation as Dublin. We are going to spend £150 million on a rapid transit system for Belfast, but there can be no a rapid transit system for Belfast if the number of cars on the roads remains the same. The first thing that we have to do is take away the cars. Public transport has to be an alternative. We are on the same page, but we need co-ordination around where we are going. For us, public transport and taking cars off the road are the same issue.

Mr Friel:

I agree that cars have to make way for faster vehicles.

Mr T Wilson:

I will answer the question about pollution from trucks. When work on the Westlink started four or five years ago, there were 65,000 vehicles a day on the road, of which 22,000 were commercial vehicles. In the North, the number of commercial vehicles is 10% or 11% of the overall traffic volume, but it is much higher on the Westlink because vehicles are going into and out of the port. If they are stuck in slow-moving traffic, going 2 ft or 3 ft and then stopping, they are churning out more pollution because they are in bottom gear. The volume of pollution from trucks moving along a roadway at 40 mph or 50 mph is very much less.

I will deal briefly with the point made about moving freight to rail. In the past week, some of you may have seen television footage of the 1960s and 1970s, during which bags were physically handled at the docks. Every morning, hundreds of dockers were hand-hauling goods. We have moved a long way from that to container traffic. However, there is very little warehousing and hardly anything is held in stock nowadays. Shifting goods from trucks to railways is a slow process. It is OK if the journey is, perhaps, 100 miles, but the last freight moved by rail in Northern Ireland was cement and beer from Belfast to Dublin. Moving freight by rail is good

when a long journey is involved. However, in practice, it is not possible in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson:

Thank you all for coming, and I thank all the stakeholders who have been an enormous help to the Committee over the past four years. The Committee and the Executive still have major problems. We hope that meetings such as this highlight some of the frustrations that people have, and we are glad to take those on board and work at them.

It is for the next mandate, thankfully, to look at some of the really major issues. For us, those issues are cross-departmental, and they have to be resolved. We cannot do it by working in silos. That will not work. We have to resolve them if we are to remain competitive. Producing strategies is just not good enough. Ultimately, we have to have action, and we are not good at action. Thank you all very much and I hope you have a safe journey home.