

SDLP Discussion Paper on Regional Development

June 2000

The North in Context

Introduction

A new regional development strategy is fundamental to the building and establishment of a new society in the North of Ireland, especially because of the conflict resolution scenario we presently find ourselves engaged in. The state of Northern Ireland since its foundation has experienced uneven social and economic development within the confines of its restrictive political and geographic boundaries. This has exacerbated social exclusion and alienation, which has been one of the core reasons for the existence of social and political upheaval over the past thirty years in the north of this island.

The new society we are seeking to create in the North of Ireland must be developed strategically with reference to an all-Ireland and European context, and the challenge now as we enter the 21st century is to put in place a sustainable development plan. This strategic plan should have at its core a recognition of the need to implement a balanced development programme, addressing both the needs of urban and rural communities. Fundamental to the success of this plan are considerations relating to equity and fair treatment which must be an integral part of its framework. The political dispensation must be seen to deliver on a fair and equitable basis for all of the people of the North of Ireland, irrespective of geographic location or political and social affinities. Also, sustainable development must take into account other important factors such as environmental and quality of life considerations. These core objectives can only be achieved if policy initiatives are developed within an all-Ireland and European regional context to ensure that we achieve a harmonious and truly integrated society in the North of Ireland.

A successful regional development strategy must include certain core parameters, many of which are outlined in the DOE's recent Draft Regional Strategic Framework document - *Shaping our Future*. These include the following:

Balanced and sustainable growth

Social and economic inclusion - strengthening the regional economy and tackling social disadvantage

protection of the physical, natural and man made assets of the region

providing a spatial framework for transport, air and water quality, energy and waste strategies, including infrastructure providers and public service promoters

Overarching strategic framework for Development Plans, and guidance for decisions with regards to public and private investment in relation to land use

The *Shaping our Future* document sets out the framework for the devising of a regional development plan for Northern Ireland. The draft proposals refer to the new political context and the need for balanced sustainable development necessary in the creation of a more cohesive society. It is of fundamental importance that rural development must be allowed to coexist in a complementary way with urban development in both the Belfast Metropolitan area, and the designated regional towns and their associated hinterlands. The new regional development strategy should not regard increased urbanization as the primary social and economic driver, otherwise this will result in uneven development. Therefore, urban development must be successfully managed in parallel with rural development so that we achieve the necessary balance to meet the quality of life and the environmental needs of society as a whole.

The formulation and implementation of a regional development strategy depends to a large extent on the provision of key strategic services. This includes an integrated transport strategy, and an energy supply mix with a related distribution network, underpinned with a water and sewerage system capable of meeting the development needs of the entire region. Fundamental to the formulation of a strategic development policy must be the

recognition that key public utility services should be distributed in an equitable manner, taking into account factors such as accessibility and sufficient capital spending throughout the entire region in order to meet our stated development goals.

Unfortunately, for almost the last twenty years there has not been any effective strategic planning for Northern Ireland in the areas of transport, energy and water service provision. The reality is that we never had any development proposal which sought to achieve an integrated transport infrastructure or a proper energy supply mix for this region. To accomplish decentralization we must ensure that the regions have an adequate physical infrastructure. Furthermore, the question of balanced capital expenditure throughout the region has not been addressed sufficiently in relation to the provision of public utilities. This means that a new regional development plan must also address the long-term strategic provision of these vital services.

Many of the social and political problems in the North of Ireland have emanated from a sense of injustice about how infrastructural planning was conducted in the past. The whole issue of ghettoization must also be addressed within a regional development strategy in order to tackle social and economic disadvantage, which particularly manifests itself within deprived urban and rural communities. Indeed many rural communities, especially in the western and southern parts of the North of Ireland, feel that the public sponsored development of infrastructure must be tackled in a more inclusive and sensitive way to redress the past neglect of such regions. Future regional development must effectively contribute towards community development and take into consideration both the social, cultural and political affinities of such communities at a local level. The overriding aim must be to ensure that no urban or rural community perceives that they are being marginalized, or deprived from sharing in the social and economic benefits resulting from the total productive output of the region as a whole.

Shaping Our Future - Department of Regional Development Regional Strategic Framework

The Department of the Environment published a draft Regional Strategic Framework - Shaping Our Future - in December 1998. Following devolution and the new Departmental structures, this is now within the remit of the Department for Regional Development. Shaping Our Future is a bold document, and a welcome development. As noted above, a scattergun or laissez-faire approach to development could result in many areas suffering from a lack of cohesion and effective planning and no area achieving its full potential.

It is inevitable that such a bold and far-reaching document will not please everybody. Not every small town will find itself on a main arterial road, or earmarked for promotion for inward investment. What matters, though, is that every settlement, whether a major city such as Belfast, a regional town such as Omagh or Newry, or a village such as Ballymartin or Portballintrae, should have fair and ready access to services, jobs, hospitals, housing and public transport.

All-island context

If the Strategy is to be meaningful, it must be set firmly in an all-island and, indeed, a European context. It could even be argued that it should be set in a global context. The SDLP calls for a similar all-Ireland strategic framework to link the various Regions of Ireland together, enabling each to benefit from the planning of the others. This will require a culture change away from geo-spatial competition towards cooperation. For too long, we have seen back to back development across the border with the South. The border zone, in its entire length from Derry to Newry, can realize its economic development potential only through face to face development with the South, whereby, for example, Newry sees development in Dundalk as an opportunity, rather than a threat. Joint infrastructural development schemes in border zones can greatly enhance social and economic welfare for people on both sides of the border. There is also a need to refocus "cross border" activity beyond the towns and villages immediately on the border. For example, Cork and Ballymena too should be able to see the opportunities of expanding their trading sphere.

North-South cooperation must extend far beyond the six implementation bodies and the six areas for enhanced cooperation, which arise from the Good Friday Agreement. Almost

every aspect of Government policy could benefit in terms of efficiency, economy or efficacy from closer North-South ties. This does not appear to have received sufficient recognition in *Shaping Our Future*. It is imperative that there is institutional cooperation between corresponding Departments in the North and South, mirroring the cooperation between Departments of European Governments.

The *Ireland - National Development Plan 2000-2006* published in November 1999 in the South does make mention of an all-island strategy in terms of bidding for European structural funds. The North and the South have a Common Chapter in their Structural Funds Plans for the period 2000-2006 which highlights the potential for cross border cooperation. The Common Chapter is cited in *Ireland - National Development Plan 2000-2006* as putting in place a framework for closer cooperation, but no firm ideas for developments seem to be in evidence. *Shaping Our Future*, however, makes no reference to EU Structural Funds and the Common Chapter. This is a crucial omission. It is likely that Northern Ireland's access to high levels of Structural Funds will be time-limited, it is therefore essential that the best possible use is made of them to develop our cross-border infrastructures in a coordinated fashion.

Devolution

As we leave the 20th Century and prepare to enter the 21st, the world around us is changing fast. The old social and economic model of individual nation states is being superceded in the West by a model of a Europe of the Regions, with those Regions vying with one another for business and wealth. The North of Ireland has to recognize that it does not yet have the necessary infrastructure to seize the opportunities that this new situation affords: unless we develop that infrastructure, we will not attract inward investment and will not be able to retain our home-grown entrepreneurs. The engine for effective local economic development is largely centred on the Small and Medium Enterprise sector, which has a major contribution to make in relation to creating local employment opportunities, particularly in the rural hinterlands.

We have spent thirty years and more living without a locally based collective say in our Government. We have largely evolved a Regional economy based on handouts from Britain or from Europe - sometimes disguised as public sector jobs or peace grants - but, nevertheless, handouts. This culture has to change, and devolution offers us the best hope yet of standing our own two feet. It offers us the opportunity to develop Regional Development policies - to develop and implement a Regional Development Strategy - that meets our local needs and provides more home based employment.

Concerns about Shaping Our Future

The SDLP is broadly happy with the vision set out in *Shaping Our Future*, but does have some specific concerns:

Inner Spine Road

The SDLP sees the need for an Inner Spine Road to link Coleraine, Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon, Armagh and Newry. Each of these towns is of modest size, but together they serve a well-populated rural hinterland that has suffered the consequences of repeated omission from Government policies as resources have been directed to better known centres such as Derry, Belfast and Craigavon. The Inner Spine Road links these rural areas to services and would also enable domestic travel from North to South, which is currently not practical with the largely East-West layout of the proposed key transport corridors.

Newcastle and Downpatrick are also currently isolated from main transport links and *Shaping Our Future* does not appear to address this. South Down offers some of the most spectacular scenery in Northern Ireland, and offers beaches for family seaside holidays. It is also massively under-exploited and has enormous potential to develop its tourist industry. This will not happen as long as it remains inaccessible from the ports of entry into the region (i.e. Belfast and Newry). If practical, therefore, the Inner Spine Road should extend to incorporate towns like Hilltown, Newcastle, Downpatrick and Lisburn to Belfast.

The diagram below shows our proposed Inner Spine Road superimposed on the transport corridors shown in the Shaping Our Future document.

Key transport corridors

Shaping Our Future does not explain what a key transport corridor should look like, but simply states that it should be an upgrade of existing roadway. The road surfaces should be suitable to take a large volume of traffic, both of freight and passenger variety. Because of the likely volume of traffic, for reasons of safety and noise, these routes should bypass towns and villages wherever possible. The key traffic corridors must have overtaking lanes or dual carriageway at reasonably frequent intervals or else the routes will only be as fast as the slowest tractor or juggernaut. Consideration should be given to allowing wider trunk roads; in the North the present maximum width is 7.3m, whereas in the South it is 10.5m. This allows vehicles greater scope to overtake, even when there is only one lane in each direction.

ICT infrastructure

As we move into the 21st century the revolution in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is radically transforming our lives in many ways. Innovations such as the internet and e-commerce are revolutionizing the way we relate to one another, the way we conduct business and are also challenging the boundaries of the nation-state itself. The capacity of this new technology has been further enhanced by developments such as the Integrated Digital Services Network (ISDN) which enables data to be transmitted up to five times faster than the current analog systems.

In today's knowledge based economy this new technology is fast becoming a tool of social empowerment and if the devolved administration is to implement a truly inclusive equality agenda then, both urban and rural communities throughout the North of Ireland must have access to these new developments. Therefore, it is essential that a comprehensive regional development strategy must include provision for the expansion of the physical infrastructure of the ICT sector. This could be achieved by government working in tandem with the private sector to make it financially viable for firms to expand this infrastructure into peripheral areas, to ensure that the region as a whole is properly equipped to avail of the opportunities of the global economy.

Larne

Although the role of ports is considered elsewhere in the paper, mention must be made of the Port of Larne in relation to Shaping Our Future. The role of Larne is unclear; the port appears to be undergoing a slow death at present as trade increasingly moves to Belfast or Derry. The SDLP believes that this is in part attributable to the poor road and rail connections between Larne to the rest of the North and beyond. Shaping Our Future shows a key transport corridor between Larne and Belfast; it is assumed that this represents an intention to develop the transport connections because there is little at present to indicate that it is a key corridor. However, as trade at the Port of Larne continues to dwindle away, there will be less of a need for an upgrade of the Larne-Belfast links. In other words, if there is to be action, it must be now or never.

Major/Key Service Centres

The distinction between Major Service Centres and Key Service Centres is unclear and this has been highlighted in the Report of the Panel conducting the Public Examination of the proposals. However, the Panel Report proposal to drop the concept of centres altogether in favour of the categories of small town and large town risks throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The argument that we must not straitjacket development for the next 25 years to a few towns is sensible; nobody can predict demography or development 25 years hence. The argument that too many towns were highlighted to provide a meaningful focus is also compelling. Indeed, the SDLP believes that the original approach gave too much emphasis to urbanization, and did not highlight the interaction between the service centres and their surrounding rural communities. However, to throw away the notion of service centres altogether leaves the Strategy running the risk of dispersing into the scattergun

approach to development which it was intended to replace. Moreover, it leaves the transport and housing sections short of strategic justification.

As an alternative, the SDLP proposes the retention of the concept of service centres, albeit without the distinction between major and key centres. The intention should be that no household is left without ready access (by road and public transport) to a service centre whilst allowing rural communities to retain the own integrity through local services and employment. Strategic centres for attracting investment should be retained, but with the proviso that they should be seen in the context of their rural hinterlands. Hence, at any one point, four or five areas would be the targets for investment with an aim for a mix of rural and urban investment within that area. The four or five areas should be reviewed on a five-yearly basis to ensure that all parts of the North receive their fair share of attention. A key criterion in selecting the four or five areas should be social deprivation. This recognizes that not every area can be a priority area at the same time, but that the reasons for the selection of priority areas are transparent and fair.

Decentralization

Shaping Our Future recognizes the need for decentralization of services and employment if communities outside Belfast and Derry are to prosper. The SDLP believes that Government should lead by example: entire Government Departments should be relocated outside Greater Belfast. This would enable potential public servants who live in regional towns or their hinterlands to see an entire career in their locality. At present, there are some (although not enough) lower paid Government jobs outside Belfast, but very few senior posts. In the South and in Britain, positive policies of decentralization have been adopted, which are promoting better balanced growth beyond capital cities.

Airports

Northern Ireland depends upon its airports for its link with the outside world. If the Region is to compete in a European or global economy, it must be readily accessible. Of the three airports, Belfast International Airport will be the key on a global level, with Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport focusing primarily on shuttle services within Ireland and Britain, and potentially to near Europe, such as Brussels or Paris. These various roles need better definition.

Despite its name, Belfast International Airport has relatively few international flights. Shaping Our Future shows flight times to, for example, Boston, Rio de Janeiro, Johannesburg, Sydney and Tokyo. Direct services do not operate to these cities at present. At February 2000, non-stop flights could be made to Brussels (7 per week) and one-stop flights could be made to Copenhagen (6 per week), Paris (15 per week) and New York (3 per week). Any other international destination would require a change of aeroplane. This hardly constitutes an international service.

Investigation should be made with airline carriers to determine what conditions would be required to have international services extended to Belfast, e.g. by adding Belfast as a further destination beyond London, Manchester or Dublin. If there is no demand, there will be no services but, if the services do not exist, there will never be a demand for them. Without direct international connections, Belfast and Northern Ireland will always be viewed as off the beaten track. This will deter both potential inward investors and potential tourists.

A fast and efficient dispersal system from the International Airport is also required. Present facilities depend entirely upon roads, with the only forms of public transport being minibuses to Belfast City Centre or taxi services. The Airport is two miles from Antrim Town, and has a railway line passing by the perimeter fence. The railway line is scheduled for closure. The SDLP proposes that the existing railway line should be operated as a frequent three-stop shuttle, covering Antrim, the Airport and Belfast. This would entail the construction of a station at the airport, with a means of accessing the station from the terminal. Antrim should be developed as the dispersal centre for all destinations other than Belfast, with bus and rail services increased to facilitate this.

Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport are unlikely to be able to expand into the

international flight sector because of their confined sites. They should therefore be encouraged to take an increased volume of domestic (i.e. within Ireland and Britain) trade from the International Airport. In particular, there is considerable scope to increase services within Ireland. In the case of City of Derry Airport, connecting flights to Belfast International Airport should be encouraged and direct holiday package flights are a potential area for expansion. If a passenger volume at these airports is to increase, adequate dispersal systems are required; in Belfast City Airport, this should include bus services and a covered escalator and moving walkway facility to the railway station. Increased affordable car parking at all airports will be needed.

The South West of Ireland benefited from the establishment in the 1950s of a Free Enterprise Zone near Shannon Airport. The Assembly should consider whether a similar, 21st Century, hi-tec business park should be established near Belfast International Airport. Indeed, such a park could be an asset in the vicinity of City of Derry Airport, and would have the potential to increase demand for flights to new destinations.

Ports

Major decisions on ports will be needed. Larne and Belfast are presently competing for the same traffic, resulting in duplication of effort. A strategic decision is required as to whether Larne will continue to operate as a port and, if so, whether it should take freight only whilst exclusively Belfast takes passenger services. As noted above, if Larne is to continue to serve the Region as a port, an upgrade of its transport links is required as a matter of extreme urgency. The SDLP believes that Larne should have a future, and incentives should be developed to encourage more freight to go through Larne rather than Belfast. Belfast's city streets are ill equipped to deal with an increase in volume of 40 foot lorries. The SDLP recognizes that the Port of Larne is owned by a private company and, as such, its future is in its own hands. However, the Department for Regional Development has a major influence on the future in its control of the access to the port.

The future of the Port of Belfast is crucial to the overall development of ports in the North - no one port can be seen in isolation. Belfast must not dominate the market to the exclusion of other ports both for social reasons, but also to spread the burden of traffic and pollution. It is vital that Government allows the smaller ports of Larne, Warrenpoint and Lisahally to exist and trade effectively; thereby allowing balanced economic development throughout the Region.

The Port of Warrenpoint is a Trust Port dealing exclusively with freight on a RORO basis. The SDLP is aware that proposals exist for the port's expansion and believes that such proposals must be considered in full and open consultation with local people.

The Port of Lisahally has already received substantial investment, including funding from Europe to relocate. It is an important gateway not just to the City of Derry, but also to the whole of the North West of Ireland. The SDLP supports the proposed extension of the gas pipeline to Derry, but recognizes that this would reduce the volume of coal coming through Lisahally. If the investment in the port is not to have been wasted, alternative trade will have to be found. To this end, the SDLP would support tentative proposals to open up a passenger and freight service to Glasgow.

Public Transport

All transport policy must be related back to the principles of equality, social justice and accessibility. The priority of the policy should be the efficient and increased mobility of people and goods. It should also take into account the impact of the policy upon the environment, public health and safety. Accepted wisdom dictates that this entails getting cars off the road and investing instead in a comprehensive network of public transport. Moreover, there is an increasing trend amongst the pro-public transport lobby that the solution is to make use of the car less attractive, thereby forcing people into public transport. The SDLP sees this as running counter to the principles of social justice - instead, creative steps must be taken to make public transport more attractive to allow it to compete with using private transport. It must also be remembered that Northern Ireland is a Region with a large proportion of the population living outside urban areas - solutions put forward by the "Green Lobby", living in the suburbs of Europe's major cities,

may not be appropriate for our needs.

Broadly, the population can be divided into those who have access to a car, and to those who do not. Both groups present their own challenges.

Many of those who have access to a car will use their car almost to the exclusion of using public transport. The reasons for this need to be examined, and could be determined with accuracy only through a public survey. The SDLP suspects that the reasons would include:

Convenience: a car can transport you from doorstep to doorstep at any time of the day or night, without the need to walk to the bus stop/station and wait in the rain, wind and snow for the next service

Speed: a car is imagined to be faster than a train or a bus, which has to stop to collect passengers

Cost: there is an obvious and immediate link between paying for a travel ticket and travelling, whereas the link between paying for a car, petrol, insurance & maintenance and undertaking a car journey may be separated by time, leading to the true cost of travelling by car remaining obscure

Access: many areas are simply not served by frequent public transport or, in some cases, any public transport. If a village has only two services a day, it reduces an individual's flexibility to travel when they wish and if a village is three miles from a bus stop, most people would not find public transport accessible at all.

To address each of these issues, the SDLP makes the following proposals:

Convenience & access: there must be a recognition that entire journeys conducted by public transport will remain inappropriate for many people. Nevertheless, measures should be taken to allow people to conduct part of their journeys by public transport. This will entail linking car parks to transport terminals, either by enhancing car parks at existing bus and railway stations or by creating new transport terminals with purpose built commuter car parks.

Cost: Translink should be encouraged to move to prepay ticket books (or individual tickets), which could be sold in post offices, newsagents, etc. Tickets would then be taken by bus drivers and train conductors or stamped on buses and trains on an honesty basis. This system of payment operates in mainland Europe and is advocated in the Ireland National Development Plan 2000-2006 for reasons of speed in embarkation. Crucially, though, it creates a temporal separation between the payment and the travel, akin to the payment for petrol used on car journeys.

Speed: as long as buses and cars share the same road space, cars will always be quicker because they do not have to make passenger stops. Greater introduction of bus lanes would allow buses to sail past queues of traffic in urban centres, and is being introduced in Belfast on a limited scale. This would redress the balance somewhat, and any road with more than one lane in each direction would lend itself to bus lanes. The introduction of sensors at major junctions to change traffic lights to give buses priority - as used in some British cities - should also be considered.

Other options would include smartcards - similar to phonecards, which would be prepaid and debited by machines on trains and buses - or the greater use and promotion of weekly, monthly and annual season tickets on a zone system, akin to the London Transport model.

Public transport from door to door

People without access to cars, particularly those in rural areas, are often experiencing the highest levels of social exclusion. This is especially so when the lack of a car is coupled with old age, youth, unemployment or disability. However good the general network of public transport, if someone cannot access it, it is useless. The SDLP therefore proposes that Translink explore the possibility of linking with local taxi firms to extend their reach

beyond the existing network right to the customers doorstep. Where people can demonstrate that they live beyond the reasonable reach of public transport and where they are in receipt of state benefits, the Government has a social duty to provide them with access to transport. This might be in the form of taxi tokens valid for travel to the nearest terminus, subsidized by increased fares on regular routes or from car parking charges in urban centres.

Privatization

Any attempts to privatize public transport will be resisted by the SDLP. Public transport cannot be reduced to a purely commercial venture. Instead, public transport serves social needs. Bus deregulation in Scotland and England has led to fierce - even cutthroat - competition between rival operators for the popular routes, whilst the uneconomic routes have been withdrawn. Whilst this privatized system may benefit the majority of urban dwellers, the cost to those in rural areas has been devastating.

North-South links

Travel from the North to the South or from the South to the North is difficult by public transport. Few services operate, and those that do are often listed in separate timetables according to whether they are run by Translink or Southern operators. An integrated public transport system should recognize the need to operate services to link people and communities, rather than being blinkered by issues of jurisdiction and territory. As more cross border routes are opened and remain open, old cultural and commercial links across the border will re-establish themselves. Public transport must be ready to meet these needs and, crucially, must recognize the role that it can play in developing the links.

Six bus fleets - one service

At present, there are six publicly owned bus fleets in Northern Ireland. Translink operates the largest fleet, but other fleets are owned and operated by the Education and Library Boards to run daily school services. These vehicles lie unused throughout the day, in the evenings and at weekends. The SDLP will press for these vehicles to be made available to Translink to operate at these times. In particular, the smaller ELB buses would be ideal for serving rural routes outside times of peak demand.

Roads

By world standards, Greater Belfast has an excellent road network, although there are some bottlenecks that would be eased by greater use of public transport. However, the road network is marred by people who park in urban clearways or make right turns during peak hours. Stricter curbs on this should be introduced, covering both morning and evening rush hours - and those curbs should be enforced. Outside Belfast, however, the road network is poor. Roads linking key towns are slow and single carriageway, preventing faster moving vehicles from overtaking slower moving vehicles. This is exacerbated by traffic laws which restrict haulage vehicles to 40mph on roads that were intended for use by vehicles travelling at up to 60mph. EU Structural funds must be used to upgrade the road network as a matter of urgent priority on a cross border strategic basis. The Common Chapter in the North and South Structural Funds Plans lays the framework for this to be done; this paper details the areas for immediate action.

Triangle of Motorways

The three corners of the North should be linked by motorways: i.e. between, Enniskillen, Derry, Belfast and back to Enniskillen. Motorway should also be extended to the Newry border with an expectation that the South would extend the motorway to Dublin. This would reduce travel time at current speed limits viz.

	Current travel time	New travel time
Enniskillen - Derry (via Omagh)	90 minutes	60 minutes

Derry - Belfast	100 minutes	60 minutes
Belfast - Enniskillen	100 minutes	75 minutes
Belfast - Dublin	180 minutes	90 minutes

Moreover, it would reduce most long journeys in Northern Ireland, even where destinations did not lie directly on one of these routes. It would enhance the quality of life of many people who commute long distances beyond measure, and would allow many towns that currently suffer from peripherality - both in Northern Ireland and in the South - to attract investment and trade.

North - South Transport Planning

Transport planning between North and South must be integrated, going beyond the proposed "closer cooperation" set out in the Good Friday Agreement. Sligo and Enniskillen, for example, are geographically close, but separated by a slow and twisty road with almost no suitable overtaking places. There is little point in developing this road on one side of the border if the work is not reciprocated on the other side. Shaping Our Future shown detailed routes for development in the North, which peter out into vague arrows as they cross the border. These must be firmed up. Notwithstanding the proposal for a Triangle of Motorways in the North, the SDLP sees an urgent need for investment on the following routes:

N16/A4 from Sligo, via Enniskillen to Belfast

A6/N13 from Letterkenny, via Derry to Belfast

N2/A5/N14 from Dublin, via Monaghan, Omagh, and Strabane to Letterkenny

N15/A5 from Sligo, via Donegal to Strabane and Derry

N3/A509/A32 from Dublin, via Cavan and Enniskillen to Omagh

A29/A3 from Coleraine, via Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon and Armagh to Monaghan

Speed Limits

Hand in hand with a need for a better road network is a need for better traffic management systems. Northern Ireland has some of the worst accident rates on its roads in Europe, with dozens of avoidable deaths each year and scores of horrific injuries. The SDLP will press for a greater variety of speed controls, which would improve both safety and traffic control. Clearly, there is a need for lower speed limits in residential areas where children play in the streets and on the pavements, and higher speed limits are possible on arterial urban routes where children do not play.

Speed limits need to be properly enforced; there are a number of ways in which this could be achieved:

Firstly, the SDLP does not believe that enforcement of speed limits requires teams of police officers. The equipment needed to detect breaches of speed limits could be operated by civilians or by staff of a civil service agency, who could then pursue matters through fines and, if necessary, magistrates courts. This would be analagous to routine benefit fraud detection work being undertaken by civil servants.

Secondly, judicious use of traffic calming measures can reduce speeding. However, the potential slowing of emergency vehicles has to be considered, and the SDLP therefore recommends that consent of local residents be sought before such measures are introduced.

Thirdly, and most importantly, speed limits must appear appropriate to the road in

question. Whilst there would be sense in reducing limits on some roads, an appraisal must be conducted at regular intervals to ensure that roads are not unnecessarily restricted. Unnecessary restrictions will only serve to discredit the entire speed limit system in some drivers' eyes.

The aim should be to facilitate smoother transport of people and goods whilst increasing public safety.

Rail

The rail network in Ireland is not good. Most of the rolling stock is old, the lines are worn out and stations are often in a poor state of repair. For many journeys, either trains do not depart from where the journey starts, or they do not go to where the journey ends. In Northern Ireland, rail services cover only the North and East of the Region, the West and South have long since lost their services and lines.

Notwithstanding this, the rail link between Ireland's two major cities - Belfast and Dublin - has seen considerable recent investment, with an overhaul of the lines, new rolling stock, and ongoing refurbishment in Connolly Station. In the North, a new Lagan track links the two halves of the network, and Great Victoria Street Station has opened in Belfast. These projects have been hugely successful, increasing demand for rail travel and cutting journey times. It now takes only two hours to travel by train from Belfast to Dublin, compared to three hours by road. This makes the train the universal first choice; even the businessman will choose to leave the Mercedes Benz in the station car park and travel in speed and comfort by rail.

We should now look, as a matter of immediacy, for an upgrade of the line and rolling stock between Belfast and Derry. The volume of passenger traffic on that route on a daily basis would make fast and efficient rail travel an attractive option. Beyond that, a feasibility study should be conducted to explore the potential to extend the Belfast to Lurgan line to Enniskillen and Sligo or Armagh and to laying a line linking Enniskillen to Omagh, Strabane and Derry.

The overall aim must be to develop a meaningful all-Ireland rail network. In Europe, it is possible to travel in speed and comfort from Lisbon to Leipzig and from Brussels to Bucharest by rail. We should demand no less.

Energy

Whilst energy was not one of the areas listed for a North-South Implementation Body or closer co-operation under the Good Friday Agreement, it is one of the most vital areas for co-operation. Put simply, Ireland is not big enough to sustain more than one energy market. Economies of scale would point to the clear logic of a single, all-Island market for energy. This was recognized by the former Department of Economic Development in its Vision 2010 - Energy Action Plan, which placed the creation of an all-Island energy market as the top priority. All the other recommendations lead either to or from this single market.

All-Island Gas Supplies

Within a single market, there is scope for a number of exciting projects. Plans for the extension of the natural gas pipeline South wards from Belfast and across the border as well as to the North-West and beyond are, at last, being advanced. The viability of these plans has been strengthened by confirmation of extensive find in the Corrib gas field off the coast of Mayo. An all-island natural gas network is the likely outcome, the development of which will require considerable consultation within the North-South Ministerial Council.

This project would be dependent upon a degree of public funding, however the economic, social and environmental benefits of natural gas outweigh public finance considerations. The North and South-West suffer from high levels of social deprivation, a poorly diversified industrial base, and a range of social problems in relation to health and the living environment. The extension of natural gas to these areas would assist the diversification of

the local economic base and improve competitiveness by providing access to a relatively inexpensive and environmentally friendly fuel. It would reduce emissions of certain pollutants such as carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxide. Group 22 estimates that savings in the region of £20 million over a 25 year period could be made through the reduction of environmental damage costs. Furthermore, the extension of natural gas to the North and South-West would make these regions more attractive to inward investors who would provide much needed employment, and would help to ensure that the populations of the North and South-West are given due consideration in relation to the parameters of equality of opportunity and equality of treatment.

Electricity

There is further scope to link up the Northern and Southern electricity supplies. While, there are difficulties in linking the privately owned energy market of the North with the publicly owned energy market of the South, these problems will reduce as deregulation evolves in the South. The DED strategy talked in terms of developing an all-Ireland action plan by February 2001 with a view to agreeing the steps that need to be taken, North and South, to create an all island energy market.

At present, customers in the North pay 20% more than they should for electricity owing to the ill thought-out decision to privatize the two power generators. Clearly, it will not be possible to retrieve the generators contracts into the public sector, but creative steps are required to protect the end consumer of electricity. It is likely that these will involve a twin prong approach of a North-South electricity market and a greater supply of non-electric power.

There is a need for alternative, cheaper energy supplies if economic regeneration is to be anything more than a pipe dream. The SDLP will resist proposals from Britain for an energy tax; this could have disastrous consequences for any plans to extend the gas network throughout the North. Our energy prices are already too high and we should not be penalized further by taxes that might seem fair in South East England, but are totally inappropriate for Northern Ireland. Water - a Millennium Priority Project.

Current estimates show that 600 rural households in Northern Ireland do not have access to mains water. The SDLP believes that this is disgraceful in any supposedly civilized society at this point in our social, economic and political development. We see it as the responsibility of the Department for Regional Development to provide mains water to all households and will press for this to be made a Millennium Priority Project. The time for prevarication on the subject has long since passed - action must commence now to ensure that all households in the North have access to mains water.

Initiatives should be taken to improve the aging water and sewerage infrastructure. Measures should be taken to increase the number of water reservoirs and water treatment works to deal with the increased volume of water demand. Given the amount of rainfall in Ireland, we should never run short of water; when we do, no amount of excuses can cover the fact that it is due to lack of planning and infrastructure. This will inevitably require capital expenditure, and the possibility of harnessing Public Private Partnerships should be explored to allow access to low cost, private sector capital.

We have 10,000km of sewerage, some of which are in dire need of upgrading. In some cases, our sewers fail even to meet the basic European Union Directives that regulate the quality of sewerage discharges. Besides the obvious humiliation this brings, the resulting pollution damages our coastal areas and marine biosystems. It is all very well proposing upgraded transport links to Newcastle, but there is little point if tourists are put off from holidaying there by smells and effluent.

The system of standing charges on metered water is unfair and needs careful revision. At present, in addition to paying for volume of water used, metered water customers pay a standing charge for each meter they use - some farmers need several meters. Even if no water were used in a year, the annual fee would still be payable. Although the standing charge varies according to the diameter of the supply pipes, the standing charge still amounts to a water poll tax, or a charge for being charged. By analogy, if someone went into a shop to buy a pint of milk, and was charged 35 pence for the milk and 25 pence

service charge, it would be obvious that something was wrong. Yet, the water service does this on a daily basis and gets away with it - because the customer has no choice.

The SDLP believes in charging only for the volume of water consumed, even if this means a marginal rise in the cost of water to cover the lost standing charges. Representations have already been made on this matter to the Minister for Regional Development.

Conclusion

The SDLP believes that this paper shows a way forward for Regional Development in the North. Much of the paper builds upon or extends the proposals contained in Shaping Our Future. We make no apologies for this - Shaping Our Future is one of the most visionary strategic documents to have been tabled in recent times. In its implementation over the next 25 years, care must be taken to ensure that equality and social justice are kept to the fore, and that as time goes on, Shaping Our Future is adapted and tailored to meet changing circumstances. The SDLP would propose that the Strategy and its implementation be reviewed fully every five years to gauge the success in meeting its objectives. Under no circumstances must today's beacon of hope become tomorrow's millstone around Northern Ireland's neck.

Regional Development Policy Sub-group

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