

Government Futures*
Perspectives on public policy for a new Northern Ireland

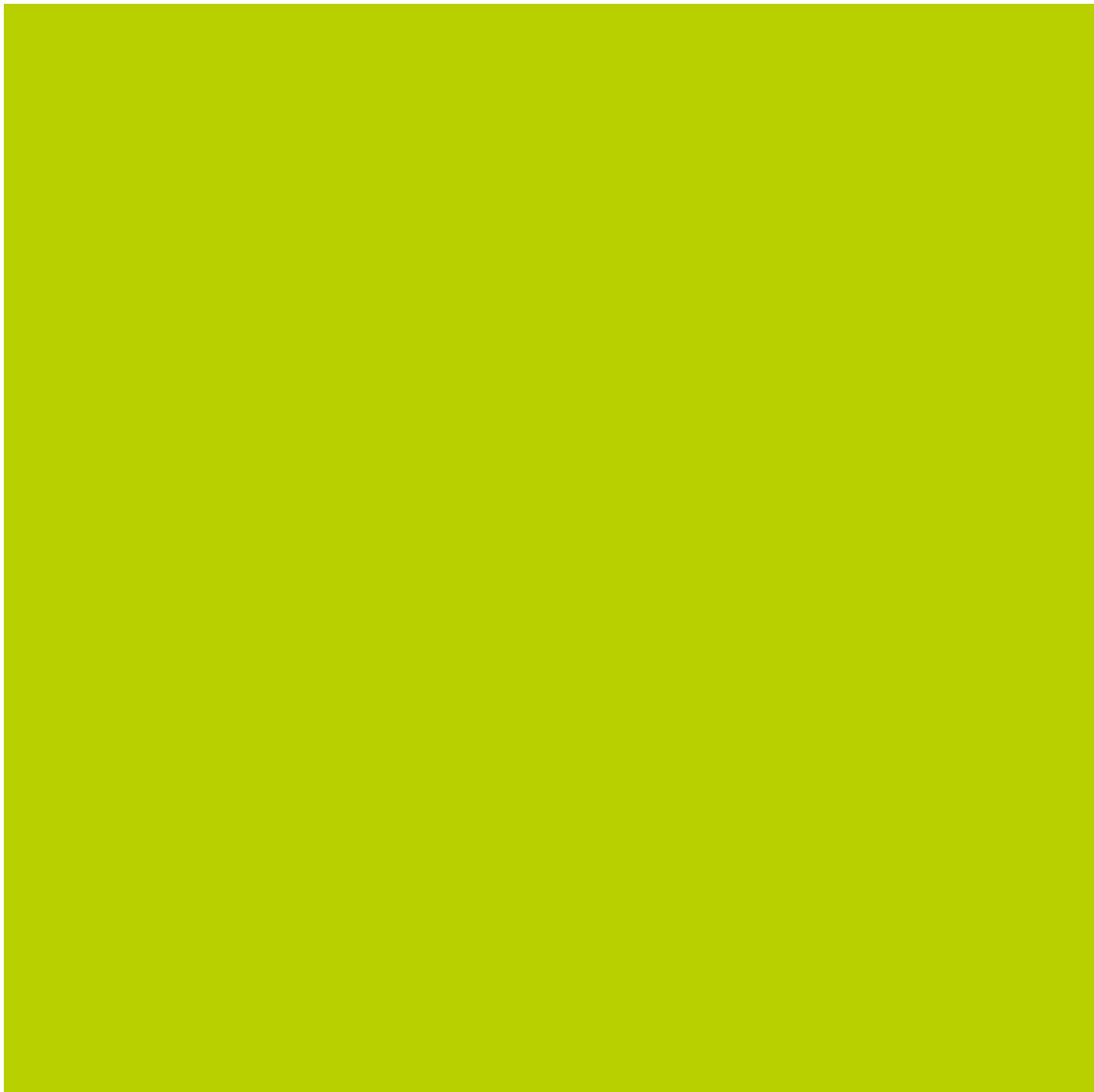
Bridging the Gap

Transforming Public Transport in Northern Ireland



*connectedthinking

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About *Government Futures*

Welcome to our *Government Futures* series, in which we examine a range of public policy issues that are central to Northern Ireland's future prosperity and wellbeing. Our first article, published in October 2008, examined leadership in education and argued for a substantial investment in school leadership as a prerequisite for raising Northern Ireland's educational performance. Our second article, published in January 2009, focused on job creation in Northern Ireland's western economic corridor and highlighted the challenges faced in ensuring the benefits of economic growth are equitably dispersed. A key theme in that report was the importance of an efficient and accessible transport infrastructure that linked businesses with their customers, suppliers and employees, and we argued that more needed to be done to develop transport networks.

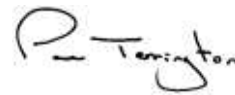
Never has this issue been as important as now when we find ourselves in the midst of one of the deepest recessions of modern times.

*"Without efficient transport, the Irish economy, North and South cannot function effectively - it is vital that we keep goods, commuters and customers moving."*¹

¹The Minister for Regional Development speaking at the All Ireland Infrastructure Conference on 12th March 2009.

This article examines how successful we have been at closing the gap between Northern Ireland's public transport network and that of neighbouring and competing economies, how well our current strategy is serving us and whether it will serve us into the future. It also sets out a number of ideas on what needs to be done to improve the quality and efficiency of public transport.

I trust you will enjoy this and our other *Government Futures* articles and find them a positive and constructive contribution to important debates about public policy and service delivery in a new Northern Ireland.



Paul Terrington
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About this article

Public transport is now firmly established as a key issue on the public policy agenda as governments around the world search for ways both to enhance their international competitiveness and to reduce their carbon emissions.

Northern Ireland is no exception. A number of recent initiatives (notably Metro, the revitalisation of NI Railways and the forthcoming Bus Rapid Transit scheme) have helped raise the profile of public transport and, the evidence suggests, the quality of services to Northern Ireland citizens.

However, we are now seven years into the implementation of the NI Government's Regional Transportation Strategy for 2002-2012² and, despite the intention to halt and reverse “the vicious circle of decline of public transport services, infrastructure and passenger levels”, we seem more reliant than ever on the private car, and our usage of public transport remains amongst the lowest in the UK³.

A key theme of the Regional Transportation Strategy was the need to create a modern and efficient transport infrastructure that would help close the gap with competing economies in the UK and throughout Europe. Unfortunately, this aspiration does not appear to have been supported with a sustained increase in investment.

¹Department for Regional Development “Shaping Our Future - The Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2002-2012” (2002), Belfast.

²Roads Service “Travel Survey for Northern Ireland 2005-2007” (2008) and Department for Transport “Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2008” (2008) London.

On a per capita basis, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland have been investing at least twice as much as Northern Ireland in public transport (and in the case of Scotland five times as much). The gap is now bigger than ever.

In addition:

- Traffic congestion has reached unprecedented levels and is now estimated to cost the NI economy over £250m a year⁴;
- There is substantial evidence on the contribution that efficient and low cost public transport systems can make to economic development, a particularly important consideration at a time of economic recession;
- A modern and efficient transport system is increasingly a fundamental requirement for securing foreign direct investment; and
- The Stern Review has made it clear that we must reduce carbon emissions if we are to avoid dangerous climate change⁵.

This article examines how we measure up against competing regions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland and looks at examples of best practice around the world.

⁴PA Consulting “Northern Ireland economy burns £250million a year in roads ‘slow lane’ ” (2008).

⁵HM Treasury “The Stern Review: The Economics of Climate Change” (2006) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

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Why is it important
to invest in public transport?

Important: adj. of great significance or value.

Investing in infrastructure delivers economic, environmental and social benefits...

Investment in the infrastructure of a region is a key factor driving economic growth and competitiveness. It can also contribute significantly to the environment (by reducing carbon emissions) and to social well-being (by increasing mobility). This is recognised in government policy at European, national and regional levels. In Northern Ireland, the Programme for Government 2008-2011 and the associated Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland (ISNI)⁶ 2008-2018 make a strong commitment to investing in the development of our infrastructure.

Transport is a critical part of this picture. The Investment Strategy describes some of the benefits of investment in improved transport infrastructure:

- It allows businesses to compete more effectively.
- It attracts investment and skilled workers to the region.
- It promotes inclusion and access to services.

Benefits from investment specifically in public transport include:

- It reduces congestion on roads, thus contributing to competitive advantage.
- By linking workers and jobs, it generates time savings and creates a more efficient and productive labour force.
- By reducing our carbon footprint it contributes to wider environmental targets and makes Northern Ireland a more pleasant place to live.

Northern Ireland's public transport system has suffered from decades of under-investment...

Historically, under-investment and a disjointed approach to transport planning in Northern Ireland have created a downward spiral of decline in services and passenger numbers. And whilst the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland commits the Executive to increasing investment in public transport to £725m over the next ten years, closer examination shows that this is still only half the level of investment planned for competing regions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. By contrast, the same strategy commits £3bn to developing our roads network. However there are signs that public transport will play an increasingly important role in our future transport strategy:

- In the Republic of Ireland, the current National Development Plan places public transport as its number one priority until 2013⁷.
- In Northern Ireland, the Minister for Regional Development recently announced a fundamental review of the Regional Transport Strategy and stated:

“We need to manage congestion and give the bus the priority it needs to be an attractive alternative to the car. In short, we need even more services that put passengers first. If we put passengers first, passengers will put public transport first.”

DRD Minister Conor Murphy - April 2009

⁶Strategic Investment Board “Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland” (2008)

⁷National Development Plan 2007-2013 “Transforming Ireland” 2007

Investing in public transport is even more important at a time of economic recession...

Investment in public transport will provide cost and time savings to firms and individuals at a time when resources and margins are tight. It also represents a medium-term investment in productive capacity, so we are in a strong position to benefit from the upturn when it arrives. We consider evidence on the contribution of efficient and low cost public transport systems to economic development in the next chapter.

What does a good public
transport system look like?

Good: adj. better, best, 1. being positive or desirable in nature; not bad or poor.

At a strategic level there is widespread national and international consensus on the key elements of good practice in public transport...

A good transport system is one that balances the requirements of the economy with the need to tackle climate change, improve quality of life and promote equality of opportunity for all citizens. In practical terms, effective transport strategies seek to address the perceived imbalance between the use of private vehicles and the use of public transport. Some of the key features of a modern, sustainable, world class public transport system are reflected in the current transport strategies of the UK and Republic of Ireland governments (see Boxes 1 and 2).

Box 1: Republic of Ireland - delivering a world class transport system

Currently underway, Transport 21 is a capital investment programme that will transform Ireland's national roads, rail, bus services and regional airports and deliver a world class transport system for Ireland by 2015. It will:

- **Increase accessibility:** Making it easier for everybody to get to and from work, school, college, shopping and business.
- **Ensure sustainability:** Recognising that a modern transport system must be sustainable from an economic and environmental perspective.
- **Expand capacity:** Addressing existing deficiencies and providing for future growth.
- **Increase use:** Managing the transport network and seeking to increase the use of public transport.
- **Enhance quality:** Improving safety, accessibility, integration, reliability, speed and comfort.

Source: Department for Transport (2006), "Transport 21 progress in motion", Dublin.

Box 2: UK - strategy for delivering a sustainable transport system

- To support national economic competitiveness and growth, by delivering reliable and efficient transport networks.
- To reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases with the desired outcome of tackling climate change.
- To contribute to better safety, security and health and longer life expectancy by reducing the risk of death, injury or illness arising from transport and by promoting travel modes that are beneficial to health.
- To promote greater equality of opportunity for all citizens, with the desired outcome of achieving a fairer society.
- To improve quality of life for transport users and non-transport users and to promote a healthy natural environment".

Source: Department for Transport (2008), "Delivering a Sustainable Transport System", London.

There are some specific examples of international best practice right on our doorstep...

The Beacon Scheme was set up to disseminate best practice in service delivery across local government in England. Beacon status is granted to local authorities that can demonstrate a clear vision, excellent services and a willingness to innovate. One outstanding example in the transport area is set out in Box 3.

Box 3: Best Practice - closer integration of strategy, policy and delivery yield success in Cambridgeshire

Strategy

The strategy is to promote the use of high quality public transport as an alternative to the car in a predominantly rural county that is also subject to development pressures, extending accessibility and meeting the needs of the local economy.

Actions

Cambridgeshire County Council has designed and delivered:

- Five Park & Ride facilities in Cambridge.
- The 'Citi' network of cross city routes which, linked with the Cambridge Core Traffic Scheme, integrates policies for walking and cycling as well as motorised transport.
- Branded routes operated by low-floor accessible buses have been introduced on the North Huntingdonshire Key Network and offer guaranteed connections between routes at interchange points.

In rural areas the emphasis is on access to services and the number of parishes served has increased from 53% to 78% over the last three years. Further schemes, including Dial-a-Ride, are in development.

This combination of measures has won a significant number of awards.

Outcomes

Annual Park and Ride usage is now 1.3 million. Public transport usage across the county rose by 1m or 7% in 2002/2003. Towns other than Cambridge have recorded significant increases in usage as a result of infrastructure, network and accessibility improvements.

Source: The Beacon Scheme, Excellence in Local Government (2006)

Further afield there are internationally recognised, high quality integrated transport systems that have been a driver for growth in both urban and rural regions...

Curitiba, the capital of the Brazilian state of Paran, is internationally recognised as an example of good practice, including by the International Association of Public Transport. Although small by comparison with other systems, the success of Curitiba's public transport system is credited with inspiring the TransMilenio in Bogotá in Colombia, the Orange Line in Los Angeles in California, the Transmetro system in Guatemala City and the Metrobús in Mexico City.

Box 4: Best Practice - public transport as a catalyst for growth

Faced with the problems of rapid urban growth, Curitiba developed a master plan in the 1960s that has evolved over the years to its present form. Although the population has increased from 430,000 in 1960 to over 1.8 million today, the city's streets are 25% less congested than in cities of similar size. Much of this can be attributed to Curitiba's highly efficient bus system, which transports 75% of all weekday commuters. As a result of Curitiba's innovative public transport system and other environmental measures, Curitiba's air quality is far superior to that of comparable Brazilian cities.

Characteristics of Curitiba's bus system:

- **Bus-only lanes:** These lie along the main roads servicing areas that were specifically designed to contain large buildings and high densities of people. The lanes have reduced travel time immensely.
- **Tube stations:** Bus passengers pre-pay fares to an attendant and enter buses from 'tube stations' which are level with the buses. This practice significantly reduces boarding times.
- **Types of bus:** Curitiba uses five different types of bus with capacities ranging from 80 to 270 passengers. At peak hours Curitiba's buses can transport up to 20,000 people per hour.
- **Coverage:** Curitiba's buses cover some 900km of routes in virtually every area of the city. On a typical day, 1.9 million passengers use the buses. Approval ratings are at 89%.
- **Recycling:** Many of Curitiba's retired buses are used to benefit the city's low-income residents. Converted buses are used as mobile training centres in the city's neediest areas, providing a base for job training and education on environmental and health issues.

The Netherlands is regarded by many commentators as a market leader in the development and operation of integrated transport systems. It helps that the objective of maximising the usage of public transport and cycling is firmly embedded in national, regional and local policy and decision making. In the rural region of Achterhoek, the development of an integrated transport network is widely seen as having made a strong positive contribution to rural development (see Box 5).

Box 5: Best Practice - integrated transport as a driver for rural development

Achterhoek is a rural region with a population of around 355,000 in the east of the Netherlands, close to the German border. It is a particularly successful example of Dutch transport policy, which encourages co-operation between central, provincial and regional government to enhance accessibility to transport and quality of life.

A key priority is to counter the negative effects that unrestrained growth in car use has on society, the economy and the environment through enhancing the quality and attractiveness of alternative modes of public transport in particular.

- Transport planning and budgets have been decentralised to the region.
- Regional bus, rail and taxi services have been integrated under a single operator, Syntus.
- Syntus has introduced new vehicles and light-rail rolling stock.
- An innovative demand-responsive taxi system has been introduced in the region. The system now carries 1,500 people per day and usage is growing by 15% per annum.
- Exemplary provision of pedestrian and cycling infrastructure means that over two-fifths of all trips are now made by sustainable modes.
- The increase in car ownership and use is amongst the lowest in the Netherlands (5% over the period 1997-2000 compared to 9% in the Netherlands as a whole).

Source: Commission for Integrated Transport, “European Best Practice in the Delivery of Integrated Transport”, (2001), Northern Ireland Assembly, Research and Library Services, Research Paper 101/08, “Public Transport Reform Best Practice” (2008)

How does Northern Ireland's public transport system compare to elsewhere?

Compare: verb 1 (often compare to/with) estimate, measure, or note the similarity or dissimilarity between.
2 (compare to) point out or describe the resemblances of (something) with.

There have been some significant developments in Northern Ireland's public transport network in recent years...

The introduction of the Metro bus network and a major investment in the railway rolling stock have been notable recent successes in the Northern Ireland public transport system (see Box 6). The recently announced Bus Rapid Transit system has the opportunity to add to this record of success.

Box 6: Major public transport initiatives - Northern Ireland

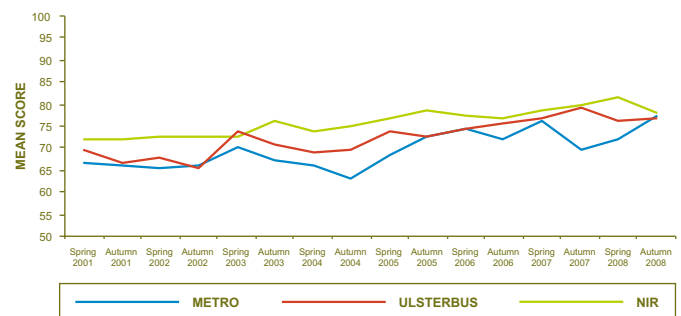
- **Metro:** In 2005, Translink launched Metro, a revitalised and rebranded bus network for Belfast. Widely acclaimed, Metro has been the catalyst for a 15% increase in bus ridership in Greater Belfast.
- **NI Railways:** An £80m investment in new rolling stock and a major programme of station refurbishments have all helped to drive a 60% increase in usage since 2002.

Source: Department for Regional Development

This is reflected in a steady increase in customer satisfaction amongst public transport users...

Customer satisfaction has increased over the 17 years this has been surveyed, most noticeably in the last five years with the introduction of the two major initiatives just described (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Overall customer satisfaction, public transport monitoring autumn 2008



Note: Customer satisfaction measures include (in order of priority): punctuality, value for money, comfort and cleanliness, staff helpfulness, service levels at stations.

Source: Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company

Notwithstanding this, it is clear that Northern Ireland has a long way to go before it is aligned with national and international best practice...

We have yet to adopt an integrated approach to the design, delivery and operation of our transport system:

- In particular, whilst we have brought together many of the organisations responsible for our transport system under one Government department:

- We do not have a joined up approach towards planning for land use, our transport network and public transport.
- Our transport system lacks many of the features associated with an integrated transport system, for example, integrated ticketing, bus, coach and rail interchanges.
- We have not yet convinced enough people that travelling by public transport can offer better value for money than travelling by private transport. The NI Consumer Council highlights value for money as consumer's number one concern.
- We are more dependent on private vehicles and make less use of public transport than comparable regions in the UK.

And the simple reason is that the investment and the will hasn't been there...

Where Northern Ireland has invested in public transport, the outcomes as evidenced in the cases of Metro and NI Railways, are often both successful and sustained. Unfortunately our appetite for public transport investment is significantly less than that of competing regions in the rest of the UK and RoI.

As Figure 2 shows, investment on a per capita basis in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland is at least twice that of Northern Ireland.

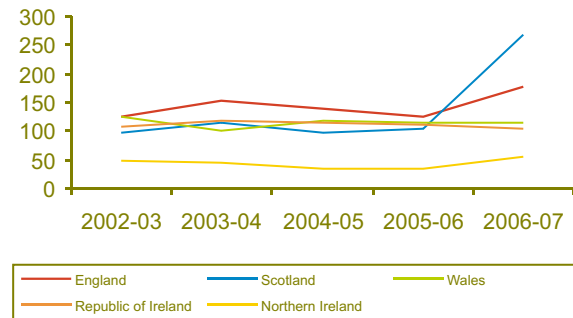
A step change is therefore required...

The NI Government's Regional Transport Strategy sets out to make a significant contribution to delivering

“a modern, sustainable, safe transport system which benefits society, the economy and the environment.” Continuation of decades of underinvestment has meant that it has failed to do so.

The Minister has recently announced that the Department for Regional Development is to develop a revised Regional Transport Strategy. If this is to be successful, it will have to set its sights on delivering a world class public transport system that borrows heavily from national and international best practice and ensures that it has the financing mechanisms at its disposal to support delivery and operation.

Figure 2. Total indexed expenditure on public transport on a per capita basis for UK regions and the Republic of Ireland 2001-2005



Source: HM Treasury “Public Sector Statistical Analyses 2008” (2008), National Development Plan 2007 to 2013.

What needs to be done?

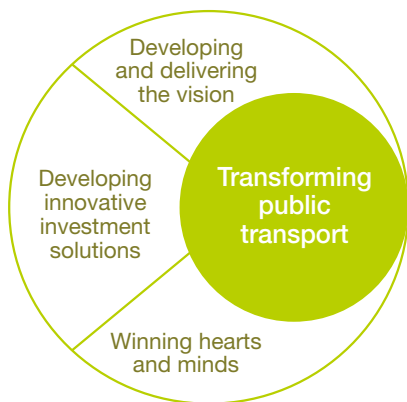
Done: adj 1 (of food) cooked thoroughly. 2 no longer happening or existing. 3 informal socially acceptable: the done thing.

We have it within our power to transform our public transport system...

The principles behind designing and developing a sustainable public transport system and the factors that influence customer behaviour are well understood and well established.

Our challenge is to identify those that are best suited to meeting the current and future needs of Northern Ireland.

Figure 3: Transforming public transport - a simple framework



Developing and delivering the vision...

To develop and deliver the vision for public transport in Northern Ireland we need to:

- Leverage the experience of recognised best practice in RoI, UK, Europe and beyond.
- Adapt this to meet the specific needs of Northern Ireland.
- Ensure it is aligned with the current strategies of the UK, RoI and the revised NI Regional Transport Strategy.
- Use this as the basis for engagement with all stakeholders but focus on the core beneficiary, the customer.

Developing innovative investment solutions...

Unfortunately, established sources of investment are coming under increasing pressure from a number of directions:

- Given the current state of UK public finances, the next Comprehensive Spending Review (for the three years from 2011) is likely to result in a tighter public expenditure settlement in Northern Ireland and consequently fiercer competition for resources.
- Financing mechanisms such as the Private Finance Initiative and Public-Private Partnerships are less attractive to both public and private sectors as a result of changes in accounting regulations and the reduced availability of private finance.
- Nationally, Government incomes are falling as the credit crunch takes its toll on all forms of taxation.

Fortunately there are a number of emerging financing mechanisms:

- **Tax incremental finance:** Currently undergoing resurgence in GB in the form of Accelerated Development Zones.
- **Workplace parking levy:** Legislated for in England and Wales; requires adaptation for Northern Ireland.
- **Salary sacrifice:** Encouraging employee take-up of season tickets. Benefits both employee and employer and can create an income stream for local public transport.
- **Parking and retail concessions:** Licensing third parties to run Park and Ride or retail concessions creates an income stream for local public transport.
- **Developer Levy/Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL):** Contribution by developers to the cost of providing local infrastructure. In England and Wales, current legislation will create CIL which formalises process. This would need adapting for Northern Ireland.
- **Commercial leaseholds:** Linking ground rent to current value of property can provide greater return on investment.
- **Windfall tax:** Retrospective application of the Developer Levy / Community Infrastructure Levy. This would need adapting for Northern Ireland.
- **Asset realisation:** Ring fences rise in value of Government-owned buildings due to investment in local infrastructure.

Winning hearts and minds...

Changing customer attitudes and behaviour will be key to the success of a good public transport system in Northern Ireland:

- We need to develop and communicate clear messages on the challenges and opportunities we face and what we have to do to address them.
- We need political, business and community leaders to lead by example.
- We need to reward positive behaviour (through, for example, salary sacrifice, flexible fares that reward loyalty/use) and to penalise negative behaviour (through workplace parking levy, reducing Government-owned parking spaces and other measures).

*“A man maie well bring a horse to the water,
But he can not make him drinke without he will”*

John Heywood, 1546

What could a **best** in class
public transport system in
Northern Ireland look like?

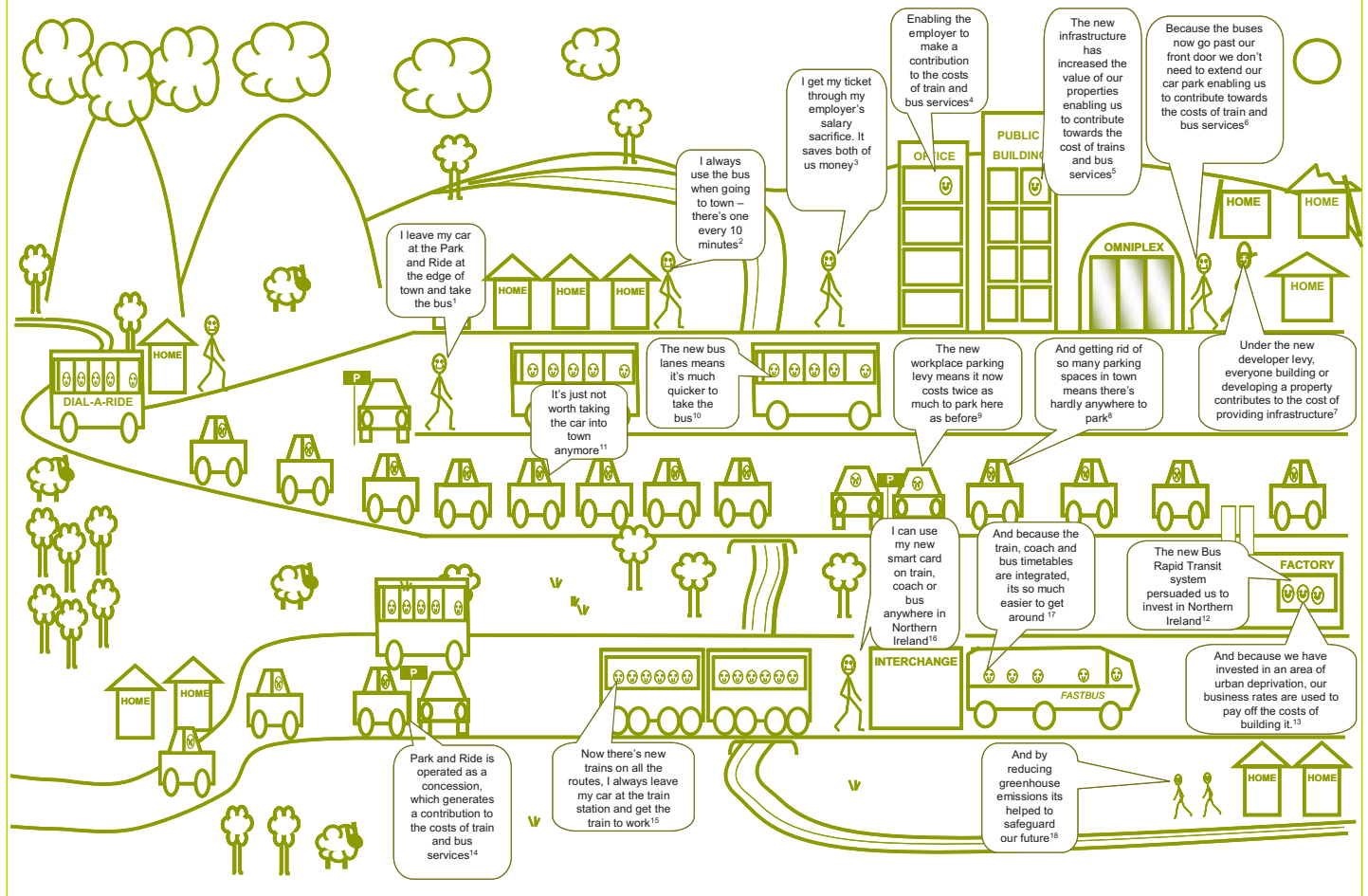
Best: adj. 1. of the highest quality, excellence, or standing.
2. most advantageous, suitable, or desirable: the best way.

Bringing it all together...

Figure 4 shows what bringing it all together could look like for Northern Ireland.

- Park and Ride facilities linked to train or quality bus corridors on all major corridors into Northern Ireland's towns and cities.
- Integrated timetabling ensures public transport offers an effective and efficient alternative to private transport.
- Quality bus corridors that go up to and through the traffic lights, and straight through town and city centres, make bus and coach travel much quicker and reliable at busy periods.
- A province wide salary sacrifice scheme makes season tickets for bus, coach and train the cost effective option for both employees and employers.
- As a result, employers make a contribution towards the cost of providing bus, coach and train services.
- Investment in new transport infrastructure such as Bus Rapid Transit stimulates a rise in property values in adjacent areas. Government is able to ring-fence the incremental rise in value and make a contribution towards the cost of providing bus, coach and train services.
- Shopping centres, leisure centres and entertainment complexes, all benefiting from the higher footfall that the new transport infrastructure brings, make a contribution towards the cost of providing bus, coach and train services.
- Developer levies are enshrined in legislation, bringing a clear transparency to the contribution that developers must pay towards the cost of providing local infrastructure and towards the cost of providing bus, coach and train services.
- Reducing the amount of Government-owned car parking spaces encourages more people to leave the car at home and to take up the salary sacrifice scheme.
- Workplace parking levies are enshrined in legislation, further reducing the number of car parking spaces available and creating a contribution towards the cost of providing bus, coach and train services.
- An integrated smart card ticketing scheme is launched, making it easy and value for money for customers to travel by bus, coach and train throughout Northern Ireland.
- An integrated timetable makes changing between bus, coach and train easy and efficient across Northern Ireland.
- A modern and efficient public transport system helps Northern Ireland to continue its success in attracting Foreign Direct Investment.
- Investment in infrastructure in areas of urban deprivation generates an incremental rise in business rates which can be used to offset the costs of that infrastructure.
- Concession schemes such as Park and Ride and retail and business schemes at stations and interchanges, make a contribution towards the cost of providing bus, coach and train services.

Figure 4: The future of public transport in Northern Ireland?



Postscript - final reflections

Reflection: noun. 1. a fixing of the thoughts on something; careful consideration.
2. a thought occurring in consideration or meditation.

This article makes a case for innovative thinking in relation to new investment in Northern Ireland's public transport network. It argues that, at national and regional level, a high quality public transport network can deliver strong environmental and economic benefits. The environmental imperatives are now well understood by the public and, generally speaking, are recognised and supported locally and nationally by politicians across the political spectrum. The economic arguments are becoming more prominent and have a particular resonance in the midst of the current economic downturn - the local economy simply cannot afford to lose £250 million a year through unnecessary traffic congestion.

The article shows that, whilst significant progress has been made on some aspects of Northern Ireland's public transport network, we still have a long way to go before we can describe our network as “good”, never mind anything resembling best practice or world class. The key problem, we argue, is a straightforward lack of investment: we continue to spend significant sums of money on the local road network but we have simply failed to invest in any commensurate way in public transport.

Clearly the economic and fiscal climate means that new money and additional resources for public transport will be difficult to find. There are no easy answers. We have therefore set out a range of options for generating additional revenue and investment that go beyond direct funding from the Exchequer. These options have been used successfully in other contexts and other countries and should be seriously considered as potential means of generating the resources to bring our public transport network up to the standard required.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that even if we are successful at generating this additional investment, none of the benefits will accrue unless there is a corresponding shift in hearts and minds. Generally speaking, the public mindset in Northern Ireland seems to be more closely aligned to the private car-oriented US model, rather than the more public transport-oriented European model. This needs to change. Additional investment and improved quality in the network will help but real change will also require a sustained communications campaign, focused on the individual and shared benefits of moving away from private car usage. It will require leadership from our politicians, civil servants and business community to model the right behaviours and engage in the necessary innovative thinking. The benefits of embracing this agenda are clear and now is the time to act.

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