



**THE INSTITUTION OF
CIVIL ENGINEERS
Wales Association
Cymdeithas Cymru**

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11 October 2001

Environment Planning & Transport Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Dear Sir

Environment, Planning and Transport Committee Consultation Report
Policy Review of Public Transport

Please find below the ICE Wales Association's summarised views, as formulated by its Transport Professional Interest Network (TPIN), headed by Keith Thomas, formerly Director of Highways at the former Welsh Office. Due to the EPT Committee Adviser role of our Executive Secretary, he has, for obvious reasons, not been involved with this response, which is authored by TPIN, in order to preserve his independence relative to any further Adviser work on the Review. Our views are expressed in overall terms, rather than commentary upon specific proposals.

The document is welcomed as a vehicle to generate ideas, but it is lacking in positiveness and firmness. Perhaps this is inevitable in a document intended to review policy, as opposed to delivery, but particularly in the field of public transport, the two are intertwined, and the first cannot be satisfactorily measured or evaluated without clear views on the second.

For example, it is clear that dramatic, and planned, early modal shift must be achieved if ten year objectives are to be met. From the document, it is unclear how modal shift is to be achieved. There are a few carrots but no sticks. Both professionally, and intuitively, we do not see how modal shift will result from mere exhortation. We are concerned that, three years after HMG's White Paper on Transport, the changes are not significant, or noticeable, and that traffic growth appears to proceed unabated. If the remaining seven years of the first ten year period perform similarly, we will have been totally ineffective, and judged to be so!

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Brave policy decisions are needed by the policy formulators, both nationally and locally. Carrots are certainly advisable, but a clear recognition is needed that sticks are unavoidable, if a real difference is to be made.

Transport planning clearly must take place on a regional basis within Wales. We believe the all-Wales dimension is too big for other than broad brush strategy, and obscures considerable travel patterns, and journey to work differences, between regions of Wales. Individual Local Authority areas are far too small. Transport planning for Wales can sensibly be achieved via four regional areas, reflecting, where appropriate, complete “journey to work” areas, and / or rural problems of dispersion and accessibility, and the solutions necessary in each case.

Initially, expanding the regional consortia, as they exist and can be strengthened, particularly with respect to NAW / Consortia member interactions, seems the sensible way forward. There is scope for regional Transport Plans, perhaps growing out of existing LA Plans, and consortia objectives, similar to some metropolitan areas in England. Again, initially, the consortia, suitably strengthened, could be the primary source.

The options put forward need to be positive and strong organisations, with the power to act and to achieve objectives. Inclusivity and partnership working is all well and good, but “someone” must be responsible, and accountable, for performance and delivery. At present these are separated. Procurement must take place hand in hand with “street” services. Fundamentally, however the organisational structure debate turns out, organisations need positive and planned finance over a rolling ten year horizon, with powers to co-ordinate, and direct, if necessary. The concept of “binding compacts”, promulgated by some contributors to the Review, has attractions.

To guarantee a sound financial base, we believe that hypothecation (proposal 4.8) is long overdue and should be agreed. Priorities need to be established on a regional basis, and schemes conceived and executed as “cross-border” projects, not constrained by boundaries of too small (for this purpose) LA’s. If LA’s are funding a large part of the finance source, there could be difficulties, and “direction” may become necessary. NAW hypothecation of finance to strengthened consortia may be one solution, which, as we understand it, is not too far removed from the Transport Grant regime as experienced and practiced over the last few settlements.

The ICE is interested, of course, in major “new build” projects to support PT, and these would lend themselves to TG type finance distributions. What seems to be always overlooked is that buses, providing the vast bulk of Welsh PT services, operate predominantly on LA roads, which are in a parlous state of maintenance after many years, under successive Administrations, of chronic underfunding. Major injections of finance into major structural renewals of the existing assets must now take place alongside the provision of new assets. To the extent that money does now seem to be trickling through for this purpose is welcomed by ICE, whose members would play a large part in infrastructure structural maintenance delivery. Naturally, we would urge that the trickle becomes a stream, given both the backlog, and the increasing demands upon the network.

Efficient and comfortable road based PT, in addition to adequate maintenance, requires an attack upon congestion where it occurs. ICE fully support steps to give preferential treatment to high occupancy vehicles and urge greater policy and financial support for such schemes. Effective interchange needs much attention. There are a few good exemplars in Wales, but, in the main, interchange in most urban areas is substandard, inefficient, poorly laid out, planned and designed. ICE members would wish to play a full part in developing creditable 21st Century facilities for Wales, which need significant capital investment over a protracted time scale. A rolling ten year plan, to provide world class interchange, passenger information, and passenger comfort, must be instituted to replace the limited, unimaginative, utilitarian facilities to date. Public safety and security must be factored into these designs. We consider that each significant population centre in Wales should expect such investment over the Plan period. We also feel that this investment should be “public purse”, given that the fragmented private sector operator regime is unlikely to deliver infrastructure improvements of the type required. The operators contribution should be expected in the form of high quality, low age rolling stock, both road and rail. We would welcome stronger Quality Partnerships to deliver this.

We would also wish to address the issue of engineering and transport planning and traffic management skills and their shortages. This is becoming a serious problem, and one capable of frustrating the delivery of policy maker’s objectives, even if finance is available. We would like to work with the Administration in developing positive and proactive programmes to recruit, train, and then retain, those staff necessary to deliver rolling ten year objectives. Given the “gestation period” for producing a raw engineering graduate, or technician, the next five years is bound to be difficult. However, adequate planning, and intervention in the system now, could help ease the five year plus time period, providing home grown expertise, avoiding the need for massive “importation” of skills which will otherwise be the only solution. We know that, following the meeting between the Minister and ICE representatives, our Executive Secretary has written a paper on skills issues in the construction industry, as requested, for the attention of the Minister and her officials. We would be pleased to follow that up, and help in whatever way we can to resolve the developing problem.

One manifestation of skills shortage, as pre-LGR experts from LG retire and are not directly replaced, added to the “haemorrhaging” of some staff to “tiger” economies such as Eire, particularly from West Wales, is the increasing difficulty in staffing up to deliver ITS objectives. This further pressurises individual LA’s to consider regional consortia pooling of expert staff for purely practical, as well as policy planning reasons, and this should be borne in mind.

This response is being finalised as the news of Railtrack’s collapse is breaking. We suggest that a golden opportunity has presented itself! One of the weaknesses of the Wales Transport Strategy is that the NAW only control road policy and expenditure, and have influence, but no control, over rail, air or water. Railtrack’s operations in Wales should transfer to the NAW forthwith, giving the opportunity for real integration, with both road and rail controlled, in strategy and policy terms, in one place. This would be a massive step forward in Welsh transport planning, and we recommend it.

Service delivery could be focussed through the strengthened consortia, to NAW policy direction, bringing service delivery closer to the customer, always an admirable principle.

We hope you find these generalised comments of help and support. ICE would wish to be involved fully in your implementation plans and pledge our support to realising the objectives of a transformed 21st Century public transport system. You will know that our Executive Secretary stands ready to help in Expert Adviser or other supportive roles, and can be called upon at any time.

Yours sincerely

Chris Harris
Chair, Wales Association