

Meeting of Joint Committee on Transport and Communications

3 July 2024

Moving Together: A Strategic Approach to the Improved Efficiency of the Transport System in Ireland

OPENING STATEMENT

Firstly, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to consider this important and potentially pivotal strategy for transport.

Everyone in this room recognises the extent to which our daily lives can be impacted by our travel experiences, in both very positive and negative ways. A smooth journey, that is not impacted by congestion, is a happier and healthier one.

However, if we get caught up in traffic, then this can affect our mood, our productivity, and our health – in terms of stress, inactivity and pollution.

As you probably know, the impetus for this latest transport strategy came from the Climate Action Plan. Despite Government support for a large-scale transition to electric vehicles, higher penetration levels of biofuels in the fuel mix and unprecedented investment in public and active travel

infrastructure, we will fail to achieve our climate targets without addressing the existing inefficiency in the transport system. This much is known.

So, this strategy represents the final key policy component in our decarbonisation pathway for transport, helping us to reduce transport demand in an efficient way. I was pleased that, just last week, the Climate Change Advisory Council in its 2024 Annual Review of the transport sector indicated support for the strategy and – more importantly - its swift implementation.

Decarbonisation is not the whole picture, however. As we began to develop the strategy, we realised that there are so many other reasons for a wholesale change of approach.

In recent decades, like most other countries, the car and road-based freight have become the dominant means for moving people and goods. Through urban planning and road-building programmes, this trend was supported by allocating more and more of our public and civic spaces to cars, vans and trucks.

While this made sense from several perspectives, it did give rise to problems: not least traffic congestion, but also a cultural shift in how we think about public space and prioritise its use.

Motorised transport became the priority, while space for people rather than cars became inadvertently demoted. Communities became severed by heavily trafficked streets, and active transport became a greater challenge.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but I suspect we may have adopted a different approach if we could have envisaged the kinds of challenges we now face. In fact, replicating aspects of our past could provide future opportunity. Before motorised transport was all pervasive, people walked and cycled to local shops, supported local businesses, and lived in a way that limited waste and used resources efficiently. Our towns were thriving marketplaces, as well as vibrant centres for community living.

Today, however, many of our old market towns, are choked with traffic. Space is at a premium, particularly in towns that date from medieval times. As well as causing localised pollution and health implications, congestion makes it difficult to access shops and services. Equally, it makes it difficult for people to move about safely. This can particularly affect children, disabled persons and the elderly, with implications for independence and community life.

Demand management can make a difference and measures, like road space re-allocation, can be good for business. Taking away through traffic makes cities and towns more accessible for trading and retail. Where interventions have been made, evidence tells us that most businesses prefer the people-centred model and would not go back.

So, I think we can all agree that congestion doesn't work for anyone – not for drivers, not for users of public transport, not for business and certainly not for people who want to walk, wheel or cycle.

So, we need a new approach. Alongside a growing population, and a buoyant economy, we find the transport sector at a critical juncture. There is also a growing recognition, across the world, that the prevailing car-centric model is reaching the limits of its efficiency.

To this end, the new Moving Together strategy is being developed to bring back efficiency and to help alleviate the impacts of car dependency on the economy, the environment and the health of our society.

While this Strategy is about putting people, rather than cars, at the centre of our urban and transport planning systems, this is not about restricting people's movement. That's never in the Government's interest. People need to be able to move about freely, to make a living, to contribute to the economy, to be socially and recreationally connected and to live a good life.

It's important to reiterate to all members of this Committee that cars, vans, and trucks will continue to be a vital and important part of our transport mix. For many people, particularly in rural or isolated areas, we know that car journeys will continue to be a critical part of everyday life. Similarly, tradespeople are particularly dependent on vans for example. This strategy has not been developed in isolation of these facts but simply aims to plan for vehicle use in a better way.

However, we do know that heavy traffic makes public transport less reliable and can discourage people from using it. It also makes the environment for vulnerable road users, such as pedestrians and cyclists, less safe. This, too, discourages people from using active travel, particularly for shorter journeys.

A systemic change is clearly needed, and this new strategy aims to bring about this transformation through leveraging a wide

array of Government policies and programmes. It proposes 35 recommendations, which are the product of a constructive, collaborative, and concerted effort across a broad range of stakeholders, including expert sub-groups which were set up to identify the type of interventions that could cumulatively make a lasting and positive impact.

Broadly speaking, the recommendations are grouped into different themes like national planning or legislation. As well as recommendations aimed at empowering local authorities, improving freight efficiency and strengthening supports for sustainable mobility, it seeks to identify ways to further embed demand management principles into the public sector, and to take a long-term approach to taxation, bringing the polluter pays principle more to the fore. Reflecting the system-wide nature of the change envisaged, it calls out the need for engagement with sectors like education, sport, tourism, business, retail and industry. Engagement with the citizen is also identified as a key area of focus.

As mentioned earlier, the strategy has been developed to work hand-in-glove with an extensive range of Government investments and supports – both existing and planned. More detail on these supports and the recommendations are outlined

in more detail in both the draft strategy and implementation plan, which were published for public consultation in mid-April. The closing date for views on the documents is 21 August.

It is anticipated that, when implemented, this strategy will play a key role in unlocking the full potential of the Government's investment in sustainable mobility options by prioritising these modes across the transport system, thus helping to facilitate efficiency, like bus service efficiency for example, and improved journey times.

At a local level, the strategy looks to ensure that the necessary guidance is in place for local authorities and local council representatives to develop demand management plans for their own areas – plans that are tailored to best suit the bespoke needs of each individual community.

Even though my department has engaged extensively up to now, I recognise that more voices still need to be heard. To this end, my officials are planning a further round of robust and holistic engagement over the coming months.

I'm particularly keen that local government representatives engage as much as possible, so that the strategy – when

complete - fully reflects the types of issues being faced by towns, up and down the country, in an effort to address congestion. Public officials need to be involved from the outset – and that’s why today’s meeting is to be welcomed and is another important input into the strategy’s development.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts on how we can use this document to better support more inclusive, accessible and liveable urban centres – centres with cleaner air, more timely public transport, and safer spaces for walking and cycling. I’d be surprised if we didn’t all share those same goals.

