

TraCC

Trafnidiaeth Canolbarth Cymru / Mid Wales Transportation

Initial Comment on the draft Transport (Wales) Bill

Introduction

1. The draft Transport (Wales) Bill was circulated by letter dated 27th May 2004 and the mid Wales local authorities for Ceredigion, Gwynedd and Powys will be providing a response through Trafnidiaeth Canolbarth Cymru / Mid Wales Transportation (TraCC) to the Wales Office / Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) by the deadline of 5th August 2004. The Councils will also be contributing to discussion of the Bill through specialist groups such as the Association of Transport Co-ordination Officers (ATCO) and within the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).
2. The following, earlier evidence regarding the Bill is submitted to meet the deadline of 15th June 2004 set by the joint Welsh Affairs Select Committee / National Assembly for Wales Economic Development and Transport Committee. It should be noted this submission is an initial response drawn up during a period of local government elections. TraCC represents the rural centre that makes up 40% of Wales and the formal regional response to the August consultation deadline will have the benefit of consideration by elected Members. An appendix details the particular concerns that Gwynedd Council have as they are, necessarily, unique in being a member of two transport consortia.

General

3. The TraCC consortium welcomes many elements of the proposed Bill and in particular the proposal that the WAG produce a Wales Transport Strategy, takes up powers to fund all modes of transport and secures greater influence in its dealing with the Rail Passengers' Committee and the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA). It is noted that the Bill also proposes to give powers to the Assembly that could affect the current administration of public and other transport. This could impinge on the statutory duties of the constituent local authorities, e.g. for school travel and traffic management, and have a significant impact in an area where transport services are socially necessary but not commercially operated.
4. The need for co-operative working has always been appreciated across mid Wales and has been practised to good effect in many spheres of local government, especially in transport matters. The economic development of the region is championed by the Mid Wales Partnership. The Partnership gave the Assembly their first integrated transport strategy in 1999 and this has been revised and re-issued during 2003.

5. Transport is of particular importance to the wellbeing of rural areas and mid Wales' gradual embrace of the concepts pioneered in the Assembly's Transport Framework for Wales has been successfully led by the area's Local Authorities. Their efforts are still evolving, and TraCC is now starting its first full year in operation and is making use of WAG funding to promote, for example, travel plans and long-distance bus corridors. It would be inappropriate to consider further change to the transport partnership at present.
6. There are several areas in which the initial draft of the Bill could be improved and these are commented on briefly below. It is essential that the Assembly's intentions, duties and limitations are clearly thought through and detailed in the Bill. The current proposals offer no definition of "transport" and appear inconsistent in their use of the term. They show no recognition of the WAG tenets such as sustainability or spatial planning nor do they recognise the value of existing regional transport strategies. Continuity of policy will not be ensured by making Local Transport Plans (LTPs) statutory unless local control and new resources are also assured.

Comments on the draft Bill (by numbered Sections)

7. S1, S2: The Assembly's duty to produce and implement a Wales Transport Strategy is supported. This should update the Transport Framework for Wales and provide a realistic, funded programme for action whilst supporting the present consortia as the mechanism for regional delivery. Consultation with the Local Authorities is not mentioned and should be required. Production of local transport strategies (whether as LTPs or other documents) should follow within a specified time of the Assembly's publication rather than being set for March 2006.
8. S3: The second round of LTPs will be produced from 2006 and County Councils are intending to incorporate their adopted strategies, e.g. for buses and for road safety, as "chapters" within their Plans. The new Plans will benefit from input gained through each Authority's Community Strategy, their joint Health Social Care and Wellbeing Strategy and Local Authority (and, where relevant, National Park) Unitary Development Plan. Each LTP will accord with the strategic direction set by the regional consortia and WAG guidelines regarding LTPs and control of central funding would be sufficient to ensure this. The centralised LTP powers proposed for the Assembly and contained in Schedule 1 to the draft Bill appear to be miscast and the WLGA concerns in this respect are supported.
9. S4,S5: TraCC receives guidance from locally elected representatives and, especially in a rural context, appropriately co-ordinated working is already enjoyed and is improving. Further joint working is, in principle, welcomed but within a strategic framework necessarily varies for different functions and to suit local needs and priorities. Sections 4 & 5 of the Bill foresee a need for the Assembly to direct the establishment of Joint Transport Authorities (JTA) that would control and fund a wide range of "transport" functions.

The circumstances that could trigger or reverse this process are not sufficiently detailed nor, with the proposed establishment of a new corporate body, would be the continuing role of local authorities (especially in light of the Traffic Management Bill). It is noted that the Transport Act 2000 currently gives powers of intervention to the Assembly.

10. S6, S7: It is appropriate to clarify the Assembly's powers to fund transport services though this would have to be new funding to have any effect. It is assumed that service procurement and supervision would remain with the local transport authorities to ensure efficient co-ordination. Some further detail is needed regarding implementation and satisfaction that local needs are sufficiently met.
 11. S.8, S9,10: The extension of rail powers is strongly approved and should improve local accountability and forward investment as the Wales & Borders franchise starts its fifteen-year life. There will be a need to ensure that UK national problems of organisation and funding do not affect Wales and the Assembly should guide any future SRA move to designate Community Railways in Wales.
 12. S.11: Assembly powers to finance air services are fully supported and recent responses from mid Wales to the UK air policy document and the Intra Wales Scheduled Air Services proposals have outlined local views and priorities.
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Appendix: Additional Note from Gwynedd Council

Gwynedd Council supports the main aims of the Bill, insofar as these are to provide a strong lead and focus on transport in Wales, through the duty placed on the Assembly to develop a Welsh transport strategy.

In particular the Council supports the Bill in giving the Assembly powers over the SRA, which, provided there is an adequate financial settlement from the SRA, will permit the development of rail services in Wales which reflect more closely the country's needs.

The Council gives its guarded support for the proposal for the Assembly to secure commercially unviable public transport services, provided these are services, such as long-distance services, which it is not appropriate for any individual authority to procure.

The Council supports the concept that planning and procuring public transport services should not be constrained by local authority boundaries. There is considerable concern, however, that in the case of Gwynedd, a new boundary could be created between the TAITH and TraCC consortium areas. This would create more difficulties than the existing local authority boundaries. There are many aspects of the Bill in which Gwynedd's split between TAITH and TraCC could result in difficulties. Clarification on this matter, which is unique to Gwynedd, is required.

There are several other concerns:

Many transport issues are best dealt with at a local level (albeit under the umbrella of a regional strategy). Loss of local focus could result in the failure for local issues to be addressed.

Equitable decisions on how to allocate funding for unremunerative services could be difficult to make given the wide geographical areas covered by the present consortia. Comparison with metropolitan PTE's is not valid in this respect.

There is considerable cross subsidy from the Education Department's budget for some public transport services. This is desirable from the viewpoint of integration of public, and education transport, and acceptable when a single authority is responsible for funding all services within its area. It is not acceptable, however, for an authority's education transport budget to be funding transport services otherwise paid for by a Joint Transport Authority.

It is not clear whether the clear benefits derived from integrating education and public transport will still be possible under the proposals.

It is believed that the proposals would make it more difficult to deliver transport policies integrated with land use planning and regeneration.

The close working relationship between public transport sections, and highway engineers, in the delivery of infrastructure projects, and the understanding by highway engineers of the problems facing public transport, might be jeopardised.

The Council believes that the establishment of Joint Transport Authorities would be a retrograde step unless the issues outlined above can be resolved.