

Prosperity, Fairness and Participation in Transport Delivery

“A lost decade” was how transport campaign group Transform Scotland described the outcome of the latest review of the national transport framework. The national review published on 21st January showed levels of walking and public transport down, and car traffic up. Scotland is not on track with its transport targets, and the following day, when the Committee on Climate Change visited Edinburgh, they reported that Scotland needed to do more on transport.

When publishing the review Transport Minister Derek Mackay said “reassuringly the NTS focus on improving journey times and connections, reducing emissions and improving quality, accessibility and affordability remains as valid as ever” but that “my conclusion is that we should reconsider the NTS more fully through the lens of prosperity, fairness and participation”.

As the largest professional body representing the transport sector in Scotland CILT is keen to work with government to help it focus its “lens” at the practical changes which will achieve prosperity, fairness and participation. These aims align with the day to day activities of our members helping people to get to work, moving goods and building a better connected and more equitable society.

Government wants to be judged on outcomes for improved journey times and connections, reduced emissions and the improved quality, accessibility and affordability of transport. Rail passengers and cyclists can report some improvements in journey times and quality over the last 10 years, however for most others journey times have been rising, and air quality has been declining, so the campaigners rightly highlight the lost decade. It seems that government has been better at stating policy aims than turning these aims into results.

Weak partnership delivery has probably been the greatest obstacle to better transport. The lack of priority for people movement, rather than car movement, on the roads has been hurting the public transport industry. Much more bus priority is needed to ensure faster bus journey times and much higher quality walking routes are needed connecting homes and local destinations including bus stops and rail stations. Constrained delivery times for lorries have been adding to freight costs. Only partnership working can deliver the breadth of participation needed for successful solutions. Working through the details for practical project delivery helps to optimise commercial goals with social and environmental aims, but such partnership working has been very rare. As a result, public funding has delivered poorer value and less effective solutions than hoped.

If the last 10 years have been defined by the failure of partnerships, how can the barriers to delivery now be overcome? The Minister says “we are now forging new partnerships with bus operators and authorities to deliver smart and integrated ticketing, tackle congestion and use our existing road space to give bus the priority it needs”. Most Scots know that they can already buy some smart integrated tickets, such as buying print at home or mobile tickets for parking with an air ticket purchase. However, rail and bus have fallen behind and will continue to do so without a new more flexible approach towards paying for public transport. The prospects for employers or shops to provide as many free smart bus tickets as free parking spaces for their customers are currently very slim.

The new strategy explains how Scotland’s new legislation, including the Community Empowerment Act, can help to offer a more participative approach. More action on local social priorities is certainly a

promising step forward. The government sets out the “current roles, responsibilities and key interrelationships that are essential to make transport delivery as effective as possible”. However, the partnerships did not form over the last 10 years because the organisations involved were unclear about their roles, but due to a lack of will to work jointly.

Perhaps more than any other sector transport will need to change fast over the next five years as industry restructures in response to changing technologies and new business models for a low carbon economy. The Minister hints at these bigger challenges by calling for a more thorough review of the National Transport Strategy after the 2016 Scottish Parliament election.

Scottish transport think tank STSG has published a report¹ suggesting that these changes are very controversial and Scottish political parties only have until May to gain a democratic mandate for reform. Without that mandate, the Minister’s aspirations for an effective transport strategy could struggle after the election. Weak governance would harm prosperity, fairness and participation, but if politicians do not lead then they end up following.

National and local partnerships between the Scottish Government, local government, rail, bus and freight operators can deliver transport where space is shared for the benefits of all in society. High quality streets funded by profitable transport and development delivery could ensure everyone’s needs are met from vulnerable travellers to large businesses.

Over the last decade, the organisations that developed strong contractual networks with their customers and suppliers shaped the transport systems. In contrast, the 2006 National Transport Strategy was not accompanied by the required contracts with industry, nor did the government gain an effective contract from its citizens to deliver on controversial policy ideas. 2016 seems like a good chance to put that right and perhaps January 2016 will have been a turning point if the political parties now each publish their plans about how they plan to reform transport in Scotland.

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¹ <http://stsg.org/towards-a-democratic-mandate-for-transport-reform>