

Enterprise & Learning Committee

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Purpose

The Committee has invited Sustrans Cymru to submit evidence to its short inquiry on Trunk Roads and Road Safety.

Background

Assembly Government Policy and Practice

The Assembly Government's transport strategy, One Wales: Connecting the Nation, recognises the need to change travel behaviour and sets as a priority the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in transport.

'Connecting the Nation' commits to 'improving the reliability of the road system' especially between key settlements and improving the capacity of the M4 which has 'traffic levels way above its capacity'. In addition it commits to a 'surface access strategy' for Cardiff Airport and "improvements to the existing road network ensuring free flowing, safe movement of freight traffic". The strategy also euphemistically states that roads "must be equipped to handle the flow of traffic" - in practice this often means adapting hard shoulders for traffic use and a programme of road widening.

It is not clear how augmenting the capacity of the roads network, and in-turn making journeys by car easier and more convenient, addresses the need to change travel behaviour nor delivers a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in transport - a priority for the Assembly Government.

An example of the contradictory approach can be found in the Strategy's position on air pollution. 'Connecting the Nation' acknowledges the detrimental effects traffic has on air quality and health but places the responsibility on Local Authorities to take action. For its part, the WAG states "there may be exceptional circumstances where actions may temporarily increase air pollution in order to reduce it in the long term - for example building a bypass". Therefore, to reduce the impact of traffic pollution the Strategy advocates building more roads, which in the medium term will result in an increased number of car journeys and greater levels of traffic pollution - which in-turn could be used to justify further road building.

Funding

The Assembly Government currently spends around £300 million per annum on maintaining and improving the road network. This includes some £100 million for local roads.

By contrast Walking and cycling account for more than a quarter of all trips and yet attract a tiny proportion of transport funding. In the current financial year the Government plan to spend £8,084,000 on its 'Safe routes to Communities' programme (a reduction from the £10 Million that was pledged), £1 Million on the Trunk Roads Interface Scheme and £13,350,000 has been allocated in Transport Grant to Local Authorities for Walking and Cycling projects. A combined planned total of £22,434,000 - less than 7% of the roads budget.

A lack of 'headroom' is cited as the reason for not investing further in projects which contribute towards modal shift. There is no doubt that the Transport budget is under significant pressure from roads schemes - for example, the Porth relief road in the Rhondda cost £98 million for just five miles, nearly £20 million per mile.

Costs

The costs of continuing with the current direction in transport policy are considerable.

Transport is now the fastest growing generator of air pollutants and CO₂. Private car use accounts for 13% of all UK carbon emissions, and is expected to continue rising.

The price of inaction in the face of climate change will be enormous. In 2006, Lord Stern reported that if countries do not spend 1% of their GDP now to stop greenhouse gases rising to dangerous levels then the potential cost of damage caused by climate change could be more than 20% of global GDP. Since then the scientific evidence has highlighted the quickening pace of global warming and Lord Stern has said he badly underestimated the degree of damages and the risks of climate change.

As well as contributing to rises in global temperature the growth in private motor transport has also contributed to a decline in levels of physical activity.

In his annual report for 2007 the Chief Medical Officer for Wales said "We are increasingly sedentary and more than half the population is overweight or obese. We need to find more effective ways of enabling healthier eating and drinking and significantly increasing levels of physical activity". Walking or cycling for all or part of our everyday routine - to work, to school, to the local shops or to see friends - is the easiest way for many of us to build activity into our busy lives.

The 2007 Foresight Tackling Obesities report found that the growth in car use and associated reductions in walking and cycling, (due to an environment and lifestyles which are increasingly designed around the car) are key contributors to declining levels of physical activity.

The Foresight panel of scientists projected that without urgent action to change behaviour, nearly 60% of the UK population could be obese by 2050, at an annual cost of £49.9 billion in today's prices.

A quarter of households don't have access to a car - in communities like Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr as many as 35% of families are car-less. However because jobs and services are often difficult to access by public transport many on low-incomes feel forced to 'invest' in a car. Research shows that buying and running a car is a major cause of people getting into trouble with debts.

Furthermore, people who do not use a car are still exposed to the negative impacts of traffic, without getting any of the immediate benefits that are enjoyed by car users. For example, although they are least likely to own a car, people in the poorest households are more likely to be injured or killed by a car, and this is especially true of children. People who live close to busy main roads are more likely to suffer chronic ill-health, as evidenced by symptoms such as runny or blocked nose, sore eyes or sore throat, coughs, or lack of energy, even when other factors such as income taken into account.

Those on low-wages who do have cars spend nearly a quarter of their income on the cost of motoring. Families who spend more than 10% of their income on heating their home are regarded by the Government as suffering from 'fuel poverty'. Although there is no similar official definition of 'transport poverty', that is what these families are experiencing. A transport budget heavily weighted towards road schemes will do nothing to alleviate that poverty.

Road Safety

Road Safety policy targets set have been unhelpful to both walking and cycling. Setting simple casualty reduction targets has perpetuated a long-standing culture among road safety officers of regarding walking and cycling as "dangerous" modes of transport. Hence they are often very reluctant to encourage walking and cycling, for fear that this will mean more casualties, contrary to their casualty reduction targets.

Cycling is widely perceived to be a more hazardous activity than it really is. The average rate of cyclist fatalities in Britain is 31 per billion km cycled, or one fatality per 20 million miles. This is slightly better than for walking (36 fatalities per billion km walked).

There is good evidence that cycling gets safer the more cyclists there are: the "safety in numbers" effect. This is apparent from a comparison of cycle use and the risk of cycling in different European countries. For example, in London cycling has increased by 91% since 2000 and has seen a 33% fall in cycle casualties since 1994-98. Cycling casualties per cyclist journey were thus 2.9 times less likely in 2007 than in the mid-1990s.

Furthermore the risks of walking and cycling are considerably less than not doing so. The numbers of deaths are very small compared with those associated with obesity or with heart disease related to physical inactivity.

We would be happy to provide the committee with further information on road safety if that would be useful.

Alternatives

In 2005 the Department for Transport acknowledged that forecasting based on existing trends is unlikely to help us in achieving a future that breaks with 'business as usual', and commissioned a backcasting approach to addressing future transport policy; the Visioning and Backcasting for UK Transport Policy (VIBAT) study.

The VIBAT study showed that for governments to reduce carbon emissions by 60% by 2050 (the UK target is now 80%) then up to two-thirds of this reduction will only be achieved if there is a shift in travel behaviour towards more sustainable modes of transport.

Emerging climate change science shows that we need to be going even further and moving towards zero carbon transport. Prioritising walking and cycling and reducing distances travelled will be critical to achieving this.

Research shows that in a typical town in the UK, 35% of all trips are already made by foot, bike and public transport. Around 9% of trips are made by car because they are physically constrained from being made more sustainably; a further 27% because there is no adequate alternative, for example it would take too long by public transport, or it would be too far to walk or cycle. This leaves nearly 30% of trips which are made by car when a lack of information or motivation is the only barrier to more sustainable travel.

Our work has shown that with the right information and some encouragement people could nearly double their use of sustainable modes tomorrow, and that in the longer-term targeted investment in infrastructure, together with more rational land use planning, could enable nine out of ten journeys to be made on foot, by bike or using public transport.

Summary / Recommendations

The current direction of Assembly Government Transport Policy places considerable emphasis on road building. There is clear evidence to show that increasing the ease and convenience of car journeys leads to increased volumes of traffic. This in-turn contributes to rising levels of greenhouse gasses and declining levels of physical activity.

Sustrans would like to see Transport spending reflect the modal share - walking and cycling accounts for a quarter of journeys and spending should move over time towards a funding settlement that reflects this.

As a first step we would like to see the forthcoming Welsh Transport Plan commit to ensuring that WAG's ambitious targets for growth

in walking and cycling are met.

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