

Belfast City Council Draft Response on All-Island Strategic Rail Review - Strategic Environmental Assessment and Draft Report

Belfast City Council welcomes this opportunity to respond to the consultation on the All-Island Strategic Rail Review. The Council is generally supportive of the vision and the ambitions set out in the draft report. The recommendations set out in the report to decarbonise the rail network, improve the speed and frequency of services and to improve and create additional rail connections, will support the city to achieve the targets set out in The Belfast Agenda, the city's Community Plan, the NI Climate Change Act 2022 and the Net Zero Carbon Roadmap. Consideration should be given to ensure that the proposals are in line with the requirements set out within Department for Infrastructure's new Eastern Transport Plan

Specifically, the recommendations would contribute to realising the vision for Belfast as set out in the Agenda, to be 'beautiful, well connected and culturally vibrant and being a sustainable city, shared and loved by all its citizens, free from the legacy of conflict.' In addition to assisting in meeting the Agenda's targets to 'reduce the city's carbon emissions by 80%' and for 'the economy to support 46,000 additional jobs by 2035.

As a partner in the Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC) we also recognise the role this review, and its outputs can play in the development of the wider corridor region and its economy. The DBEC strategy includes a vision to become a leading economic corridor in Europe, achieving sustainable growth through collaborative R&D, a highly skilled workforce and enabling infrastructure. 'Improved cross-border infrastructure is a key objective of the strategy to strengthen connectivity and access to markets and labour' as well as 'promoting sustainable and climate conscious growth along the corridor'.

To support the Belfast Agenda, the council has adopted the Local Development Plan (LDP), Plan Strategy, which will guide future investment and development decisions to enable the sustainable spatial growth of the city up to 2035. The draft Rail Review supports the LDP's vision for Belfast to be, 'a globally successful, smart regional city that is environmentally resilient with a vibrant economic and social heart' and to create 'thriving socially inclusive well-connected neighbourhoods, that encourage a healthy active lifestyle.'

The LDP recognises the opportunity for areas in the vicinity of rail stations, halts and connections to accommodate for a higher density of development given the improved accessibility afforded by the presence of the rail. When implementing the recommendations set out in the draft report, consideration should however be given to development being delivered sensitively to ensure it is in keeping with the local context, particularly for smaller rail halts within a suburban context.

Population projections for the island in 2050 stand at approximately 8.5 to 10 million people and the delivering of high-quality infrastructure will be critical to supporting this growth. We would encourage that the IASRR is also cognisant of the refresh of the National Planning Framework and wider social and unique economic opportunities that exist.

Taking a Transit Oriented Development would provide population densification in strategic locations and contribute to economic, social and environmental benefits, not least the increase of housing in these locations and potential clustering of employment opportunities. Ensuring efficient rail links between urban centres will bring added benefits in terms of spreading economic and population growth, across the island, support additional FDI and support indigenous investment and new supply chains to emerge, drive tourism and leisure opportunities and ultimately support sustainability goals and reduced emissions.

It is perhaps somewhat disappointing that the potential contribution of rail freight has largely been discounted when it comes to the Port of Belfast. Despite being the second largest port* on the island the review considers that any options to improve linkages to the Port of Belfast would be very costly and disruptive and would encourage freight traffic to use parts of the railway that are already quite congested.

This approach would seem contradict Recommendation 23 of the report which looks to “strengthen rail connectivity to the island’s busiest ports” and misses an opportunity to contribute towards the decarbonisation of the island’s transport system as well as reducing congestion both locally and regionally (Some [sources](#) suggest that one freight train can remove up to 76 HGVs from the road).

With a current baseline of having no regular rail freight operations it would seem that with the necessary governments' commitment and investment there are clear economic and environmental benefits that could be delivered through improved rail freight linkages beyond what is currently proposed in the draft Report.

*In 2022 the Port of Belfast handled 18,372,000 tonnes of goods¹, second only to Dublin at 25,635,000 tonnes² (28% less than Dublin). The next busiest port on the island was Shannon Foynes² with 9,819,000 tonnes (just over half (53%) of that handled by Belfast).

¹ NISRA Northern Ireland Quarterly Ports Traffic January to March 2023 data tables – [Table 1: Tonnage of Goods Through the Principal Ports in Northern Ireland, Quarter 1 2009 to Quarter 1 2023](#)

² CSO [Statistics of Port Traffic Q4 and Year 2022](#) – Table 5A: Total tonnage of goods handled classified by port and region of trade, 2022

Strong, future-proofed rail infrastructure combined with sustainable multi-modal options for first and last mile journeys also supports net zero choices and could enhance the quality of life for residents which brings benefits in terms of health and well-being, access to public services, reduced congestion, and connectivity to leisure opportunities and the unrivalled natural heritage of the island. Such an approach creates the condition that could support 'returners' to the island and drive inward migration and support sustainable lifestyles in line with the Net Zero targets.

A Bolder Vision is an ambitious blueprint for Belfast to explore a shared approach to creating a more attractive, accessible, safe and vibrant city, developed jointly by Belfast City Council, Department for Communities and Department for Infrastructure. The draft Rail Review will help to support the strategy's vision to 'fundamentally change the centre of Belfast to prioritise integrated walking, cycling and public transport and end the dominance of the car.'

Other key aspects of the vision are to 'remove severance and barriers to movement between the centre of Belfast and the surrounding communities to improve access for all' and the ambition for multi-modal transport hubs in the city. The Council would ask that due consideration is given in the Rail Review to ensure that these ambitions are supported in Belfast

and that future connections or halts do not create physical barriers between communities but instead improve the connectivity between each other and the city centre.

The Council is working with partners to support the development of the Belfast-Dublin Transport Corridor and is therefore pleased to note the Strategic Rail Review's recommendations to 'upgrade the cross-country rail network to a dual-track railway and increase commuter and intercity service frequencies,' and to 'build new higher speed railways.' However, the recommendations need to be more ambitious, in particular, the proposed speeds between regional and rural lines and core intercity locations are only provide a modest increase whereas an ambitious target would aim to link Belfast and Cork in an hour and a half.

Further consideration needs to be given to the enabling infrastructure required to deliver the network includes, tunnels, bridges, additional tracks, Overhead Line Equipment, hydrogen production and storage locations and the wider electrical grid. In addition to this the Council welcomes the proposed recommendation to 'complete the electrification and decarbonisation of the railways.' This will contribute to the delivery of the Net-Zero roadmap for Belfast and the city's commitment to work towards being carbon neutral by 2050.

In conclusion, Belfast City Council is supportive of the All-Island Strategic Rail Review but requests that the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for Transport take into consideration when finalising the report and during the implementation of the recommendations, the matters raised by Council in this response.

The Council would highlight that this response is being submitted as draft, given the deadline for submissions, it is subject to Council ratification on 4 October 2023. Following the meeting of full Council on 4 October, the Council will follow up to confirm if this response should be treated as final or if there are further addendums which Elected Members have requested.