

13 February 2006

Sir Rod Eddington
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
76 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DR

Dear Sir Rod,

Transport Study

Last year you had the opportunity to visit the West Midlands and meet with a number of representatives from the region, including myself and other members of the Assembly's Transport Partnership. This response attempts to articulate the views from our broad spectrum of partners including local government, the business sector and other stakeholders. It concentrates on issues that are important and specific to the West Midlands and the critical relationship we have with the national transport networks.

The Transport Partnership is responsible for the Regional Transport Strategy (RTS), has developed the Region's Transport Delivery Plan and has led the process for identifying the region's transport priorities, in response to the Regional Funding Allocation (RFA) guidance. As you know, the RTS is embedded in the Regional Spatial Strategy and takes us forward to 2021 – quite a long way into your study time horizon. We will be very interested in your study's recommendations and outcomes – being at the heart of the national transport network - UK Plc needs to invest here.

You will recall that you wrote to the WMRA on 2 November 2005, and we recognise the critical relationship between transport and the economy, (even though it is often difficult to provide meaningful evidence) and we welcome your last question that acknowledges that there may be "major social and environmental impacts of transport". Our response to this is in the context of the West Midlands Regional Sustainable Development Framework, an important role for the Assembly.

Before addressing the questions set out in your letter, it is worth noting that last year regional partners and stakeholders agreed five regional transport priorities. These priorities have a direct relationship with the issues set out in your study:

Promote a Change of Hearts and Minds of the Region's Population

- Change travel behaviour and deliver sustainable transport choices that promote healthier lifestyle decisions; and
- Encourage land use that reduces the need to travel.

Make the Best Use of the Existing Regional Transport Networks

- Achieve a shared understanding of the potential impacts of traffic 'demand management'; and
- Deliver rail performance improvements for passengers and freight, particularly at Birmingham New Street station.

Provide a Comprehensive Public Transport System that serves the Urban Areas

- Achieve a comprehensive network of Midland Metro in the West Midlands conurbation, and bus rapid transit in urban areas;
- Improve the integration of bus, metro and rail services; and
- Deliver strategic park and ride.

Improve Access to Birmingham International Airport (BIA) and National Exhibition Centre (NEC)

- Support the on-going sustainable development of BIA and the NEC to sustain and improve connections with international markets;
- Produce a surface access strategy that increases the proportion of sustainable trips; and
- Carry out a Route Management Strategy for the M42/M5/M6 Motorway Box, including a Land Use Development Control Statement for each length of motorway.

Ensure that the West Midlands is a Reliable Hub to serve Regional, National and International Connections

- Make better connections with international gateways, the key airports and ports, to support the economy;
- Improve the performance of the highway and rail networks to serve the region and beyond; and
- Improve co-ordination between all the organisations responsible for delivering and maintaining the transport network.

The contribution of transport to economic growth and constraints

The West Midlands is at the heart of the country, positioned at the hub of the national road and rail networks. This generates significant transport challenges in the form of inter-regional traffic 'competing' with local and regional traffic for scarce capacity. This affects the movement of people, goods and services – in other words the economy.

This is a particular issue on the predominantly 2-track rail network where local, regional, inter-city and freight services are all competing to use the limited available capacity. Without investment in more capacity, there is a real danger that Government affordability issues for the rail industry will see higher-earning inter-city services given priority over local and regional services that deliver greater benefits for the region. A balance will need to be struck between capturing the benefits of better inter-city links and also allowing effective rail travel within the region.

We have a large population - more than 5 million people live in urban towns and cities or rural towns and villages – this diverse settlement pattern creates demand for travel both within and beyond the regional boundaries.

There is no doubt that our transport networks contribute to supporting the economy, and enable the economy to grow by making businesses more accessible to suppliers and markets both in and beyond the regional boundaries. Being the 'hub' provides significant location advantages, but inadequacies in the transport networks have a major negative impact on the regional economy, and adversely affect the choices people make about where to live and work.

Investment in transport infrastructure has driven economic activity and delivered regeneration benefits. An obvious example is Birmingham International Airport and its close relationship with the National Exhibition Centre. There are other examples e.g. M6 Toll Road, Black Country Spine Road, Rugeley Bypass and Midland Metro Line One. However, citing multiple examples of public transport infrastructure aiding and supporting regeneration in the region is challenging - but more and better public transport is essential if we are serious about sustainable development and tackling climate change.

The current state of the region's road and rail networks directly impacts on businesses – whether based within or outside the West Midlands. An unreliable and congested network does not support or encourage economic activity. Long delays on motorways, over-crowding on trains or infrequent bus services do not support the economic, social or environmental well being of the region.

Future role of transport to support economic growth

Our transport networks and travel behaviour will change, through intervention or evolution – driven by demographic changes, changes in the economy and our life-style expectations.

Even though the West Midlands may not export the same volume of goods in the future, with a population more than 5 million there will always be the need to bring products into the region – access to the ports will continue to be important. If our main 'export' is 'knowledge' then we will need to maintain good links to the rest of the UK and international markets – the role of Birmingham International Airport is therefore crucial.

We need to monitor the region's transport needs to ensure that investment is targeted on the right projects to support the integration of existing and future Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies.

Overcoming the challenges

There is much to be done to deliver our longer term transport needs, and you will appreciate that it is difficult to condense them into a short list of bullet points, but listed below are what we would consider our longer term transport needs:

- A framework for an integrated, strategic national spatial and transport strategy – with commitment and consistency across the UK;
- Streamlined decision making – with regional structures that are fit for purpose;
- Agreed investment priorities – that are consistent (with national and regional strategies), integrated and holistic – there will always be 'winners and losers' but regional disparities need to be addressed;
- Better use of scarce resources – e.g. the UK has a limited supply of land, the planet has a limited supply of oil - we need mechanisms that accommodate the competing demands on society;
- Sustainability and healthier lifestyles at the top of everyone's agenda – with the objective of improving our quality of life; and
- Clarity on tackling Climate Change – again addressing the competing demands of society.

Tackling these problems requires more than capital investment. We need a step change in behaviour – people need to think more about their travel choices, business needs to think more about where to develop. It will take many years to realise these important matters, hence they should be considered in the context of this study.

With respect to travel behaviour, there is significant potential in the medium/long term, for changes in the West Midlands - depending on the outcomes of the region's Transport Innovation Fund studies. Changing development decisions is more challenging – the Spatial Strategy sets out what we need in the West Midlands, but Government needs to integrate the plethora of diverse policies and strategies that appear to be incompatible e.g. Air Transport White Paper/Climate Change or Urban Renaissance/Barker.

It is likely that many consultees will identify a similar set of transport characteristics, wherever they are, but as we are at the heart of the country there will be nation-wide benefits when the West Midlands has a transport system that is:

- Efficient;
- Reliable;
- Dependable; and
- Affordable

Identifying transport interventions is not what this study is about, but we can all agree that we need to make the best use of what we have got - airports, ports, motorways, railways or public transport networks.

Co-ordinating management and investment is challenging as the control and ownership of the transport network is diverse and needs to be improved, with structures that are fit for purpose. There needs to be greater integration between investment and business plans of e.g:

- Highways Agency;
- Local Transport Authorities;
- Network Rail;
- Midlands Expressway Limited;
- Birmingham International Airport Limited

We need better infrastructure and it needs to be managed – this requires greater levels of investment. While Central and Local Government is likely to be main ‘investor’ there is potential for other sources e.g. developers, the City or the traveling public.

Within the 30 year context of this study, it would be beneficial if the current regional funding allocations criteria evolved to include rail investment, and move away from the current formula based on population size. The West Midlands is at the centre of the national transport networks, people and vehicles pass through with little or no benefit to the region. To address this, the West Midlands should have greater levels of Government investment.

In our recent response to Regional Funding Allocation, we have demonstrated that this region can and is willing to work together, to identify problems and agree how to tackle them. However, the RFA is only a fraction of the ‘big picture’ with less than 7% of the total funding for transport in the region. In order to tackle these issues effectively, ‘partners’ must be able to engage in the broader spectrum of decision-making - not just transport - to deliver our Strategic Priorities:

- Urban renaissance;
- Rural renaissance;

- Modernising and diversifying the economy and creating a dynamic business base;
- Upskilling the region’s workforce; and
- Promoting the region’s competitiveness and assets in a national and global setting

Social and Environmental Impacts

Sustainable development is an integral aspect of national and regional policy. The Assembly has endorsed the West Midlands Regional Sustainable Development Framework and is determined to make sure that it influences the delivery of policy.

The major challenge is how we can avoid the damaging effects of climate change and still maintain/improve our standards of living. Social and environmental impacts can be tackled with technological fixes – but this takes time, investment and determination.

Sustainable development is an integral aspect of the RSS and sustainable growth requires sustainable transport. The Assembly has endorsed the Regional Sustainable Development Framework and is determined to make sure that it is reflected in all policy and investment decisions – taking account of the economy, society and the environment.

This area generates most tension between partners and more evidence is needed to convince some stakeholders that building new runways, motorways or by-passes is what is best for our society.

If you would like to discuss any aspects of this response further please contact me or Danny Lamb, Strategic Transport Advisor at the WMRA.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Phillips', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Roger Phillips
Chair, WMRA's Transport Partnership