

30 March 2012

RAILFUTURE RESPONSE TO DfT CONSULTATION PAPER: *DEVOLVING LOCAL MAJOR TRANSPORT SCHEMES*

Railfuture is pleased to submit this brief response to the consultation on Devolving Local Major Transport Schemes.

Railfuture is an independent national voluntary group organised in England as twelve regional branches plus two national branches covering Scotland and Wales. Railfuture's national Policy Committee has edited this response with input from several branches.

General Comment

We welcome the proposed devolution of decision making for major local transport schemes, but it is vital to ensure local decision-making does not damage the strategic national nature of the rail network.

Specific Comments

One reason why "there will only ever be a handful of big schemes" (para 1.16) is that the sum of money quoted is inadequate for all the local public transport enhancements requiring major capital funding. Most of the DfT funding approved in the recent announcement on 'Local Authority Majors' was for road schemes. We therefore recommend that this funding should be ring fenced for public transport. Only in this way can high quality connectivity, sustainability and carbon reduction be achieved. Without such a stipulation, there is a real danger that some local transport bodies or consortia will spend most of their allocation on unsustainable and environmentally damaging road schemes. With our recommended stipulation and, over the course of time, an increased budget, we would anticipate a sizeable number of track-based (heavy rail, light rail or tram) schemes being successfully developed.

Related to the above, we consider that DfT should make the assumption that all major cities should have track-based suburban and inner-urban transport systems. Where two cities are geographically close without significant rural areas between them, we consider that such rail systems should cover both cities. Good examples are much of Greater Manchester (which already has an expanding Metrolink tram network as well as commuter rail lines) and Leeds/Bradford – a revised 'Leeds' Supertram scheme could then be revived with routes including Leeds-Bradford via the Bradford Moor corridor. Perhaps sight of best practise from Europe would enhance this concept with for example the very heavily used stadtbahn linking Köln-Bonn as an excellent example.

Capital investment on through rail routes, and reopening of strategic routes, even though they will also have local benefits (e.g. Colne to Skipton, Lewes to Uckfield, Oxford – Bedford – Cambridge) should be funded directly by DfT and should not be considered as purely local transport schemes.

We are concerned at the proposal (para 1.7) that employed average earnings should be part of the funding criteria as this would favour more affluent areas and not contribute to regenerating and increasing employment opportunities for people living in poorer areas.

Democratic local accountability has to be a good thing; however, it may not produce decisions which are “genuinely right for an area” (para 1.29). There is a very real danger that this could result in ‘short-termism’, rather than longer-term strategic decisions. This of course would result in poor value for money and inappropriate decisions on matters, which justify a wider strategic view.

Notwithstanding that, we prefer Option 3 of the alternatives for eligible transport interventions (para 1.57).

In para 1.40, you present three options for LEP involvement. Option 3 has the LEP acting as the transport body itself. We consider this to be inappropriate as the vital sustainability and climate change considerations may not be given sufficient importance; this would not be such a problem, however, if the Government accepts our proposal to ring fence the funding to public transport. If not, we would propose option 2.

We agree that the LEP geography should be the starting point for allocating funding (para 1.65), and consider that the proposal for two or more LEP areas to join together to form a transport consortium is eminently sensible.

In city regions, the transport body should cover the city region area, which may or not be coincident with the LEP.

We consider that an independent public transport advocacy group should be represented on local transport bodies. Which group would depend on which group was strongest in the relevant geographical area. The group concerned may be the regional branch/affiliate of a national body (e.g. Railfuture; Campaign for Better Transport) or could be a local organisation, which covers the same area as the transport body.

In para 1.67, the options put forward for a formula for distributing the money does not give any importance to sustainability, climate or other environmental issues. We feel this is wrong and contrary to earlier statements in the consultation document.

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