**Is Ireland’s Transport Centre Stage?**

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**Transport Centre Stage**

This article evolved out of an address I gave to the CILT webinar, ‘*Are we on the road to sustainable freight transport*?’ on 16 April 2021.Their webinar saw the official launch of CILT’s Transport Policy Review entitled ‘*Where does Ireland stand on Climate Change for Transport and Logistics Sectors?*’ **[1].** I submit that Ireland’s transport is centre stage, given that there have been quite a number of new developments, policy initiatives and operational changes that, in recent times. As the CILT’s Policy Review points out – “*Ireland will need policies and measures that are radical, innovative, and forward-looking to reduce carbon emissions from the transport sector”.*Some of the expected changes will pose challenges; some will create opportunities and some will have unexpected consequences.

Let me develop this theme under four headings:-

1. Delivering Sustainable Freight Transport;
2. Responding to the National Investment Framework for Transport;
3. Availing of opportunities in the new National Development Plan, and
4. Achieving wider communications
5. **Delivering Sustainable Freight Transport**

Ireland may be on the right road to sustainable freight transport, but there is a long way to go. The CILT report recognises this, and the fact that there arehuge challenges ahead. But there are supports available that help the transport sector meet the challenges. The **Logistics and Supply Chain Skills Group,** of which the CILT is a member, is supporting the promotion of careers, skills development and sustainable employment. The Group promised in its Annual Report, published in March 2021, that it will enhance – *“...the perception of the sector’s diverse roles, entry routes and development opportunities, its ability to attract and retain talent, and hence its ability to service the demand for skills over the coming years*” **[2].**

And then on 7 April 2021, **Climate Ready**, a five-year national climate initiative was launched under the wing of Skillnet Ireland. The initiative is designed to equip businesses with the skills they need to respond to climate change **[3].** On the occasion of the launch of this initiative, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris T.D. said that - “*Irish businesses have seen significant upheaval over the past year due to COVID-19 and Brexit. Climate change is a reality for businesses too and it is essential we help businesses prepare for this radical change."*

In addition to improving skills, there is scope to improve road freight performance through better vehicle design and the provision of more efficient fuels. As regards the latter, the Department of Transport launched a new grant scheme in March 2021 to promote the decarbonisation of the heavy duty sector and to assist road transport companies to transition from fossil fuels **[4].** It is called the **Alternatively-Fuelled Heavy-Duty Vehicle Purchase Grant Scheme.**

As regards overall strategy for the freight sector, the Department of Transport has recently started to develop a ten-year strategy for the road haulage sector **[5].** This follows-up on a commitment given in the Programme for Government of June 2020 **[6].** The **Box** below explains why the Government is reviewing the strategy for the road haulage sector at this juncture.

**Box : Why is the Government reviewing the**

**Strategy for the Road Haulage Sector?**

* In line with the current Programme for Government, the Department of Transport is working towards developing a ten-year strategy for the road haulage sector;
* The Government’s aim is to develop a strategy that will focus on generating efficiencies and improving standards, and helping the sector move to a low-carbon future;
* The Department of Transport is launching a two-phase public consultation to seek views towards the development of a strategy for the haulage sector;
* As part of the first phase, views or submissions are being sought from all interested parties, including the road haulage sector and other industry stakeholders involved in the wider logistics and supply chain sectors, as well as from academia, further education, and the general public;
* The Department is seeking views on what measures are needed to deliver on these objectives, in particular decarbonising the haulage sector, which represents a significant challenge but which is required to make commercial road transport operations more efficient and sustainable, and
* Views should be submitted by email to haulagestrategy@transport.gov.ie or by post to Road Transport Freight Policy Division, Department of Transport, Leeson Lane, Dublin, D02 TR60, before close of business on Friday, 2nd July 2021.

**Source**: Government Press release, 8 April 2021

<https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/0dfc7-public-consultation-on-ten-year-strategy-for-the-haulage-sector/>

1. **Responding to the National Investment Framework for Transport**

On 31 March 2021, the Department of Transport launched a public consultation on the draft National Investment Framework for Transport in Ireland **[7].** This is a new high-level strategic framework for prioritising future investment in the land transport network. To assist the consultation process, a dozen background papers have been published. They cover topics such as climate change, technology, interurban connectivity, and the maintenance of investment projects.

The draft sends a strong signal that the era of mega road transport projects is over. Specifically, it states that the – “...*Government is committed to radically reducing Ireland’s greenhouse gas emissions over the next decade. This framework prioritises investment in decarbonisation and the most environmentally sustainable transport modes* “.It is clear that, at this drafting stage, the framework’s modal hierarchy prioritises active travel, followed by public transport and finally private vehicles. Specifically the draft framework states that - “*Maintaining the existing transport network will be given first priority, followed by maximising the value of the network through optimising its use. Infrastructural investments will only be considered after these two categories have been assessed as inappropriate for the identified problem, with upgrades to existing infrastructure to be considered before new infrastructure”*.

The public consultation process now underway will give stakeholders, interested parties and the general public the opportunity to reflect on the analysis presented in the background papers and to contribute to the development of the national framework. The consultation process will conclude on 28 May 2021.

1. **Availing of opportunities in the new National Development Plan**

On 4 April 2012, Easter Sunday, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform published an overview of what is expected in the revised National Development Plan **[8].** The new Plan will reassess investment plans and update project costings. It will also address policy priorities from the current Programme for Government, tackle post-Brexit developments and react to the ongoing impacts of Covid-19.

Part of the preparation for the revision of the plan included a consultative process. This allowed relevant stakeholders an opportunity to participate in shaping the revised investment plan. In fact nearly 600 submissions were received. I also took the opportunity to make a submission.

Departments were also asked to make their own submissions. In particular they were asked to analyse whether their investment priorities are aligned with Ireland’s climate and environmental objectives. For its part, the Department of Transport acknowledged the scale of the challenges it must face. Specifically, it stated that the new plan’s – “...c*ommitments will require intensification of action, introduction of new measures and likely demand constraint”.*

# The Department in its statement went on to highlight the promotion of ‘active travel’, i.e. walking and cycling. It promised in the future to promote – “...*well-developed walking and cycling networks enabling active travel as the mode of choice for localised travel and supporting the sustainable development of local communities*”. The increased focus on ‘active travel’ will deflect emphasis away from the development of mega road projects. Last May, the CILT published my article “Greening of Ireland’s Transport Investment Projects”, which discussed this emerging trend [9].

The focus on large-scale road development will decrease even further with new investment in rail. In this regard, the Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan T.D., and the Minister for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland, Nichola Mallon MLA, announced on 7 April 2021 the launch of an all-island Strategic Rail Review. This Review will consider how the rail network on the island of Ireland can improve sustainable connectivity between the major cities, enhance regional accessibility and support balanced regional development. In addition, the Review will consider the feasibility of higher speeds on the network and whether there is a potential to increase use of the network for freight **[10].**

1. **Achieving Wider Communications**

Turning to wider communications, the CILT Transport Policy Review outlined a worthy aspiration. It states that – “*Through dissemination of this study, we hope to raise the awareness and readiness towards the low-carbon transition to CILT members and the wider public audience, stakeholders, and the government*”. And there is more that can be done. For example, the CILT can play an even bigger role in the work that the International Transport Forum is doing to develop and communicate the Transport Climate Action Directory **[11].** This Directory is part of the Decarbonising Transport Initiative, a partnership of more than 70 governments, organisations, institutions, foundations and companies. The Directory is an online database of transport CO2 reduction policy measures. It contains more than 60 different mitigation measures along with the evidence-base needed to assess their effectiveness. It helps decision makers to translate their decarbonisation ambitions into actions and achieve their climate objectives. Clearly, the CILT has scope to share with, and to benefit from, the work of the International Transport Forum.

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