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RE: Regional Transportation Strategy Review

1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Community Relations Council (CRC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the above consultation.
- 1.2. CRC's aim is to lead and support change in Northern Ireland towards reconciliation, tolerance and mutual trust and promote sharing over separation. We work by promoting constructive and relevant dialogue, by actively supporting those taking real risks for relationship building, by acting as a practical bridge between groups in society and between the public, private, voluntary and community sectors and by promoting wider learning through developing better practice. Our overall aim is to lead and support change towards a peaceful, inclusive, prosperous, stable and fair society founded on the achievement of reconciliation, equality, co-operation, respect, mutual trust and good relations.
- 1.3. CRC believes that all government policies should be embedded with the concept of building strong cohesive and sustainable communities. This approach will require the involvement of all government departments and agencies working together to deliver particular strategies and ensure that suitable and effective monitoring and evaluation measures are in place to map progress.

2. Context

- 2.1. CRC has a key interest in transportation, in particular its contribution to building a shared and better future as set out in the Programme for Government (PfG). Transportation policy can play a huge role in addressing exclusion and promoting social cohesion. This current review

of DRD's Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS), like many other areas of public policy, should explore how it can influence and help shape the vision of reconciliation and the transformation of our society. This is particularly important given that for many years public policy was framed around the containment of communities as a tool of conflict management leading to a pattern of separation, duplication and social distance.

- 2.2. CRC is primarily interested in the area of public transportation and how it can contribute to inter and intra-community contact and engagement. As well as enabling interaction, transportation plays a huge role in increasing mobility across cities, towns and villages which can assist in increasing social cohesion, improving life choices and creating sustainable communities. Our comments therefore will focus on this particular aspect of the strategy.

3. General Comments

- 3.1. The Review Strategy fails to acknowledge sectarianism and segregation as a barrier to accessing travel options and destinations. Furthermore it is disappointing that there is little or no recognition of the role of transport in terms of connecting communities that are segregated.
- 3.2. Public transportation is crucial in terms of increasing choice for disadvantaged areas and individuals. The RTS highlights that 26% of households here do not own a car and this figure rises to over 50% in some urban areas. Poor transport is a contributory factor to social exclusion by restricting activities than enhance people's life chances. Therefore public transport is central to social inclusion and providing opportunities for those on low incomes.
- 3.3. It is important to recognise how a good, reliable transport system can provide increased choice . both for the resident and for potential investors and developers. Road, rail and the wider transport network are central for the regeneration of deprived and economically inactive communities.
- 3.4. Transport plays a key role in encouraging choice for education, employment, living, leisure and public spaces. Recent research commissioned by Belfast City Council in relation to conflict transformation reported that public transport can play a major role in helping to change perceptions, enlarge travel horizons, and shape new travel and social patterns in Belfast¹. Public spaces increase informal social contact and therefore help create and sustain social capital² in socially excluded communities².
- 3.5. Labour Mobility. Reduced access to transport can negatively impact on economic activity. It can limit employment opportunities in terms of deciding not to apply for a job because of transport problems.
- 3.6. In relation to the above comments CRC is concerned that under the current investment strategy the ration of spend has moved to

¹ Improving Connectivity and Mobility in Belfast. 2008.

² Transport Investment and Social Cohesion. Table 3.2.

approximately 80:20 for roads and public transport respectively. This is even more worrying given the recent PWC report that states that on a per capita basis, England, Scotland, Wales and the republic of Ireland have been investing at least twice as much as Northern Ireland in public transport. The gap is now bigger than ever³.

4. The Challenges

- 4.1. Budget constraints will impact on the level of transportation development and investment. New sources of income are required in order to ensure appropriate resources are committed.
- 4.2. Changing mindsets will require long term action. In a local study of barriers to bus use, Wixey et al., (2005) found that respondents did not necessarily use their nearest bus stop, but might use another bus stop if it has better shelter/seating facilities, wider choice of services and is located in a safer and better lit area. In terms of safety, a local study in Middlesbrough found that general improvements in safety perceptions (as a result of various local interventions) did not immediately lead to increased bus use, especially when people still had negative views of service reliability and quality (Transport Studies Group, 2004)⁴. This is particularly relevant in the context of Northern Ireland where particular bus stops are viewed as belonging to the other community, therefore safety mechanisms such as lighting and design become the catalyst for future use in a growing modern society.
- 4.3. The solution to social exclusion is not solely transport based but it does play a role and the Review must examine how it can contribute to inclusive and safe communities.
- 4.4. Whilst not a good relations issue, environmental consequences of increased use of cars, congestion will seriously affect Northern Ireland's environmental obligations.

5. Meeting the challenges

- 5.1. A recent PWC report highlighted the difficulties in using Private Finance Initiatives (PFI) and Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in terms of accounting regulations and the reduced availability of private finance. A number of suggestions were put forward, one of which CRC has advocated for in the past and that is the contribution from private developers. CRC supports investment from developers in terms of promoting and maintaining shared spaces, and we would support a similar approach for the development and maintenance of travel routes and transportation in deprived and disadvantaged areas. This contribution would help bring much need jobs and facilities into areas that require regeneration and by contributing to the development of access routes this will increase usage of these services and would greatly assist inclusion and cohesion.

³ Bridging the Gap, transforming public transport in Northern Ireland. 2009. Page 2.

⁴ Evidence base review on mobility. DfT. 2009. Page 6

- 5.2. The onset of the Review of Public Administration and the transferral of specific powers to local government offer an opportunity for the development of local plans that will address ongoing issues of inter and intra-community division which continue to shape the structure of life here. These plans will need to be developed in line with transportation planning and therefore it is essential that interdepartmental engagement takes place to ensure a strategic vision can be planned for. This dialogue and planning should involve local planners, developers, and those responsible for transportation planning. It will offer the opportunity to consider new and existing policies, strategies and corporate plans through a good relations lens . including the good relations impact and opportunities to promote good relations in line with Section 75.

6. Practical measures:

- 6.1. Connect services across communities.
- 6.2. Prioritising improving bus services in deprived areas.
- 6.3. Better timetabling that takes the needs of different travellers into consideration i.e. young people, shift workers and those travelling through interface corridors. Frequent buses for night time travellers may encourage more opportunities to access public and shared spaces if the traveller doesn't have to wait for long periods between buses. Safety is crucial, particularly for individuals who access transport in an area that they wouldn't traditionally feel safe.
- 6.4. Reduced fares, concessions for disadvantaged and low income facilities and individuals and especially young people, could encourage travel which in turn could enable access to training and increase choice for employment, housing, education and services.
- 6.5. Cross-ticketing which allow travellers to change between bus and rail on the same ticket, thereby allowing more freedom in terms of planning a journey.

7. Equality Issues

- 7.1. As per the Equality Commission Northern Ireland (ECNI) Guidance for Implementing Section 75 of the NI Act 1998, mainstreaming requires that equality is central to the whole range of public policy decision making process - from the initial planning and development stages through to the implementation, monitoring and review of the development (in this instance the Regional Transportation Strategy Review). We believe that this requirement should be part of every stage of the policy development process. CRC asks for confirmation that the EQIA process will be mainstreamed into the ongoing Review. It is our main aim to influence and develop policies and actions that can tackle inequalities and promote good relations.
- 7.2. As a constructive way forward CRC would like the department and the review team to take the following issues into account when conducting the EQIA:

- The impact of reduced investment in public transportation on lone parents and older people given they are less likely to have private transport and therefore are more dependent on public transportation.
- The heavy dependency on public transportation by low income and deprived areas.
- Chill factors such as the geographic location of public transportation access points, particularly at different times during the day.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1. CRC welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this current transportation review and is hopeful the department will take our comments as constructive. It is our aim to influence the development of public policy in relation to a society that has moved away from conflict to one that is undergoing conflict transformation. Communities are leading this debate but public policy and resources need to contribute also. Too often good relations are deemed to be the responsibility of only one department . it is our view that all departments have a role to play. It is primarily a case of acknowledging the issue and taking new and innovative approaches.