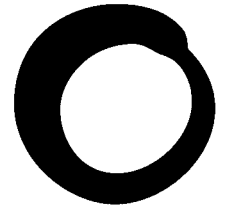


Briefing



**Friends of
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Cymru**

Transport in 21st century Wales

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Friends of the Earth Limited Registered in London No 1012357

Registered office 26-28 Underwood Street London N1 7JQ

Printed on paper made from 100% post-consumer waste

June 1999

Transport in 21st century Wales

The coming of the National Assembly for Wales, with its world-leading remit for promoting Sustainable Development, together with a major development opportunity afforded by European Union Objective One aid, has brought Welsh transport policy firmly into the spotlight. The question is how can the Assembly balance the traditional call for faster road access, and increasing traffic, with the future need to achieve integrated and sustainable transport activity in Wales ?

A policy of major roadbuilding has transformed parts of Wales over the last few decades. Fast East-West access has resulted from the construction of A55 Expressway along the North Wales coast, and along the M4 corridor in South Wales. Further major roadbuilding, throughout Wales, is being advocated by many in the belief that this would reduce peripherality, attract inward investment, and stimulate remoter local economies.

The total cost of the proposed new roads is enormous and is, in Friends of the Earth Cymru's view, unaffordable in both economic and environmental terms. Schemes, either programmed or conditionally accepted, amount to about £1,200 million for trunk roads, £475 million for Local Authority schemes, and at least £60 million* would be required to reduce north-south journey times along the A470 by about 30 minutes. Local Authorities also have an additional roads wish-list of £400 million. Yet, the available budget for any new transport investment, most of which has historically been spent on new road construction, is currently £55 million per annum. It would have been £70m, except that about £15m pa is now committed for 30 years to the A55 Anglesey Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract repayments. Furthermore, there is an argument for increasing the road maintenance spend. (Note: all above costs are Welsh Office figures, except*)

At the same time, pressure is mounting for a large slice of this budget to be switched from roadbuilding to fund integrated transport 'packages' to reduce traffic and car dependency. Indeed, the Welsh Office has issued useful guidance on Local Transport Plans to achieve traffic reduction. Funding such plans would bring benefits in terms of reducing greenhouse gases, congestion and social exclusion, and improvements in air quality, health, safety and fitness.

There is a call to use Objective One funding for road construction in western Wales. However, the EU's policy and priority is for rail and port access infrastructure. Indeed, even if significant funding for road construction were possible, it would compete with other aid programmes. Furthermore, the current growth in road congestion at the eastern borders of the A55 and M4, areas not covered by Objective One aid, may be the Assembly's priority.

In any event, attempting to raise the GDP of western Wales by roadbuilding is an economic gamble with definite environmental consequences. According to the Government's own road transport experts, faster road access to 'peripheral economies' may well have little net economic effect, and can cause damage. One reason is that bigger, more centralised companies, can out compete the smaller indigenous businesses, that typify western Wales, and some companies simply relocate eastwards to reduce logistics costs. Indeed, the £700m A55 Expressway was constructed through the counties of Gwynedd, Conwy and Denbigshire about a decade ago. Yet, their continuing low GDP's have actually qualified them for Objective One aid. It is claimed that Conwy has not attracted one inward investment job in the last 7 years, and the St Asaph Business Park remains fairly empty, while traffic has nearly quadrupled in the last 15 years. Aid money could be better spent.

Major roadbuilding would induce more traffic, and create more environmental problems. The preferred routes for inland roads often follow sensitive river corridor habitats, and proposed road construction is estimated to affect up to 20 ecologically important sites including the Gwent Levels. Aggregate extraction could further scar the Welsh landscape, and traffic emissions are a significant cause of acid rain on the sensitive upland areas. Valued wildlife species such as the barn owl, badger and otter, would also be further compromised.

Friends of the Earth Cymru say that rather than building major new roads for faster access, roads policy should focus on resolving the 200 or so listed accident blackspots, localised improvements, access to development sites, and the building of small bypasses for any communities which remain severely blighted after the implementation of concerted traffic reduction measures.

Much more investment in public transport, Safe Routes to Schools, green commuter schemes, cycling, and walking, together with teleworking and information technology is needed. This would improve choice for those with cars, and the car-less 18% of rural households. In rural areas many journeys can only be sensibly made by car. Yet, even in Wales, 65% of car journeys are under 5 miles.

The age-old issue of north-south links can be addressed by funding track speed improvements to compliment the express rail service which is planned to start this year. For about £20m, Bangor-Cardiff journey times, via Wrexham, could be cut to 3 hours 15 minutes. In comparison, Bangor-Cardiff by road takes about 4 hours 15 minutes at legal speeds. Even air services would have timing, and cost, limitations.

Wales's economic and environmental performance now depends on the people of Wales calling on the National Assembly to tackle the rising tide of traffic and car dependency, by focussing transport budgets on integrated transport policies. Such policies would transport Wales to a sustainable future.