



Advancing the low carbon transition in Irish transport

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“Transition of Irish transport: issues, approaches and options”

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Introduction

Governance institutions are key to enabling decarbonisation across economy and society. The international literature on governance of low-carbon transition points to the importance of both bottom-up innovation and experimentation and top-down direction from central government in creating change. This paper draws on our report, *Advancing the Low Carbon Transition in Irish Transport*, commissioned by the National Economic and Social Council and published in May 2019 (Devaney and Torney 2019).

Our research identifies three main themes that emerged from interviews with key stakeholders. The first concerns **how the transport system operates**, where we highlight complexities inherent in the sector. Our second key theme concerns the **drivers of the transport system**. We show how contestation between institutional priorities has shaped the development of a carbon-intensive transport system to date. Our third key theme identifies **who shapes transport outcomes**. We paint a picture of a fragmented governance landscape, and highlight the impact of fragmentation as reported by stakeholders, as well as institutional opportunities for enhanced co-ordination. On the basis of this diagnosis, we identify a number of recommendations that build on these three key themes.

Acknowledging Complexities in the Sector

Our first key research theme concerns **how the transport system operates**. These include internal tensions between public and private, rural and urban, and special interests versus the public interest. Transport interacts in complex ways with broader policy objectives, sectors and systems. Most prominently, transport is intimately connected with our systems of spatial planning, but through, for example, decisions on locating hospitals and schools, transport is also connected to the health and education sectors. In advancing the low-carbon transition, these complexities need to be accounted for in three key ways:

- **Collaborative, adaptive and reflexive policymaking** will be critical to developing a low-carbon transport system. This will require input from a diverse range of public, private and civil society actors. While there have been some positive attempts to bring such stakeholders together in transport, more is required to develop common agendas, complementary ambition and concerted action. Stakeholder engagement is essential to enhance transparency and democracy in decision-making processes, ensure greater credibility, legitimacy, trust and uptake of decisions and ultimately generate better outcomes (Fiorino, 1990).

- **Bottom-up approaches to low-carbon transport** are needed to take account of geographical variations, differing technical possibilities and the rural-urban divide in Ireland. These complexities mean different transport solutions in different geographical areas and sub-sectors (e.g. passenger compared to freight). For example, rural towns and villages rely more heavily on buses as a public transport option, while EVs might hold more promise to decarbonise isolated rural households. Understanding, developing and tailoring transport solutions to local contexts will thus be crucial.
- **Understanding transport as a social practice** is essential to promote positive behaviour change across freight and passenger transport categories. This takes the practice of travel as the primary unit of intervention (rather than the individual) and considers the socio-cultural, technical and governance forces that shape these (Shove, 2003; Warde, 2005). Designing and implementing appropriate combinations of these interventions will be critical to advancing low-carbon transition.

Challenging Institutional Priorities

Our second key theme concerns the drivers of the transport system. Low-carbon transition has yet to be embedded in these priorities, and there is persisting disagreement over what low-carbon transition might entail. To align institutional priorities with a low-carbon ambition:

- **Transport policy-making should align with international sustainable mobility thinking** that promotes an ‘Avoid, Shift, Improve’ (ASI) framework for both passenger and freight transport. This could more clearly emphasise a hierarchy that focuses on: reducing journeys in the first place (demand management); achieving modal shift (from private car to active and public transport modes and road- and aviation-based freight to rail, maritime and ‘last-mile delivery’ options), and improving mode efficiencies (including a move away from the internal combustion engine, electrifying the system and promoting the sharing economy).
- **High-level direction from the highest levels of central government** is critical to steer investors, consumers and citizens towards a low-carbon future. This includes leadership from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS) to guide the plethora of transport institutions that operate under its remit. It must be underpinned by a whole-of-government approach and enhanced policy co-ordination that prioritises climate action and low-carbon living. Mandated responsibilities for climate action and commitment across government could be considered, such as re-establishing the position of Minister of State for Sustainable Transport.
- **The mandates of transport governance actors should align with low-carbon transition**, from state agencies to local authorities. These could be revised to include a statutory commitment to develop and prioritise low-carbon transport. Current institutional mandates in the sector do not include a strong commitment to low-carbon transition and, for the most part, do not dominate everyday thinking, decision-making and actions.
- **Leadership by example in the public sector** is important to promote low-carbon options and showcase commitment to more sustainable practices. This could include not just central government but also, for example, local authorities switching fleets to electrified alternatives. The civil service could also give priority in hiring and promotion to environmental expertise across physical and social sciences and those who have made carbon savings through their work. Civil service incentives could also be better aligned with a low-carbon mission, including, for example, the car mileage regime that currently prioritises larger engine sizes and discourages public and active transport use.

Interrogating the Institutional Landscape

Our third key research theme identified who shapes transport outcomes. The system of transport decision-making is deeply fragmented. Authority is spread among multiple institutions whose mandates often have not kept pace with the urgency of the climate crisis. Building on this analysis, we suggest below a number of institutional mechanisms that could be pursued in order to overcome or ameliorate this institutional fragmentation.

- **Taskforces:** The LEV Taskforce provided a structured forum to bring together the key actors to unblock policy action for EV incentivisation. Consideration could be given to replicating this model for other sectoral challenges. Such taskforces could combine insights from public, private, academic and civil society organisations, with the aim of providing a robust and balanced evidence base for transport policy-making.
- **Hubs and public-private partnerships:** The creation of multi-modal transport hubs that effectively connect public, private and active transport modes holds promise in the Irish passenger transport context. This includes enhanced park and ride facilities at the edge of cities to alleviate issues with sprawling settlement patterns and curb fossil-fuelled private car use through prioritising pedestrian greenways, bicycle storage facilities, car-pooling initiatives, EV charging points, and high-frequency bus, rail and Luas lines. Similar distribution hubs could be established to decarbonise freight, acknowledging the road dependency of many of our port connections currently, and to increase the use of rail and electric freight transport options. Public-private partnerships may be an appropriate business model for progressing such low-carbon hubs to leverage funding and expertise from both professional spheres.
- **Forums for peer learning:** Villages, towns and cities across Ireland need further opportunities to learn from each other in order to scale up innovative low-carbon transport solutions. There are a variety of settlement sizes that could learn from one another's experimental approaches, while recognising important differences across the transport landscape. This would introduce a much-needed level of reflexivity into the system and allow low-carbon transport innovations (technological, social and economic) to be tested, compared and revised in local conditions.
- **Deliberative forums for stakeholder and citizen participation:** Structured inclusion of private and civil society actors can enhance transparency and moderate the impact of lobbying by special interests. Building on the model of the Citizens' Assembly, further engagement of the public in low-carbon transport planning is also required to enhance buy-in and ensure locally relevant decisions and success. Public information offices could be established, with structured citizen assembly processes and town-hall-style meetings.
- **Research infrastructure for transport policy-making:** There is a need for more evidence-based policymaking to advance the low-carbon transition in Irish transport. This requires more diverse, interdisciplinary and inclusive transport research, as well as channels of communication and absorptive capacity in the policy-making system, including the potential for 'learning' or intermediary institutions for enhanced knowledge exchange between academia and government. Increased support for social and behavioural sciences to understand why passengers and freight companies travel as they do should be combined with pioneering insights from engineering fields for enhanced technology adoption. Participatory backcasting research that adopts a social-practice orientation could help to create implementable transition frameworks for change.

References

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