

Strengthening local democracy

Response from Campaign for Better Transport

Summary

- local councils should be able to scrutinise all those delivering transport services
- central government should support projects and organisations that help the capacity of local interest groups to engage in scrutiny processes
- local councils need good data to inform scrutiny processes
- there is a need for a better indicator on transport and CO2
- government policy could do more to enable local authorities to reduce CO2 from transport
- sub-regional (and regional) bodies should act in a transparent manner and their impact on local areas should be subject to scrutiny
- city-regional leadership is key to improving transport but needs revenue raising powers and integration of transport, highways and planning responsibilities

Introduction

Campaign for Better Transport supports the devolution of powers to local authority and other sub-national bodies (for instance integrated transport authorities) who may be better placed to respond to local problems than a centrally based approach.

Local councils should be able to coordinate the delivery of local services and, as the democratic representative of the local community, scrutinise those that provide those services. However, for local authorities and other bodies to be able to take action, they must have the capability to do so, whether in terms of powers to act (including to hold other deliverers of public services to account), ability to raise finance or the skills to identify problems and enact solutions.

The Strengthening Local Democracy consultation is a welcome opportunity to address this.

Response

Chapter One – Local government at the centre of decision making

Questions 1 and 3

Campaign for Better Transport supports the enhancement of scrutiny powers by local councils and the extension of those powers in relation to local area agreement partners to cover the range of their activities, and not just those related to specific targets. This would enable scrutiny to respond to changing priorities or, for instance, a deterioration of services outside LAA indicators.

We support the extension of scrutiny powers to include those providing public transport and transport infrastructure. Given the complex nature of transport provision in England, local councils should be able to scrutinise the local operations of

- integrated transport authorities (ITAs) / passenger transport executives (PTEs)
- bus providers (of both commercial and subsidised services)
- Network Rail
- train operating companies (and potentially rolling stock leasing companies)
- Highways Agency

Local councils should also be able to scrutinise the activities of regional and sub-regional bodies (including the ITAs mentioned above). Although the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill will result in changes in regional governance, the impact on local areas of regional development agencies and leaders boards should be able to be scrutinised by local councils. In particular, local councils should be able to scrutinise regional bodies' role in decisions on transport (such as with the regional funding advice process and current work on regional studies under the Department for Transport's DaSTS approach).

Question 4

Scrutiny committees should be able to require attendance by officers or board members of external organisations (including private transport providers) subject to a test of reasonableness and proportionality.

Questions 5 and 6

Local scrutiny committees should be able to draw on information and data to enable them to identify issues for investigation and to act on those. Although the national indicators under the LAA process are in general useful, they are not necessarily useful in the specific transport context. For instance, in terms of providing information on the impact of local authority actions in cutting CO₂ from transport (a key goal of central government policy as set out under DaSTS), NI 186 is not particularly helpful.

Information about public transport performance can also be difficult to obtain, with, for instance, information about bus performance and benchmarking between authorities both patchy and not publicly available. VOSA's role in monitoring bus performance is also poorly resourced and, in metropolitan areas at least, that role should be taken on by ITAs. On the plus side, the wider remit for Passenger Focus should mean that they can play a stronger role in providing information for local council's scrutiny processes.

Given the sometimes technical nature of transport and the way that it is often a cross-cutting issue, consideration should be given as to how to develop councillors' capability on transport issues so that they can scrutinise transport. DfT and CLG should consider a programme to support this, and the role of councillors in developing the next round of local transport plans (LTP3). Councils should be encouraged to look at the wider impacts of transport on other areas of council responsibility, and how decisions on other services impact on transport.

Question 7

The role of local communities in scrutiny should be stronger, and the potential of citizens acting as expert advisers to committees would be a sensible way to do this. In addition, local councils should recognise the role of local interest groups in this process, including those that may be local groups of national third sector organisations. Government departments should consider how they can support the capacity of local interest groups to contribute to scrutiny, for instance through working with third sector strategic partners they fund. In terms of transport, the Department for Transport could do more to recognise the role of local groups in local

transport policy development and in providing solutions. Government should promote good practice in involving third sector organisations in consultation and scrutiny on transport policy and delivery.

Chapter two – Strong local government operating in the local interest

Question 8

As mentioned above, the current indicators for transport (particularly in relation to cutting CO2 emissions from transport) are not adequate. Transport also tends to be a cross-cutting theme (for instance in comprehensive area assessment) and fewer targets could mean that transport is not dealt with adequately in those targets chosen, despite its impact on vital areas of policy such as climate change, economic development, health, community identification and social capital and tackling social exclusion. If there are to be fewer targets, there should be specific indicators (from which local authorities could choose a target) on cutting CO2 from transport and the inclusion of perception indicators on transport (including the safety of walking and cycling) either as part of the Place Survey or in a separate survey. Failure to perform on these indicators should be picked up in the Comprehensive Area Assessment.

Chapter three – local authorities tackling climate change

Question 14

Although the take-up by local authorities of NI186 on reducing per capita CO2 emissions has been good, NI186 needs to be reviewed so that it can be better used as a target for reducing emissions, particularly from transport.

Questions 15 and 16

Local authorities (with integrated transport authorities and other sub-regional bodies) have a major role to play in terms of reducing CO2 emissions from transport. Local authorities (with ITAs) could play a much stronger role in enabling a shift from transport modes with high CO2 emissions (primarily cars and other motor vehicles) to those with low CO2 emissions (including walking, cycling and public transport). Local authorities capability to do this is constrained by limited ability to finance transport improvements themselves, a lack of skills in taking forward sustainable transport and the “smarter choices” agenda, and limited powers to coordinate the range of transport providers (though powers in the Local Transport Act will help).

If localism is to successfully lead to local authorities and sub-regional bodies being able to take action, central government needs to support their capability in these three areas.

National government can also provide central coordination and can unblock barriers to improving low carbon transport. Examples can include:

- enabling a national transport smartcard and ensuring that it covers all operators and linked to simple pricing mechanisms
- national planning policies that link spatial and transport planning to reduce the need to travel, and enable local planning authorities to support more sustainable development (for instance through higher density development, development of brownfield sites rather than greenfield, giving priority to pedestrians, cyclists and public transport over private transport and maximum parking standards)
- provide a framework for local authorities to innovate in transport policy (for instance in variations to standard traffic signage and regulations to encourage other modes)
- ensuring that national bodies such as the Highways Agency or Network Rail are responsive to local initiatives

Chapter Four – sub-regional working

Questions 17,18,19,20

There are concerns about the accountability and openness of new regional and sub-regional partnerships and bodies who may be making significant decisions on transport behind closed doors. Government should:

- ensure that their activities are subject to scrutiny, and have to provide information
- act in a transparent manner with public meetings and the provision of papers made public
- have a duty to respond to petitions

Questions 22 and 23

Outside London, responsibility for local transport policy and provision in England is confusing and prevents the delivery of good transport options, as the Car Dependency Scorecard produced by Campaign for Better Transport shows.¹ The discussion of “city-region leaders”, authorities and mayors (similar to the “metro mayors” proposed by the Centre for Cities) is welcome and should be an opportunity to agree the best model for delivering sustainable transport in the cities outside London.

Whichever model is chosen, Government should also consider the integration of transport, planning and highways powers, as happens in London, to enable better coordination of bus and other public transport services, the provision of bus priority measures and promotion of walking, cycling and smarter choices measures.

City-region authorities should also have the ability to raise finance themselves for transport improvements. Government should consider the potential for accelerated development zones, taxes based on land value rating, the community infrastructure levy and business rate supplements along the lines of the French *versement transport* (transport tax).

In the short-term, there are also additional powers or funding that could be given to ITAs/PTEs. These include:

- active support for ITAs'/PTEs' implementation of quality contracts through a dedicated funding stream
- giving ITAs/PTEs a more central role in the development and management of local rail networks, including responsibility for some lines and stations where the ITA/PTE wants to do so and where this would deliver better and more integrated services for passengers
- devolution of bus service operators grant and national concessionary travel scheme funding to ITAs/PTEs
- grant making powers

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Campaign for Better Transport is the leading transport NGO. Our compelling arguments and ideas have won us the support of national decision-makers and local activists, enabling us to secure transport policies and programmes that improve people's lives and reduce environmental impact.

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¹ The Car Dependency Scorecard - A look at car dependency and what is being done around the country to reduce it. <http://bettertransport.org.uk/system/files/car-dependency-scorecard-Sep09.pdf>