
Report to the Minister for Transport

from the

**Chairman of the Expert Working Group on the
Western Rail Corridor
(WRC)**

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May 2005

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Foreword

The Expert Working Group on the Western Rail Corridor (WRC) was established by the then Minister for Transport, Mr Seamus Brennan TD in June 2004 to examine the proposal to re-open the WRC. The terms of reference and composition of the Group can be found in Appendices 1 and 2 of this report.

I was very privileged to be asked by the Minister to Chair the group and I am very happy to say that the Group has now concluded its deliberations.

The Group held a total of four plenary meetings in Galway, Mayo, Sligo and Roscommon over the last year or so. Early on in the process we set up a number of sub-groups to examine particular aspects of the proposal. Numerous sub-group meetings were held and these generated a great many reports and analyses. I am grateful to all my colleagues on the Group and on the individual sub-groups for their contributions, all of which were taken into account when I was formulating my recommendations.

I was also facilitated by specific analytical work carried out by Iarnród Éireann and West on Track and other individual Group Members in the course of this process which greatly helped in clarifying my conclusions on the subject.

In drawing up my Report I had the option of producing a weighty tome that would have included all these reports and analyses or producing a short, concise, readable document that went straight to the heart of the matter. In the interests of clarity I opted for the latter and accordingly this is deliberately a very short report.

While this is my Report to the Minister for Transport, in my capacity as Chairman of the Group, it is the outcome of a lengthy process, which involved many people. I can assure all of them that the conclusions I reached were based on their very valuable contributions for which I thank each and every one.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 When the Working Group was set up it was envisaged that it would not commission any studies or analyses on the viability or otherwise of the WRC from outside sources. My understanding was that the primary purpose in establishing the Group was to afford the proponents of the WRC the opportunity to make the case for the restoration of the line. In doing this they could draw on whatever analysis that had been carried out in relation to the viability of the line and advance any other relevant arguments in support of the case.
- 1.2 Some analytical work on the WRC was available which had been carried out prior to the formation of the Group. In particular I am referring to the "*Strategic Rail Review*" (carried out by BoozAllenHamilton for the Department of Transport) and "*Western Rail Corridor, Project Costings and Financial Projections*" (carried out by West on Track). Both these documents were referred to at length in the course of the meetings of the Group.
- 1.3 However, because of the absence of agreed data on capital costs estimates for restoring the line and in the absence of any reliable data on the potential for rail demand, Iarnród Éireann (IE) agreed to commission studies on both these subjects. This work was carried out by *FaberMaunsell* and the full data from the study was available for the Athlone meeting of the Group. These estimates were generally in line with the costings in the Strategic Rail Review and I will use this new data when I come to my recommendations below.
- 1.4 The Goodbody report on "*Transport and Regional Development*" commissioned for the National Spatial Strategy in the year 2000 concluded that: "*a strengthened inter-regional rail service network has a role to play in regional development*"

The only indication that we have in relation to likely travel demand on the WRC are the numbers travelling on the newly refurbished Ennis to Limerick line since the service offering on it was greatly enhanced in December 2003. These exceeded all expectations, with some 130,000 people travelling in the first twelve months of operation, of whom some 80,000 continued on to Dublin on the Limerick-Dublin service.

Travel demand grows with the provision of service. As stated in the "*Strategic Rail Review*": "It is clear that additional rail capacity, when provided, has been more than matched by demand". The travel demand figure for the WRC will only be absolutely established once the route is operational.

- 1.5 Balanced regional development and the front-loading of infrastructure are critical to the development of the whole region. Benefits will include diverting commuters and long-distance travellers from cars to trains and buses; diverting heavy freight from road to rail; providing integrated travel centres; reducing congestion on roads and costly road upgrades and maintenance.

2. General Recommendation

Having considered all the arguments made in favour of the restoration of the WRC over the last ten months, my general conclusion is that a strong case can be made for the restoration of the line. However, I believe that a number of considerations should be taken into account.

The WRC has the possibility of being restored as a complete project, or on a phased basis. I will outline later in the Report the advantages of a phased introduction. In our deliberations we have not examined the effects of the phased introduction and how that might infringe on the viability of different parts of the line.

The line can easily be divided into four distinct sections (see "3. Specific Recommendations" below). It is quite clear that some of these sections are more viable than others and economic and commercial logic would dictate that the process of line restoration should begin by restoring what is likely to be the most viable section first. This is without prejudice to any other considerations that might have to be taken into account.

A very strong case has been made by some members of the Group regarding the potential for rail freight in the West. It has been put to me that this unmet rail freight demand could be substantial, that there is a positive disposition towards the use of rail by manufacturers and distributors in the West and that its contribution to the viability of the line could be significant. Accordingly, I am recommending that a comprehensive examination be made of the potential for rail freight in the context of the developing the WRC.

Connecting major towns in the West by rail to the cities of Galway, Limerick, Sligo, Cork and Waterford could have significant impact on economic activity in the West. At the very least, having the five largest cities outside Dublin connected to each other by rail has to bring economic and social benefits to the entire western seaboard.

3. Specific Recommendations

The WRC can be broadly divided into four basic sections of line*. Table 1 lists these sections, the distances involved, the capital costs and the averages costs per mile. This data is taken from the FaberMaunsell capital costs study.

Section	Distance	Capital Cost	Average Cost Per Mile
Ennis to Athenry	36 miles	€74.7m	€2.1m
Athenry to Tuam	15.5 miles	€34.7m	€2.2m
Tuam to Claremorris	17 miles	€58.9m	€3.5m
C/morris to Collooney	46.25 miles	€197.4m	€4.3m

It is clear that there are broad divergences in average capital costs per mile between the various sections and that a pattern can be detected: the further north the line goes the higher the average capital cost per mile. The comparison showing the widest divergence is that between Athenry-Ennis and Claremorris-Collooney where the average cost per mile of the latter is more than twice that of the former

I understand that there are two main reasons why the cost of the Claremorris-Collooney section is very high. Firstly, when it was built in 1891-1892 the section was constructed as a light railway. If it were to be brought into the IE network the formation would have to be rebuilt to the national heavy rail standard. The second relates to the cost of necessary alterations to level crossings, of which there are a total of 290 along the section, two of which alone would cost €24m to create grade separations.

In following through on my general recommendation, I am suggesting that the restoration of the WRC should take account of these relative costings

** I will also deal with the section of line from Athenry to Galway which is not strictly part of the WRC but is necessary for the link to Galway.*

4. Phasing in the Restoration of the WRC

In this chapter I have isolated the four sections of the WRC and put forward my specific recommendations in relation to them.

<p>Section 1</p>

<p>Athenry to Ennis – 36 miles in length: total capital cost of €74.7m (€2.1m per mile)</p>

This section would appear to be one of the more viable as things stand and I am recommending that this section be re-opened in the short-term.

The main argument I see in favour of restoring this section is that it would create a rail link between the four largest cities outside Dublin; Galway, Limerick, Waterford and Cork and thus implement a major objective of the National Spatial Strategy, that of creating greater linkages between these four cities.

It is important that Galway, Clare and Limerick County Councils and Galway and Limerick City Councils are involved in the process of line restoration from the outset. When this line was previously in full operation there were five stations on the section, in addition to Athenry and Ennis. A line survey should indicate whether the original station locations or new ones are the more practical.

Section 2

Athenry to Galway commuter services

This section was not costed in the FaberMaunsell study, as strictly speaking it is not part of the WRC. However, this section would be an integral part of the rail connection between Galway and the towns to the north and the Munster cities and towns to the south. In addition there is the potential for this section to be developed for commuter rail services.

A commuter rail service could be developed relatively quickly and inexpensively between Athenry and Galway:

- Capital costs will not be prohibitive, as the service would run on the existing Dublin-Galway InterCity track
- Services would be facilitated by the flexibility to operate commuter services afforded by the new generation of InterCity regional railcars
- The project would complement proposals by the two Galway Councils for concentrating development along the rail corridor

The main capital outlay would probably be incurred restoring the North/South Crossover at Athenry, improving Athenry station to cater for greater rail usage, the development of a new station at Oranmore (which I understand has significant growth potential) and some signalling modifications to allow for the interleaving of commuter services with InterCity services.

The critical success factors for this proposal are for the development potential along the rail line east of Galway to be fully exploited and for Oranmore and Athenry to grow significantly and to become major development centres. Accordingly, I am recommending that both Councils be represented on any steering group set up to develop this section.

Section 3

Galway to Tuam - 15.5 miles in length; total capital cost of €34.7m at an average cost of €2.2m per mile

I am also recommending that the second section to be restored should be the Tuam to Athenry line. Tuam is the hub-town to the Galway gateway, and the introduction of the rail service between Tuam and Galway City would serve to strengthen linkages and advance the objectives of the National Spatial Strategy for the region. Restoring this section would provide connections to the Dublin-Galway InterCity train services and the cities and towns to the south via the Athenry-Ennis line. In the short-term a commuter type service to Galway should be introduced.

Section 4

Tuam to Claremorris; 17 miles in length: capital cost of €58.9m at an average cost of €3.5m per mile

The restoration of the line from Tuam to Claremorris would link up the WRC with the Castlebar/Westport and Ballina lines and thereby link these Mayo hub-towns with Galway and the cities in Munster.

As I noted earlier, it has been impressed on me that there is significant unmet demand for the carriage of freight by rail out of the Connacht region. In particular, there is a view that if the rail connection with Claremorris is made, then substantial rail freight could be carried southwards on the WRC all the way to Waterford. This is significant because I understand that Waterford is the only port with direct rail access on its quays; containers can be lifted directly from the freight cars onto the vessel. This reduces some of the extra handling costs usually associated with rail freight in Ireland, which could very well make it competitive with road freight.

It has also been suggested to me that another benefit that would accrue from carrying rail freight southwards on the WRC to Waterford is that it will free up rail capacity in the Dublin area especially at Connolly Station and on the Loop Line Bridge.

It might be that rail freight will add to the viability of the Tuam-Claremorris section of line and so I am recommending that a thorough study to quantify the potential for rail freight in the region be initiated.

It may also be more cost effective to complete the entire section between Athenry and Claremorris as one phase. The WRC implementation group that I am proposing (see page 12) could examine this as a possibility.

Section 5

Claremorris to Collooney: 46.25 miles; capital cost of €197.4m at an average cost of €4.3m per mile

It is clear that this section would be extremely expensive to restore. It accounts for 54% of the restoration costs of the entire line. Expenditure of this order would be very difficult to justify and I have to say that the case for its restoration, as things stand, is weak except on the grounds of balanced regional development.

This section is characterised by low population densities with few towns of reasonable size.

The one strategic argument in its favour is that it would connect by rail the Sligo gateway with the other gateways and hubs on the western and southern seaboard. How Sligo develops, in terms of population, employment and economic activity, will be of relevance to any future decisions on this section. Accordingly, the case for restoring this section could change over time and I am making two specific recommendations here.

Firstly, the section should be preserved in its entirety by clearing, fencing, etc and Mayo, Roscommon and Sligo County Councils should make the necessary arrangements as soon as possible.

Secondly, the viability of restoring this section of line should be reviewed in three years to see whether the objective conditions for line restoration have changed.

Implementation Group

I am recommending that a WRC implementation group be established that would oversee the implementation of this Report. I would envisage that this group be composed of no more than ten people. These should include the five County Managers and one representative of each of the following West on Track, the Inter-County Rail Committee, IE, CIE, and the Department of Transport.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this Report, my conclusion is that there is a strong case for the restoration of significant sections of this line. With projects of this nature demand is very difficult to quantify. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that infrastructure such as the restoration of the WRC could have a major impact on the future development of the West and would support both the Government's Spatial Strategy and Decentralisation Programme.

There are also a number of additional follow on developments that could add to the viability of the line. A connection to Knock International Airport and to Shannon International Airport were not considered by the Group but, were they to be developed in the future, could add significantly to the business case for the line. Another consideration could be to use the restoration of the line for other infrastructure. An example of this might be the installation of a broadband backbone along the line. There are a number of examples of this type of infrastructural development in Europe.

In closing, I wish to thank my fellow Working Group Members for their input and vigorous debate, for their hospitality and courtesy. Their enthusiasm for this project knows no bounds.

I look forward to the commencement of this project and its eventual completion.

Pat McCann
Chairman, Expert Working Group on the Western Rail Corridor

May 2005

Appendix I

Membership of the Expert Working Group on the Western Rail Corridor

Mr Pat McCann Chairman

County Councils

Mr Alec Fleming	Clare County Manager
Mr Tom Kavanagh	Galway County Manager
Mr Des Mahon	Mayo County Manager
Mr John Tiernan	Roscommon County Manager
Mr Hubert Kearns	Sligo County Manager
Mr Edmond Gleeson	Limerick County Manager
Mr Maurice Moloney	Cork County Manager

Regional Authorities

Mr Jim McGovern	Director, West Regional Authority
Mr Tom Kirby	Director, Mid West Regional Authority
Mr Matt Donnelly	Director, Border Regional Authority
Mr John McAleer	Director, South West Regional Authority

City and County and Development Boards

Mr Frank Dawson	Galway County Development Board
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Western Development Commission

Ms Lisa McAllister	Chief Executive
Ms Deirdre Frost	Policy Analyst

BMW Regional Assembly

Mr Gerry Finn	Director
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Inter-County Rail Committee

Fr Michéal MacGréil SJ	Westport, Co Mayo
Mr Terry Byrne	Sligo
Cllr Michael McGreal	Chairman, West Regional Authority

Appendix I (contd)

**Membership of the
Expert Working Group on the Western Rail Corridor (contd)**

West on Track

Mr Martin Cunniffe	Claremorris, Co Mayo
Cllr Tom McHugh	Tuam, Co Galway
Ms Helen Rochford-Brennan	Tubbercurry, Co Sligo

CIE

Mr Michael Reidy	Manager, Programmes and Projects Unit
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Iarnród Éireann

Mr Tom Finn	Manager, Strategic Planning Unit
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Railway Procurement Agency

Mr Robert Leech	
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Department of Transport

Mr Ed O'Callaghan	
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Appendix II

Terms of Reference of the Expert Working Group on the Western Rail Corridor

To consider:

- The dimensions of the WRC for the purposes of this examination
- The travel demand that gives rise to the proposed WRC and how best that might be met, including the potential contribution that rail can make to meet transport needs along the corridor
- The WRC proposal in the context of the findings of the National Spatial Strategy, the Strategic Rail Review, the Regional Planning Guidelines, relevant County and City Development Plans, the submissions put forward in favour and the current and proposed road investment programmes
- The costs and benefits of the proposal and options for its phasing, should such a strategy be adopted
- To consider how the proposal might be funded
- To consider all other relevant issues in relation to the proposal.

Appendix III

Sub-Group Membership and Terms of Reference of the Expert Working Group on the Western Rail Corridor

WRC Dimensions and Costs and Benefits Sub-Group

Mr Frank Dawson, Galway County Development Board (Chairman)

Mr John McAleer, Director, South West Regional Authority

Mr Gerry Behan (for Edmond Gleeson, Limerick County Manager)

Cllr Tom McHugh, West on Track

Mr Robert Leech, Railway Procurement Agency

Terms of Reference:

To consider the dimensions of the Western Rail Corridor for the purposes of this examination and the costs and benefits of the proposal.

Rail Travel Demand Sub-Group

Mr Hubert Kearns, Sligo County Manager (Chairman)

Mr Tom Kirby, Director, Mid West Regional Authority

Mr Michael Reidy, Manager, Programmes and Projects Unit, CIE

Fr Michéal MacGréil SJ, Inter-County Rail Committee

Mr Martin Cunniffe, West on Track

Terms of reference:

To consider the travel demand that gives rise to the proposed Western Rail Corridor and how best that need might be met, including the potential contribution that rail can make to meet transport needs along the corridor.

Appendix III (contd)

Sub-Group Membership and Terms of Reference of the Expert Working Group on the Western Rail Corridor (contd)

Land Use Sub-Group

Mr Des Mahon, Mayo County Manager (Chairman)

Mr John Tiernan, Roscommon County Manager

Ms Deirdre Frost, Policy Analyst, Western Development Commission

Mr Jim McGovern, Director, West Regional Authority

Mr Alec Fleming, Clare County Manager

Terms of reference:

To consider the WRC proposal in the context of the findings of the National Spatial Strategy, the Strategic Rail Review, the Regional Planning Guidelines, relevant County and City Development Plans, the submissions put forward in its favour and the current and proposed road investment programmes.

Funding Sub-Group

Mr Gerry Finn, Director, BMW Regional Assembly (Chairman)

Ms Helen Rochford-Brennan, West on Track

Mr John Tierney, Galway City Manager*

Mr Matt Donnelly, Director, Border Regional Authority

Mr John Morgan, Director of Services, Galway County Council.

* Replaced by Joe O'Neil, Galway City Council

Terms of Reference:

To consider how the proposal might be funded.