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NATIONAL TRANSPORT STRATEGY REVIEW

www.transport.gov.scot/strategy/national-transport-strategy

Below are responses from Spokes to the five questions in the online NTS Early Engagement survey...

1. Have you used, or referred to, the 2006 National Transport Strategy (NTS)?

Referring to the NTS has been most dispiriting – what is the point of referring to it when its spirit and much of its content is disregarded by government? Whilst many of its words are encouraging the actual policies implemented by government, and particularly the prioritisation within the government's transport budget, have contradicted the spirit and even the words of the NTS. There are innumerable examples – here we give one over-riding example.

The NTS Vision is *“an accessible Scotland with safe, integrated and reliable transport that supports economic growth, provides opportunities for all and is easy to use; a transport system that meets everyone’s needs, respects our environment and contributes to health; services recognised internationally for quality, technology and innovation, and for effective and well-maintained networks; a culture where fewer short journeys are made by car, where we favour public transport, walking and cycling because they are safe and sustainable, where transport providers and planners respond to the changing needs of businesses, communities and users, and where one ticket will get you anywhere.”*

The clear implicit message here is that funding and programmes will favour walking, cycling and public transport over private motor traffic. Whilst that has happened to some extent with passenger rail, and with bus concessionary fares, virtually all other aspects of sustainable and healthy transport have been extremely low priorities in budgetary decisions¹, whereas very high priority has gone to expanding the capacity of the trunk road system – something which is nowhere in the above vision, and which pours additional traffic into communities, thus negating other aspects of the vision.

Having said the above, we also note that the wording of the NTS is phrased such that, although it clearly implies priority for active and public transport, nonetheless it is careful not explicitly to rule out a major programme of investment in expanding road capacity, particularly outside urban areas.

¹ In the 17/18 Scottish Government budget, just 1.6% of transport spending is for walking and cycling – for the whole of Scotland. And whilst for every man, woman and child in Scotland the government will spend £150 on trunk roads, they will spend just £7 on walking and cycling.

Of course, the NTS was drawn up under a previous government. Whether or not transport development would have been healthier and more environmentally aware had that government remained in power is unknown. We do recall, however, that one of the first cycling-related acts of the new minority SNP government in 2007 was its attempt (fortunately unsuccessful) to scrap the *Cycling, Walking and Safer Streets* fund – one of the few sources of capital funding for walking and cycling projects. Its scrapping of capital funding for Regional Transport Partnerships (again in contradiction to the important role seen for RTPs in the NTS) had a truly devastating effect on delivery of the long-distance cyclist routes planned and budgeted by SESTRAN to link Edinburgh with surrounding authorities – in particular a delay of years for the A90 cyclist route, and with some other routes still not complete to this day.

2. The current strategy sets out the three key strategic outcomes of improved journey times and connections; reduced emissions; and improved quality, accessibility and affordability. Do you think each of these will still be relevant over the next 20 years? What strategic outcomes should transport be trying to achieve?

One of the problems of the NTS is that it is full of implicit contradictions. It appears to assume that there is little interaction between different forms of transport; and thus that encouraging active and public transport is largely compatible with continually providing for, and thereby encouraging, ever-rising car use. Similarly, the proposal to abolish Air Passenger Duty is likely to mean substantial modal shift from rail to air.

The new NTS needs to make these issues explicit. If, for example, additional car use is to continue to be encouraged between cities (and, in consequence, entering cities) then this should be stated openly, so that the contradictions are at least in the open.

The outcome of “*improved journey times and connections*” (which in the NTS is expanded to include congestion and integration) is an example. Providing for increased car capacity and faster driving times also means modal shift from rail for longer journeys, and from bus and cycling for local journeys. The new NTS needs to recognise this contradiction in the wording of its outcomes.

The outcome of “*reduced emissions*” remains a top issue, both climate and toxic emissions – and we sadly note that little progress has been achieved since the NTS was published, particularly on climate emissions. A continuing increase in motor traffic (resulting in part from provision of more road capacity) negates improvements in vehicle emissions performance, as recognised in the recent Scottish Parliament Committee reports² on the draft RPP3 Climate Change report and in our submission³ on this to the RECC.

The outcome of “*improved quality, accessibility and affordability*” suffers from the same mess of contradictions as in the first outcome above, or more so. Improvements for one mode or group of users brings impacts on others. The NTS must recognise that it is not possible at the same time to improve every aspect for every mode, and the outcome should recognise this.

Finally, *improved public health* needs to be added as an outcome in its own right. Health is near the top of the government agenda and of public concerns and, since the current NTS was published, the connections between public health and travel patterns have become yet more apparent. These connections are both positive, in respect of walking and cycling, and negative in respect of sedentary car-based travel.

2 <https://sp-bpr-en-prod-cdnep.azureedge.net/published/LGC/2017/3/10/Report-on-the-Draft-Climate-Change-Plan---the-Draft-Third-Report-on-Policies-and-Proposals-2017-2032/5th%20Report,%202017.pdf>

3 <http://www.spokes.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/1702-Spokes-RPP3-submission-final.pdf>

3. If there was one thing that needs to change substantially in transport, what would that be?

We are very clear that the top change required is for government transport spending priorities to be clearly and objectively aligned with top government objectives – including public health, climate and toxic emissions, inequalities and a sustainable (in both senses) economy. The experience of the current NTS shows conclusively that words and policies do not translate into what happens on the ground.

Clearly every transport budget will include many largely fixed expenses, such as maintenance, interest on past borrowings, and contracts already entered into. However, much of the budget is also flexible, and of course there are continuing choices of which new projects to progress. Expenditure within these elements of the budget should be evidence-based, with the goal of supporting the above over-riding national objectives, rather than fulfilling relatively arbitrary and politically-based ambitions such as dualling every road between Scotland's cities.

We believe that such an analysis of the transport budget would shift the focus of heavy investment away from expanding inter-urban road capacity, towards urban public transport, walking, cycling and road maintenance (particularly of urban and minor roads). Our pre-budget submission⁴ to the Scottish Parliament RECC explores current funding for cycling, and how that does or does not relate to policies.

4. What do you think are the main transport challenges and opportunities over the next 20 years?

In urban areas the challenge is to emulate European cities such as Copenhagen, and countries such as the Netherlands, which through deliberate and funded policy have achieved huge modal shift towards healthier and more sustainable modes. Private car ownership should be discouraged, including through parking charges and restrictions, and through the planning process; and should be gradually replaced by widespread provision of car clubs and bike-share – thus reducing car trips substantially and converting the wasted space occupied by static cars into public spaces, homes and productive activities. Furthermore, car clubs enable a more rapid transition to cleaner vehicles as well as providing a more reliable gradual path towards driverless vehicles.

For longer-distance travel a major challenge is to maximise use of rail, to reverse current policies which encourage modal shift from rail to car (via ever-expanding road capacity) and to air (via airport expansion and the cutting of air passenger duty).

A particular challenge is for politicians and their transport officials to have the courage to acknowledge that current policies are encouraging unhealthy and environmentally unsustainable trends.

5. How would you like us to engage with you during the development of the future strategy that will lead to a formal public consultation?

We are happy to comment on drafts at any stage.

We urge that an early stage of drafting should cover the question of how budgeting priorities will be explicitly and objectively linked to NTS priorities – and to over-riding national priorities on health, environment, inequalities and a sustainable economy – as in (3) above. A 'National Strategy' which is not reflected in actual spending priorities is surely little more than a charade.

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4 <http://www.spokes.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/1611-Spokes-extra-pre-budget-submission.pdf>