

## **Strabane Transport and Access Proposals**

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### **Introduction**

Transport and accessibility is, beside land value issues, the key factor determining the success of town centre regeneration. The framework therefore sets of a range of measures to radically improve both the town centre as a destination, and the means of getting there.

### **Objectives**

Transport is not an end in itself, but must serve identified and agreed purposes. This is the first recommendation, and involves a shift away from identifying and implementing transport proposals without reference to social, environmental or other outcomes. The main objectives are to:

1. Enhance the fortunes of the traditional town centre in the face of competition from recent and continuing out-of-centre developments;
2. Achieve a high quality of public space throughout the town centre as a key means of achieving the first objective, and as valuable objective in its own right;
3. Achieve greater use of the inclusive modes of travel, namely walking, cycling and public transport.

The first two of these objectives received general support from the client and stakeholders. The third reflects transport and planning policy in Northern Ireland aimed at reducing the negative environmental and social impacts of transport.

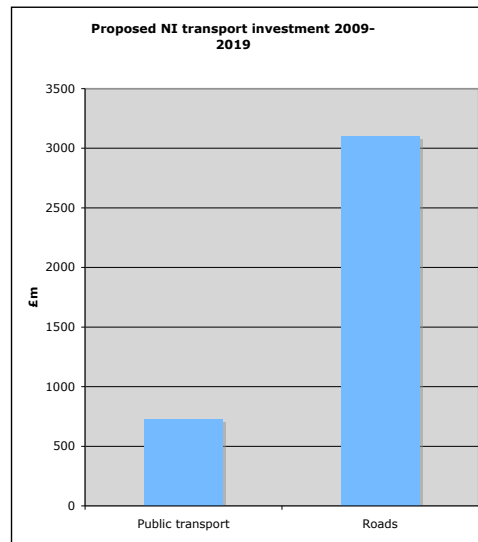
### **Priorities: The context for Regeneration**

Priorities of planning and investment should align with the objectives. The development framework should incorporate both specific proposals and enhanced processes to bring about improvements over the long term.

Investment priorities in Northern Ireland are heavily weighted towards road transport. This means that there is a tightly constrained budget for public transport, walking and cycling improvements. A "Government Futures" report for Northern Ireland by Price Waterhouse Coopers identified the mismatch between stated Government objectives and the level of funding support for public transport. It found that public transport investment per capita in Northern Ireland was running at less than half that in the rest of the UK.

It concluded: *"We continue to spend significant sums on the local road network but we have simply failed to invest in any commensurate way in public transport. Generally speaking, the public mindset in Northern Ireland seems to be more closely aligned with the private car-oriented US model, rather than the more public transport-oriented European model."*

*(‘Bridging the gap - Transforming Public Transport in Northern Ireland’, PWC, 2009)*



We recommend that future spending includes a major re-planning of these alternative modes of travel. Within this, greater attention should be given to transport and access improvements within Strabane than to communication between Strabane and other places.

Without such realignment of priorities, there is little chance of Strabane contributing to the overall policy objective in Northern Ireland of reducing reliance on the private car, and helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Initially a planning exercise should be commissioned to establish the public transport measures needed to substantially increase the use of this mode and to reduce the car driver mode share.

### **Transport and parking issues**

The key transport and accessibility issues are identified as

1. Town centre public realm quality and trade off with space for traffic and parking
2. Linking the traditional and new retail areas
3. Increasing access on foot, cycle and by bus
4. Bus service improvements and integration to promote use
5. Parking supply, management, and competition for trade
6. Taxi management to reduce impacts on other users of street space

Masterplan proposals

### **Essential transport and accessibility proposals**

- Relocate bus centre in the town centre
- Create Railway Street boulevard

- Produce radical town bus service improvements
- Reallocate more road space to pedestrians

Table/ Diagram showing each regeneration goal and its relationship to each of the masterplan proposals.

SCORE - option 1 & 2

Smith's Mill

John Wesley Street/ Main Street

### **Railway Road**

Given the crucial issue of how to get more interaction between the traditional town centre and the out-of-centre retail at the west end of Railway Street, the redesign of this corridor as an attractive, lively and welcoming street for people on foot, cycle, or bus or car, is seen as an essential measure. This is described further below.

### **Abercorn Square**

Short term measures required are the provision of better pedestrian crossing facilities, and the provision of a bus boarder to physically prevent taxis from obstructing buses at the main town centre stop on the east side of the square.



Example of bus boarder with taxi rank adjacent. This prevents taxis from obstructing buses at the stop. Brecon, Wales.

The street geometry could also be changed to provide more space for pedestrian movement without significantly affecting vehicle movement. However, it is recommended that this should be undertaken after a

wider design review taking into account all users and potential developments at the Score site.

Careful consideration will need to be given to the redesign of Abercorn Square to meet the requirements of a bus interchange (in conjunction with Canal Street), of an attractive social space, as well as providing for servicing of the adjacent buildings. If Castle Street is re-opened to general traffic, this places a further requirement on the design for adequate entry to the street from Market Street.

The provision for central bus stops will need to be planned in relation to the reconfigured bus routes. The choice will depend on which direction the buses are traveling, together with townscape and pedestrian movement considerations. There are three identified options (to integrate town services with regional services at Canal Street) with town service stops being located at:

1. Canal Street, integrated with regional bus stops. There may, however, be insufficient capacity for this option.
2. Railway Street/Abercorn Square
3. Abercorn Square itself.
4. Market Street/Abercorn Square

Apart from the last option, it would be possible to retain the present taxi rank on the east side of Market Street/Abercorn Square. Option 3 would require the removal of the present kiosk, and would affect the reopening Castle Street to general traffic, for example by requiring it to become one-way northbound.

### **Market Square**

Parking will be retained in Market Square, but reconfiguration of the streets surrounding the square will provide additional space for pedestrian movement and for market and other activities.

### **Castle Street**

Despite being the only semi-pedestrianised street in Strabane, Castle Street has failed to become a lively place and businesses are struggling. For this reason it has been suggested that traffic is reintroduced. However, there is no certainty that the decline in the street is due to its closure to vehicle traffic.

Four possible alternatives are suggested:

1. Reintroduce traffic and on-street parking one-way from Abercorn Square with the carriageway defined by street furniture and parking bays;
2. As 1, but rebuild as a conventional street;
3. Keep the present arrangement, and rely on the regeneration of the rest of centre to deliver more footfall and customers.

4. Keep the street design broadly in tact, but organise the street for use as a permanent taxi rank.

Use of the street as a taxi rank would bring people to the street. It would also enable taxis to be cleared from where they currently cause obstruction to buses and other users.

### **Recommendations**

- Commission a public transport restructuring and integration study, including a long-term financial model to increase passengers.
  - Introduce measures to directly increase interaction between the traditional centre and the recent out-of-centre developments, including physical measures, parking management, revised planning policy, and developer contributions and obligations.
  - Adopt a programme of specific street enhancement and traffic management measures in the town centre.
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## **KEY TRANSPORT AND ACCESSIBILITY PROPOSALS**

**The following measures are designed to help meet the development objectives. The identified main transport and accessibility issues are dealt with in turn.**

1. Town centre public realm trade off with space for traffic and parking

The strong and growing competition from the large-scale out-of-centre retail facilities in Strabane has led to a decline in the importance and attraction of the traditional town centre. This was inevitable, and is a classic example of why attempts have been made on the mainland to limit the spread of out-of-centre retail. As a result, supporting counter measures will be required if the traditional centre is to survive as a credible retail and business centre.

The most obvious way of starting to redress the balance would be to call a halt to further out-of-centre expansion, and to refocus development in the traditional town centre. Aside from this, the most likely way of reinvigorating the centre is to improve its environment and accessibility for trading and community activities. Another aspect of town centre reinvigoration will be to reposition its offer from being the main retail centre of Strabane to being a more broadly-based centre with leisure, community, cultural and other activities. The aim will be to make it a destination to choose rather than avoid.

All of the specific measures set out below are consistent with this approach and are designed to enhance the appeal of the town centre as a place to visit and spend time. These include making the centre more accessible, reducing intrusive elements such as parking and traffic, improving paving and

landscape and other aspects of the public realm, and maintenance and cleaning.

Providing greater priority to movement on foot, cycle and bus is one way in which Strabane can capitalise on the traffic relief that has been gained from the by-pass. Most European towns that invested in by-passes have taken the opportunity to reduce traffic space and increase pedestrian space in the town centre. Strabane needs to follow this example.

## 1. Linking the traditional and new retail areas

The expectation that the new retail facilities in the western part of the town would help to revive the traditional centre was not based on any evidence, and can now be shown to have been unrealistic. In order to address this issue, better connectivity is required between the two areas.

The first and foremost requirement is to provide a continuous public footway on both sides of Railway Street. We have been unable to find any other UK example of a town whose main approach street lacks a footway. Issues of land ownership that have prevented implementation to date must be overcome.

The provision of a footway is first and foremost, but Railway Street should as well be designed as a whole as an attractive boulevard that will attract business and footfall.

The other main mechanism for linking the two areas is to provide frequent bus services along Railway Street. Extending or overlapping the town services in a reconfigured route pattern can achieve this.

## 2. Increasing access on foot, cycle and by bus

Footways and other pedestrian routes into the town need to be improved by detailed street design and landscaping schemes. Key examples have been identified in this study at:

- Derry Road/Patrick Street
- Abercorn Square
- Main Street/Barrack Street/Church Street
- The whole of Railway Street

Other examples are the proposed new pedestrian bridges over the river. Further improvements could be identified on the approach routes to the centre.

Cycling is sparse in Strabane at present, but it has the scope for this activity to increase. Reviewing the street layouts and junction designs from a cyclist perspective could result in a number of relatively small scale improvements to

make cycling safer and more pleasant. As pointed out in the earlier Atkins report, the gradients on parts of the Strabane road system need be no more of a deterrent than they are in other towns. The cycling habit could be inculcated amongst the town's student population, and reinforced by "bike buddy" and cycle training schemes.

There is also considerable potential to reduce car use within the town by improving the bus services. While the current services were a step forward when they were introduced, they need to be revamped not just to cater for demand but to generate demand. Only in this way can their future viability be achieved. This is discussed further in the next section.

Overall, meeting the identified transport objectives will require a shift of investment and planning effort away from roads and parking and towards walking, cycling and bus. The effectiveness of this strategy should be measured in terms of the objectives set. As this can be complex to quantify, a more simple single measure may be preferred, namely the proportion of people arriving in the centre by non-car modes. This would require a simple periodic street interview survey. Such a survey could also be used to monitor the trend in footfall at key locations, as part of a standard town centre health check.

The following is a suggested target mode split for town centre arrivals.

Target mode split for town centre arrivals

Mode	2009	2014	2019
Walk all way	Not known	18	20
Cycle		7	10
Bus		10	20
Car passenger		15	15
Car driver		45	30
Taxi		5	5
		100	100

The change in mode share, and in particular the target reduction in car driver mode share is not a measure of how many cars will be used. An increased number of visitors may result in an increase in the number of cars, despite a fall in the car mode share.

A similar exercise could be used to monitor travel trends to the out-of-centre retail areas.

### 3. Bus service improvements and integration to promote use

Although a small town, Strabane now has a local bus service that links the main residential areas with the town centre. This service has reportedly not achieved the passenger numbers hoped for. The difficulty is that in order to attract passengers, there need to be convenient and direct routes and high frequencies. This is particularly so in a small town where distances are not great and can be walked. Providing the necessary routes and frequencies

requires sufficient vehicles and drivers, and these of course cost money. Quality services can only be viable if the quality is sufficiently good to attract enough passengers and revenue to cover the cost. In most countries with good public transport, a portion of the revenue is met out of public taxation, and the public payback is through lower investment in roads and parking, more socially inclusive transport, less traffic and a better environment. This approach, however, is not currently accepted in the UK.

The pursuit of financial viability in bus operation can promote efficiency, but without a longer term perspective it stifles the ability to develop a customer base by offering quality services in advance of the demand appearing at the bus stop.

It is recommended that a business model be developed for Strabane bus services that is based on offering quality services to achieve target passenger numbers, and which aims at viability in the long run while being supported in the short run from sources other than the fare revenue. Developer contributions could form part of this support. So far developers of retail and other schemes in Strabane have not been asked to make such contributions, and provision for the car is all that has been required of them.

A number of restructuring measures are put forward here that would help towards better patronage, better town centre accessibility, and fewer journeys by car, and lower parking demand.

- a) Align parking charges with bus fares such that it is cheaper for two people to travel to the town centre by bus than it is to park the car for an hour. Charges should also be retrospectively applied to the out-of-centre retail car parks in order to open up the bus as a realistic alternative mode of access for these car-oriented developments.
- b) Mount a marketing and promotion programme aimed at developing an image of bus use that appeals to all sections of the community.
- c) Re-configure Canal Street to provide a meeting point for town and regional buses. Improved journey times following the A5 construction will allow regional bus services to access the town centre without unreasonable time penalties.
- d) Reconfigure Strabane town bus services as through routes, and serving the western retail areas.
- e) Create a bus interchange at Abercorn Square / Canal Street, enabling people to change easily between town and regional services. Integration of ticketing should also be developed, for example by including a town bus journey in all regional tickets to and from Strabane. Canal Street/Railway Street/Abercorn Square will become the central transport focus for Strabane. Attempts should be made to integrate the timing of local and regional services.



- f) It is not considered necessary at present to introduce bus priority measures. If traffic conditions worsened to the point that bus schedules could not be reliably kept, then such measures should be introduced. The most likely area for such consideration is Bridge Street, where it may be possible to provide buses with advanced access to the bridge itself.

The relocation of the regional bus stopping place to the proposed town centre “meeting point” is considered important for the following reasons:

- Encouraging access to the regional buses by local bus, foot and cycle rather than by car and taxi;
- Providing regional bus travellers with immediate access to the town centre, and thus increasing incidental spending at town centre shops;
- Enabling regional bus users to reach any part of Strabane using the town bus services, and vice versa;
- Raising awareness of Strabane town centre amongst regional bus travellers.

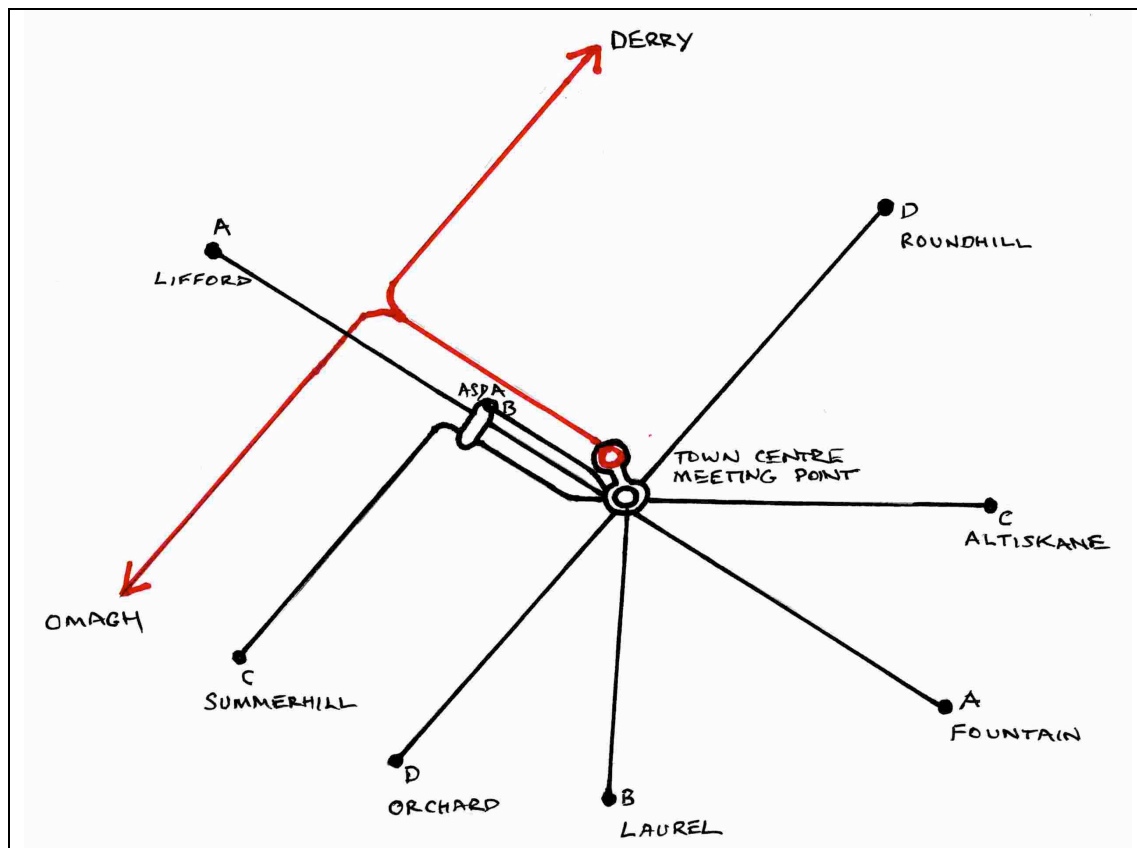
The frequency and operating hours of the town services should be improved to enable them to serve a wider range of trips. For example, if the town centre is to have a more diverse offer of activities including leisure, the bus services should operate in the evenings and on Sundays.

Key features of the bus improvement and integration concept for Strabane include:

- Meeting point at Canal Street / Abercorn Square for all bus services, regional and town;
- Cross town routes, with no terminating buses in the town centre, offering a range of destinations without the need to change;
- No long loops through residential areas;
- Three routes overlap between the town centre and Asda to provide frequent linking services along Railway Street
- Full operating day, enabling commuter and college use.

## Bus integration concept for Strabane

*Note: the town routes and names are indicative only*



### 4. Parking supply, management, and competition for trade

The availability and price of parking is the main accessibility factor affecting the competitiveness of retail, especially in a town like Strabane with heavy reliance on the private car for both internal and external movement. The development of major retail facilities away from the traditional centre with plentiful and free parking inevitably makes these facilities more attractive to use than the traditional centre for car users. In all towns where such large-scale out-of-centre facilities have been allowed, the economy of the traditional centre has suffered. It is inevitable and logical – people cannot shop in two places at the same time.

In order to compete and to maintain viability, the traditional centre needs support and countermeasures. Some countermeasures have been taken in Strabane, notably the move to diversify from just retail by the provision of the theatre. However, the developers of the competing out-of-centre facilities have not been required to contribute in any way to the provision of measures to support the traditional centre. It is recommended that any further out-of-centre expansion is required to contribute, for example by introducing parking

charges, or by providing or subsidising parking in the traditional centre, or by contributing to the cost of bus services to the centre.

To compete in parking terms with the newer out-of-centre retail, the traditional centre requires more and free parking to be provided. The dilemma is that such provision would tend, firstly, to destroy the quality of place that is the main competitive asset of the old centre, secondly to take land that is needed to increase the town centre retail and leisure offer, and thirdly to reduce the potential for bus, walk and cycle access to the centre.

This illustrates the dilemma opened up when out-of-centre car-based developments go ahead. There is no real solution once this has happened, so the parking strategy can merely attempt to mitigate the problem.

As a first step, parking data for Strabane should in future be collected to include the recent retail areas, and not be confined to the traditional centre.

The core principle should be that parking provision (and any associated access roads) should not undermine the townscape and historic integrity of the traditional town centre. To the extent that new or relocated parking is provided, this should be carefully integrated with the built fabric, for example in “wrapped” multi-level parking, or placed underground.

To mitigate traffic generated by parking areas, signing should be devised to direct drivers to the car park at their first point of arrival at the centre, and to discourage them from driving through the town centre streets. This can also be encouraged by (as at present) ensuring that parking within the centre is charged at a higher rate. For access to off-street car parks, the aim should be to avoid north-south movement along Market Street and Main Street. Thus drivers approaching from Derry Road or Railway Street directions would be provided with parking to the north of the Score site. Drivers approaching from Bridge Street or Barrack Street would find parking at Market Square or locations further south. A new pedestrian bridge linking Water Wall with Waterside would open the possibility of town centre parking on the south side of the river.

Possible approaches to parking supply and demand include:

- Limit demand for town centre parking by pricing and controls, while maintaining total accessibility by boosting access by non-car modes (as described in this plan);
- Limit the demand for parking at competing facilities out-of-centre by pricing/controls, while maintaining total accessibility by improving links to the old centre by foot, cycle and bus;
- Increase parking in the old centre (with structured parking in a context-sensitive way) but not out-of-centre.

These possibilities are not mutually exclusive. Achieving a reasonable balance will depend on the type and quantity of development in the town centre. For example, employment provision will generate demand for parking at the same times as retail, whereas leisure development will generate

demand at other times, thus allowing for shared use of parking used by shoppers.

On-street parking in the centre is popular and convenient for shoppers. The strategy should be to continue to provide for this, but to limit the length of stay (to maximise the economic benefit) and to charge more than at off-street parking.

#### Servicing

Provision for vehicles servicing town centre shops and other premises is vital for the economic success of the town. Most of this activity can take place on-street without causing major problems, but the on-street space must be managed to allow such activity. Time controls in the main shopping streets can be an effective way of managing limited space. This can take the form of waiting period limitations and/or limiting servicing to outside the peak shopping hours.

#### Residents' parking

Currently there is no legislative possibility for residents' parking bays in Northern Ireland. Initial schemes are to be introduced in Belfast, however, and other towns may then follow suit. If regeneration of Strabane town centre is successful, there will be greater pressure than at present on street parking, and this could cause inconvenience for town centre residents who wish to park on the street near their homes. Pressure will also increase if on-street parking restrictions and charges and/or controls are extended. It is therefore important to include on-street residents-only controls when demand requires it. The timing of such measures should be decided with full involvement of residents and businesses in and around the town centre.

### 5. Taxi management to reduce impacts on other users of street space

Taxis are an important part of the public transport system in Strabane. Their presence does, however, cause problems for other users, especially by obstructing buses and taking kerb space that might be more beneficial as short term parking bays. The number of taxis perhaps reflects inadequacies of the bus service, and the need for employment, rather than a bedrock demand for them. Even so, as the attraction of the centre increases, the demand for taxis is not likely to fall dramatically.

Measures must therefore be taken to reduce the negative impact of taxi activity. The first step is to identify a suitable "stacking" location for taxis serving the centre that does not interfere with bus operation or the convenience of pedestrian movement. Part of this may be to attempt again to introduce a "call forward" system. This is difficult with four independent operators in the town, but such systems operate successfully elsewhere, for example Newtownards.

The next step will be to rigorously enforce taxi parking or stacking elsewhere. In many towns, local custom and practice can easily lead to lax enforcement

out of sympathy for taxi drivers. However, if proper designated locations are provided, then strict enforcement will not lead to operational difficulties.

If there is no call forward system, the stacking location must have a single entry point (to avoid queue jumping). The taxi pick up stand must be clearly visible from the lead car in the stack.