Union Connectivity Review

Summary of Responses to the Call for Evidence

Contents

Introduction

This is the Union Connectivity Review's analysis of responses to the public call for evidence, which was issued on 16 November 2020 and closed on 30 December 2020. It formed part of the Review's consultation process on how improving connectivity between the nations of the UK can support economic growth and improve quality of life. The evidence supplied was carefully considered and helped shape Sir Peter Hendy's final report.

The call for evidence aligns with the objectives of the review, which were set out in the terms of reference.

What the Call for Evidence Asked

The call for evidence focused on three key areas:

- Assessing the need for cross-border connectivity;

- Opportunities for improved transport connectivity between the nations of the UK; and

- Connections to Northern Ireland.

In total, twelve questions made up the call for evidence, covering appraisal methodologies, the potential development of a national strategic transport network, specific journey improvements, social and environmental impacts of additional or improved transport links, and the feasibility and need for a fixed link between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Number of Responses

The call for evidence received 147 responses. A small number of additional submissions were received after the deadline. Those submissions are not included in this summary but were considered as part of the Review's further deliberations. The call for evidence was open to all individuals and organisations to provide detailed information on the need for additional connectivity between the nations of the UK.

The below table outlines the types of organisations that submitted evidence to the Union Connectivity Review and the total number of submissions.

Table 1. The types of organisations that submitted evidence to the Union Connectivity Review and the total number of submissions.

Type of Respondents	Total Number of Submissions
Local Authority	41
Business	26
Membership/Trade Association	25
Advocacy Group	12
Devolved Administration/MP/MSP	10
Regional Authority (*Local Enterprise Partnership, Combined Authority, etc.*)	10
Transport Authority (*Sub-National Transport Bodies, National Highways, Network Rail*)	8
Private Individual	7
Transport Operating Company	6
Academic	2
Total	**147**

Key Issues Raised

National Strategic Transport Network

94% of respondents to the specific national strategic transport network question in the call for evidence—including 100% of respondents from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland—were in favour of establishing a national strategic transport network. Most respondents agreed that a UK replacement for the EU TEN-T would be beneficial, providing that the network focused investment on the most important transport routes and established a coherent framework to improve connectivity across the nations of the UK. In contrast, four submissions stated their belief that a national strategic transport network was unnecessary, asserting that existing devolution and regional settlements already provide arrangements to improve transport infrastructure between the nations of the UK.

Network Capacity and Infrastructure

Over half of the submissions identified capacity, resilience, and access issues throughout the UK transport network as the primary infrastructure challenges. Submissions emphasised that competition for rail pathways between passenger and freight services negatively impacts connectivity. Restrictions in loading gauges, station capacity, line speed and other supporting railway infrastructure were issues raised by many respondents. Respondents identified the A75, the A1 and the A77 as key roads in need of upgrading to increase resilience and improve connectivity.

Aviation Reform

All respondents from or representing the aviation industry stated that Air Passenger Duty (APD) negatively impacts the growth of domestic air connectivity. Respondents argued that APD reform, either by waiver or complete removal, was drastically needed. Submissions expressed the lack of Public Service Obligations (PSOs) within the aviation industry to be a challenge for regional connectivity and that action was necessary to support 'lifeline' domestic air routes.

Transport Planning and Appraisals

Just under half of the total number of respondents raised a lack of any overarching mechanism by which infrastructure and services can be planned across all the nations of the UK as a major challenge in improving connectivity. Many respondents believed that the current transport appraisal framework focused too heavily on cost-benefit analysis. Submissions acknowledged the process was technically robust but believed it favoured investment in South East England or links serving London.

Fixed Link between Northern Ireland and Great Britain

Many submissions demonstrated their lack of support for a fixed link, indicating that the benefit-cost ratio would be poor and that there would be limited demand. A few respondents stated that a fixed link could provide benefits such as increased trade and tourism and support a more reliable alternative to ferries. Respondents were clear that any fixed link across the Irish Sea would encounter several technical challenges, such as disruptive weather conditions and historic munitions and ordnance.

Analysis of Responses Received to Each Question

This section contains a summary of answers to each question asked as part of the call for evidence. Various questions have been grouped together as some answers and key themes raised by respondents overlapped.

1. If you represent a place, what is your current strategy for growing the economy and improving the quality of life there?

2. Please provide any information you hold about current multi-nation journeys within the United Kingdom.

5. What evidence exists to demonstrate the potential impacts of improved transport connectivity between the nations of the United Kingdom?

The call for evidence received a total of 147 submissions representing all the nations of the UK and a wide variety of organisations. Of these, 44 (30%) were respondents from England, 41 (28%) represented UK-wide organisations, such as trade associations or membership bodies, 33 (22%) were respondents from Scotland, 11 (8%) from Northern Ireland, 10 (7%) from Wales and 8 (5%) were private citizens with no clear affiliation.

In total, 305 separate pieces of evidence were cited or referenced across all 147 submissions. Of these, 241 (78%) were classified as policy papers, such as economic growth and transport strategies. The policy papers were published by several organisations, including government departments, the devolved administrations, transport authorities, local councils, combined and regional authorities and industry representatives. Additional evidence provided by submissions included 22 (7%) blog or news articles; 14 (5%) data, statistics or survey reports; 12 (4%) academic journals and 6 (2%) parliamentary papers. A further 10 (3%) pieces of evidence were assorted as "other"; examples include letters of support from MPs and website landing pages.

Almost all respondents provided evidence relating to their specific local or regional transport links or corridors. Respondents outlined how their plans linked to cross-border travel or wider-UK strategies, such as levelling up or decarbonisation. Economic growth and transport strategies were the most consistently shared evidence provided by submissions, particularly by local and regional authorities. These strategies outlined ongoing or upcoming plans around multi-modal transport and place-based investment to boost productivity and quality of life. Transport authorities and industry bodies provided information on journey times,

traffic volumes, capacity statistics and timetabling across numerous transport modes and multi-nation journeys.

Most submissions provided a short answer, contributing a more detailed response to the specific journey question (Question 7).

3. In general terms, is there a need for new or improved transport links between the nations of the United Kingdom?

Submissions described a clear need for improved high-speed rail connectivity to Scotland. Respondents supported the 'Golborne Link' as part of Phase 2b of HS2, stating it would provide additional capacity for services running between Scotland and England. Improving connections along the East Coast Main Line (ECML) would improve north-south services. Electrification would allow for higher speeds and increased capacity across the line. Respondents representing borderland areas between England and Scotland called for an extension of the Borders Railway.

Many respondents identified the need for improved transport links to and from Wales, highlighting that Cardiff is the UK's least directly connected major city. Submissions outlined that current transport links between South England and Wales lacked resilience due to congestion and rail links needing upgrading to improve regional connectivity between Wales, the West Midlands, and North West England.

Submissions noted the need to drive forward transport decarbonisation, but that air connectivity must continue to provide essential services to remote areas that are not served by high-speed rail or direct rail links. Submissions highlighted the need to improve resilience and capacity along the pathways to access key UK ports, particularly rail access for freight.

North-south connectivity was highlighted frequently as the most economically important corridor of cross-UK travel, based on population distribution and economic activity. Respondents recognised that transport is just one piece of the puzzle when it comes to levelling up. However, transport investment is needed to help stimulate local economies, reduce exclusion, and tackle inequality.

Most submissions refer to the need for current and future transport to be more carbon-efficient and environmentally friendly. Modal shift to rail (for both freight and passenger traffic) was identified by many submissions as the key to offset carbon emissions. A carbon-efficient UK rail network was recommended as a potential long-term goal for the UK Government.

Many respondents referenced the need for reform to current transport appraisal methods, stating that current interventions are based on short-term solutions and should better reflect cross-border benefits. Submissions put forward the need for a golden thread between national, regional, and local policies when establishing transport plans. This will be fully covered in the analysis of Question 6.

4. What are the main obstacles and challenges in improving transport connectivity between the nations of the UK?

The most consistent challenges raised by submissions relate to non-infrastructure aspects of connectivity, such as fragmented project delivery and appraisal system (see Question 6), lack of government infrastructure investment and political barriers. Submissions stated that competing political views on transport priorities, funding and delivery between the UK Government and the devolved administrations slows decision making and progression. The A75 and relations between the UK and Scottish Government were highlighted as an example.

Several respondents from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland perceived a lack of investment as a challenge to connectivity, believing that investment is focused more on London and South East England, with major projects, such as Crossrail, reducing the funding available for cross-border projects.

Capacity restraints across the rail network were raised by submissions as a major infrastructure challenge that negatively impacts union connectivity. Line speed, gauge enhancements, infrastructure upgrades, signalling improvements and reducing single track sections were solutions suggested by respondents. Interventions focused primarily on the East Coast, West Coast, South Wales, and North Wales Main Lines.

Submissions from logistics/freight operation companies and ports underlined the significant challenges facing strategic roads, such as the A1, the A75 and the A77. Respondents highlighted bottlenecks, safety, and resilience issues as the fundamental challenges along these routes.

All aviation related submissions articulated the negative impact that APD inflicts on domestic air travel and connectivity. Respondents called for APD reform, either by complete removal, removing levies on the return leg or waiving to counteract COVID-19 damages. Submissions claimed that APD is outdated and not considerate of steps the aviation industry has taken to be more carbon-efficient in the decades since its introduction. Aviation respondents unanimously expressed that the restricted use of PSOs within the sector is a significant challenge for regional connectivity and threatens 'lifeline' routes. A small number of non-aviation sector submissions argued that APD should increase to force the public to fly less and take more carbon-efficient transport.

6. When making transport investment decisions that aim to improve connectivity between the different nations of the UK, does the current appraisal framework capture all the potential impacts?

Most respondents believe a gap exists in the current appraisal framework, as there are limited methods for which infrastructure and services can be planned collaboratively between the nations of the UK. Submissions view development, appraisals, and delivery of cross-border projects to be incredibly disjointed. Submissions raised that delivering cross-border projects is astonishingly complex, requiring multiple sets of permissions or completing separate processes due to devolved responsibilities. Respondents stated that

the lack of guidance as to who is responsible for commissioning cross-border co-delivered schemes makes it difficult to achieve an agreed strategic outcome.

Many submissions emphasised that the current appraisal framework and system is too focused on cost-benefit analysis, favouring investment in South East England and London. Respondents called for the creation of a clear long-term UK transport investment and delivery strategy, with a rolling programme of investment.

Aviation submissions stated that appraisal models traditionally focused on journey time savings. They felt that future models should assess the security of provision, frequency and onward connectivity to the economic impact of services.

7. Which specific journeys would benefit from new or improved transport links?

The majority of submissions consistently mentioned reducing journey times by improving high-speed rail connectivity, particularly along the West Coast Main Line (WCML) and the ECML to Scotland and Wales. Respondents outlined the importance of ensuring that other infrastructure projects benefit from improvements that HS2 will bring. The potential levelling up impacts of HS2 were extensively mentioned by many submissions, which focused on extending HS2 to Scotland and the Eastern Leg.

Expanding rail electrification was supported by over forty submissions as a method to create a more carbon-friendly network. Lines identified by respondents where electrification would support decarbonisation and increase capability included the East Coast, South Wales and Great Western Main Lines.

Submissions regarding connectivity to North Wales highlighted that the North Wales Main Line would benefit from improvements, specifically line speed enhancements to support cross-border travel to North West England (Chester, Liverpool and Manchester) and links to Holyhead.

Several respondents from the border areas of Scotland and Northern England advocated for the extension of the Borders Railway to Hawick and Carlisle. Submissions outlined the success of current work and linked the extension to future demand for improved connectivity to Carlisle.

The A75, the A77 and the A1 were consistently raised by submissions as routes vital to union connectivity but requiring improvements. Respondents highlighted that these roads are either fully or partly single carriageway roads and called for them to be upgraded to dual carriageways to improve reliability and journey times for freight and passenger traffic.

Several submissions highlighted the Western Rail Link to Heathrow to improve connectivity from South Wales to Heathrow. Respondents stated that delivering the project would reduce congestion, improve journey times and provide environmental benefits by encouraging a modal shift away from car travel.

8. Is there a need for the development of a national strategic transport network to replace the European Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) following the end of the UK-EU transition period?

94% of respondents who answered this question supported the notion of creating a national strategic transport network to replace the TEN-T. All respondents from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland supported establishing a national strategic transport network. Three submissions from organisations in England and one UK-wide organisation opposed a national strategic transport network, stating that regional settlements already provided arrangements to improve transport infrastructure between the nations of the UK.

Most submissions stated that any national strategic transport network must encompass a UK-wide network, covering all transport modes and linking to international gateways. A small number of respondents disagreed and believed only surface transport modes should make up a national strategic transport network, due to aviation and maritime sectors being primarily operated by the private sector.

Submissions varied on potential management and funding of a national strategic transport network. A slight majority of respondents argued that funding and management of a national strategic transport network should be primarily the responsibility of the UK Government, with input from the devolved administrations, government agencies, sub-national transport bodies and private sector organisations. A minority of submissions outlined other mechanisms, such as sole management by joint government agencies or establishing a new independent body funded by the UK Government.

Submissions clearly outlined that any national strategic transport network should reflect wider environmental and growth policy aims, such as improving sustainability, carbon reduction, quality of life and levelling up. Respondents stated the key aims of a national strategic transport network should be improving decision-making and investment at a national level and providing a platform for joined-up strategic planning.

9. With reference to the unique geographical position of Northern Ireland, please set out how best to improve cross-border transport connectivity with other UK nations.

10. Other than geographic, are there any other specific restrictions to improving connectivity between Northern Ireland and other UK nations?

Most submissions emphasised the need to upgrade the A75 and the A77 to improve links between Northern Ireland and Scotland and grow the volume of commercial and tourism traffic. Respondents outlined several issues facing these roads relating to safety, resilience and long journey times compared to competitor ports. Connectivity to and from the ports of Great Britain that provide access to Northern Ireland was outlined as an area for improvement, including road and rail access to Holyhead, Liverpool and Cairnryan ports.

Many respondents expressed that a fixed link across the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and Great Britain was unnecessary, indicating that the benefit-cost ratio would most likely be poor. Submissions raised numerous technical and construction challenges that a potential fixed link could face, including disruptive weather conditions and historic WWII munitions deposited across the sizeable Beaufort's Dyke. Respondents outlined that any fixed link crossing would require large scale infrastructure development on either side of the link to facilitate access and allow networks on both sides to manage increased traffic levels.

A small number of submissions stated their support for a fixed link, believing it could increase trade and serve as a more reliable and faster alternative to ferries, improving connections from Northern Ireland to Glasgow, Edinburgh and London.

A small number of respondents also raised that a fixed link between Holyhead and Dublin would connect to a greater volume of traffic in Dublin and provide access to the whole island of Ireland, compared to a route between Scotland and Northern Ireland. These respondents outlined that this could feed into current plans for a high-speed rail route between Belfast, Dublin and Cork.

Respondents highlighted the critical role aviation has in supporting connectivity to Northern Ireland and its economy. Submissions noted that the UK Government needs to take forward its decarbonisation agenda, however, air connectivity should continue to provide essential services to remote areas that cannot be served by high-speed rail or direct rail links. A smaller number of submissions countered this argument, stating that there needs to be a long-term modal shift away from air travel.

As previously stated in the analysis for Question 4, all aviation sector submissions cited the negative impact that APD imposes on domestic air travel and connectivity. Many respondents stated that APD has an inequitable impact on Northern Ireland because of its reliance on aviation for connectivity with Great Britain and as the Republic of Ireland does not have an equivalent tax on any flights. Submissions outlined that the latter hampers new route developments as airlines can establish routes in the Republic of Ireland without the tax being applied and leads to some people in Northern Ireland choosing to use airports in the Republic of Ireland instead, where Dublin Airport offers more destinations.

11. What else can be done to support greater transport connectivity between the nations of the UK?

12. Do you have any further comments?

Most submissions did not answer these two questions or referred to answers given to previous questions.

Submissions raised the difficulties of planning for future demand considering the COVID-19 pandemic, including uncertainty about economic recovery and changes to working patterns. Respondents suggested a new reality after COVID-19 presents opportunities for low-carbon technologies and innovations. A significant number of respondents highlighted

how improved collaboration on cross-border issues is required to facilitate investment decisions. Many respondents raised enhancing digital connectivity across the UK as essential to enabling economic recovery and supporting the levelling up agenda. Several submissions identified that the provision of step-free access was inadequate and a barrier to travel. Some respondents expanded on this issue, stating that cost also limited access, particularly for rail travel. Respondents said rail was expensive which prevented travel even if physical transport links were present and disproportionately affected people from lower socio-economic groups.

Conclusion

The evidence provided by respondents was carefully considered by the Review, facilitated further deliberations, and supported the creation of Sir Peter Hendy's final report. Sir Peter extends his gratitude to those who provided evidence and his final report includes a full list of acknowledgements.