

East-west or north-south?

Strategic priorities for a Welsh transport infrastructure

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The economic and social importance of transport in Wales is widely accepted. However, should the priority be east-west links with England and beyond, or should a balance be struck with improved connections between north and south?

Key Welsh transport links



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The Welsh transport network is a product of geography and history. A mountainous centre, the location of coalfields, and the importance of economic connections to English industrial centres has concentrated population and industry on the north and south coasts of Wales.

The busiest transport corridors in Wales are the east-west routes of coastal north and south Wales which form part of the strategic trans-European transport network. Trunk road and rail links join the port of Holyhead to Manchester and Liverpool, while the south western ports are linked to the cities of south Wales, southern England and, ultimately, Europe.

East-west road and rail links also join Aberystwyth to the English midlands, while the Heart of Wales line connects Swansea with Shrewsbury. However, these are less in demand as a result of sparse population densities in the central region.

As the main population and economic centres in Wales are in the north and south, with transport links focused on links to the UK and beyond, demand for north-south links is also comparatively low. The main north-south transport network currently includes:

- a north-south trunk road network, which forms a figure '8' and links the four corners of Wales;
- the Welsh Marches railway line, which links north and south coast destinations via Shrewsbury and Crewe; and
- a daily return air service between north and south Wales.

The economic and social impact of transport

According to the 2006 Eddington Report, the economic benefits arising from transport include:

- economic growth through increased production / consumption of goods and services, and improved productivity;
- an improved response to structural economic change; and
- improved quality of life through, for example, availability of leisure time.

More recently the role of transport in tackling Welsh social exclusion has been acknowledged. The 2008 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation identified Powys, Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, Gwynedd and Monmouthshire as the most deprived local authorities in Wales in terms of access to services. Transport planners have been urged to consider both access to services and jobs throughout Wales to tackle these issues.

The case for developing north-south links

Those who support balancing north-south and east-west priorities argue the need to develop north-south links has increased in the last decade. The establishment of the National Assembly, and other national institutions, in south Wales has refocused Welsh social and political life and increased demand for north-south travel.

Further, north-south journey times, critical for businesses in mid Wales and those trading domestically within Wales, are unsatisfactory. Significant economic benefits would result from reduced journey times, with knock-on health and road safety benefits through reduced stress and risk of accidents.

Finally, reduced travel times and costs will improve employment prospects for the rural population, and improve the access to services in mid-Wales necessary to help reduce deprivation.

Strengthening east-west routes

Those who prioritise east-west links consider better connections between north and south Wales to be a longer term objective.

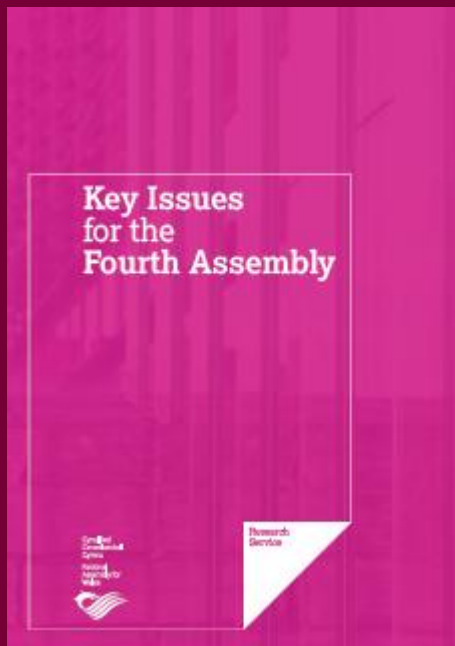
Significant 'pinch points' and a lack of resilience in road and rail networks on both key east-west corridors currently hamper key economic links outside Wales, and must be addressed to equip Wales for future demand allowing the economic and population centres of north and south Wales to sustain the Welsh economy.

The integration of Welsh and English freight networks creates dependence on strategic east-west corridors. Inadequate road and rail links have prevented full exploitation of Welsh ports as economic hubs. Moreover, the inadequacy of Cardiff International Airport, which has relatively poor overland access and has seen steady decline in usage in recent years, increases Welsh dependence on air infrastructure outside Wales. Thus, surface links to Heathrow, Manchester and other English airports will be of considerable importance for many years.

Finally, commentators who prioritise east-west links suggest there is a risk of unforeseen consequences from north-south transport infrastructure improvements, intended to promote regeneration, which do not fully consider wider social, economic and spatial policies. For example, they argue that transport improvements intended to develop services in deprived peripheral regions can actually centralise those services as they become easier to reach from the peripheral areas.

The challenge for the next Welsh Government is to balance both perspectives in the context of real terms capital spending cuts in transport of more than 35 per cent between 2010-11 and 2013-14.

Article taken from Research Service publication



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This document has been specially prepared for Assembly Members by the Research Service. It sets out some of the key issues likely to matter to Members during the Fourth Assembly.

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