

Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on challenges for public transport in cities and metropolitan regions

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POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. points out that it is necessary to reduce the external costs of transport in order to favour decarbonisation of mobility. Transport is responsible for around a quarter of greenhouse gas emissions in the EU. At the same time, some forms of it have a negative impact on people's quality of life and health through air pollution, traffic congestion, noise, accidents and sub-optimal use of space;
2. stresses that in order to ensure good quality of life in cities and to make them more accessible, clean and competitive, a modal shift towards sustainable modes of transport is necessary;
3. notes that the problem of scattering of urban functions in the form of suburbanisation and urban sprawl is a fundamental risk for the sustainable development of cities and regions. This causes not only degradation of space and reduction of farm, green and open spaces, but also an increase in external costs of residential land use and related travel, which are mainly borne by local government authorities;

Challenges relating to mobility in cities — to be considered in the Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy ⁽¹⁾

4. points out that increasing car traffic in cities and metropolitan areas leads to rising external costs relating to air pollution and lost time, which consequently also negatively effects work-life balance. Therefore, public transport should become one of the main components of urban mobility. At the same time, various forms of active mobility, such as cycling and walking should be reinforced to increase the sustainability of urban mobility;
5. draws the attention to the challenges of metropolitan regions in a broader sense and points out that the nature of metropolitan regions requires heavy commuting of citizens into urban cores. This makes the access to environmentally friendly and cost-effective public transport one of the biggest challenges of metropolitan regions ⁽²⁾;
6. points out the need to treat the transport system as an integrated system. The increasing importance of mobility as a service (MaaS) and the need to introduce innovative solutions in managing and organising transport should encourage local and regional authorities to link public and individual transport (particularly walking, cycling and using personal transport devices) in spatial planning and plans concerning transport;
7. notes that the decarbonisation objectives set by the European Green Deal and the EU's goal to reach climate neutrality by 2050 are ambitious but indispensable. For cities and metropolitan areas to be able to meet them, political decisions based on conceptual, organisational and educational work are necessary, as well as ensuring appropriate funding to achieve them;
8. recommends collecting data demonstrating mobility flows in the MRs in order to obtain comprehensive picture about the traffic situation to design more tailored measures, develop evidence-based sustainable urban mobility plans (SUMPs) and to channel investment from cohesion policy funds and beyond in a more targeted way;

⁽¹⁾ A public consultation on the *Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy* is ongoing, in line with the Action Plan (feedback period to 23.9.2020) (Ref. Ares(2020)3438177 — 1.7.2020): <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12438-Sustainable-and-Smart-Mobility-Strategy>

⁽²⁾ Opinion CDR 1896/2019 (OJ C 79, 10.3.2020, p. 8).

9. stresses that one of the sources of problems for urban mobility is limitations resulting from underfunding of infrastructure dedicated to urban public transport and non-motorised mobility. Local and regional authorities and their public transport companies need additional sources of funding aimed strictly at increasing the share of alternative and sustainable solutions to individual motor transport in the modal split;

10. underlines that public transport policy must be embedded into a broader social policy. It should be avoided that external costs of public transport such as noise, pollution, expropriation, infrastructure works, etc. are not unevenly oriented towards the socially most vulnerable people. Furthermore, fair access to all with regard to price-setting or connectivity must be ensured, in that way allowing for a better quality of life to all;

Ensuring that a real choice is possible with preference for sustainable means of transport on the road to the European Green Deal

11. points out that, where currently prevailing standards favour private cars in planning and funding, conditions need to be changed in a way that promotes more sustainable and efficient modes of transport. Current habits, however, stem from the availability and attractiveness of the various modes of transport, while most people are flexible in their choices in this area. By making the public transport more attractive in the terms of price, availability, frequency and continuity of transport connections, the real alternative to individual car mobility will arise;

12. highlights the importance of creating a public private partnership in cities and regions to engage private investment and develop innovative solutions in public transport. In this regard calls for a business friendly regulatory framework, which incentivises the growth of new business models and creates a competitive market;

13. stresses the importance of providing efficient and sustainable public transport beyond administrative borders of cities, especially for commuters, elderly and youngsters. Good cooperation and governance between public authorities at metropolitan level is key in this respect;

14. points out that changing social habits towards a greater share of less environmentally harmful means of transport requires awareness from users and above all that a real choice exists in this area;

15. notes that a deliberate preference for environmentally friendly transport is a further step. It is necessary to create pedestrian and cycling friendly space and a spatial preference for soft mobility and public transport in terms of the accessibility and attractiveness of routes and organisation of traffic. Such a change thus calls for coordination of spatial, urban and transport policies and multilevel cooperation beyond administrative borders to open up space for alternative forms of transport to cars;

16. calls on the European Commission to formulate, in close cooperation with Member States, the targets on investments for developing public transport more precisely; notes that there is a negative tendency to link investment in public transport with extending and increasing the capacity of the road system. Instead the clear priority should be given to public and collective transport in all its forms. Whenever rail transport is not feasible, BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) systems and HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lanes should be prioritised. Appropriate monitoring and regulatory arrangements should limit practices that are counter to the aims of sustainable transport policy;

17. points out that means of transport that are truly environmentally friendly are those, which not only reduce emissions, but save space, time and energy. In addition to walking and cycling, they also include forms of rail transport or Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and HOV (High Occupancy Vehicle) lanes. This is why suburban rail, metros, trams, low emission buses, in particular BRT, should form the basis of public transport for metropolitan areas and larger cities;

Mobility and public transport as key competences of local and regional authorities

18. notes that a significant amount of journeys are due to the lack of possibility to meet all needs in the places where people live. Therefore the policy should aim at the accessibility of all types of goods and services, particularly in the areas of health, education, sport, culture and social support and not just mobility in itself; at the same time, points out the long-term nature of spatial changes, supporting well-functioning urban-rural links avoiding depopulation of rural areas, while also highlighting the need to take ad hoc corrective actions in the area of the transport system;

19. is of the opinion that the primary objective of spatial and transport policy should be maximising the possibility to meet needs while minimising the need for travel. In the next step, the goal should be to rationalise travel, particularly through the appropriate modal split, to minimise the external costs of transport incurred by regional authorities; underlines also that an increased telework, as experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, could offer opportunities to rural areas in giving workers increased flexibility for choosing their place of residence;

20. notes the new trend towards less daily long-distance mobility needs due to the increase of teleworking with COVID-19 and that this trend could be long-lasting in combination with the implementation of concepts such as the '15 minutes city';

21. reminds that public transport networks should take new residential developments or emerging patterns of settlement into account as soon as possible and provide accessibility from the early stages, because once people acquire a car, they tend to use it; residents of new housing projects should have access to public transport from the first person moving into new homes;

22. stresses the need to limit suburbanisation, which is thriving in peri-urban areas, spreading out dozens of kilometres from city centres — and the bigger the given area, the bigger a problem it is. Therefore, it seems important to return to a settlement structure based on densification and a network of centres in which central functions are located in centres of appropriate scale which are indicated in planning and connected by efficient public transport. It is also important to plan new housing development in conjunction with public transport nodes;

23. calls on the European Commission to ensure funding not only for new investment in urban transport operation, but also for converting obsolete and inefficient solutions. These investments should be aimed mainly at modernisation of the rail systems, railway security and digitalisation, creating thus quicker, safer and more convenient transport systems. At the same time, the proposed investments could include elements such as collision-free car routes in cities, proper urban streets allowing more efficient use of space, limiting the need to travel, increasing the share of efficient means of transport in the modal split and reducing the external costs of transport. Such actions favour both the choice of public transport and alternatives to individual car transport and decrease the illusion that car travel from suburbs is cheap and easy when the external costs are actually borne by residents of cities;

An appropriate modal split and internalisation of external costs with guaranteed funding from EU funds in regions

24. notes that it is necessary to consider possibilities to boost investment in sustainable mobility, for example through the Connecting Europe Facility, Modernisation Fund and the Recovery and Resilience facility. It is also important to increase mobility through investment in infrastructure that improves accessibility of urban nodes and nodes in the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and to give priority to these nodes;

25. underlines the importance of the crucial challenge of increasing the share of more environmentally friendly transport, i.e. which consumes less energy and land. Therefore, sustainable and innovative ways of mobility might be an integral part of the submitted reforms within the national Recovery and Resilience Plans. This implies the need to make appropriate use of different means of transport to maximise the benefits and minimise social costs in line with the 'polluter pays' principle;

26. calls for the process of internalising external transport costs to be completed so that users' choices could also take the welfare of society into consideration. This particularly concerns taking account of the actual cost of road transport, which is currently significantly underestimated. Making this area more balanced will be an important factor in increasing the use of lowest external costs means of transport like rail transport and BRT, which should be the basis for public transport in metropolitan areas;

27. stresses the importance of ensuring cost competitiveness of public transport from the point of view of the traveller. Given that car traffic is the greatest source of external costs, the attractiveness of public transport should be ensured through a sufficiently high level of public subsidies financed in part by funds acquired through internalisation of costs of individual motorised transport;

28. stresses that rail as the backbone of regional mobility greatly contributes to territorial cohesion. It calls for stepping up investment in urban rail hubs, their better integration in the TEN-T network, improving cross-border connections and for developing the 'last mile' infrastructure to better integrate rail in the urban and suburban mobility chains ⁽³⁾.

29. It highlights the need to also support other sustainable public transport modes such as low emission buses, as a means to decongest cities, reduce emissions and achieve the climate objectives of the European Green Deal. For this, it is essential to provide economic incentives for the renewal of the fleet, the adoption of clean technologies, and investments in infrastructure (for example, bus-HOV lanes in metropolitan areas, transport interchanges that help to facilitate transfers, stops for boarding and disembarkation and deterrent parking, etc.)

30. calls for ensuring a greater share of funding for urban public transport from the Connecting Europe Facility, the Cohesion Fund and the European Regional Development Fund, making use of them faster, and greater impact of funding at the regional and local levels. These measures will play a decisive role in implementing the operational and technological solutions at the urban level and in ensuring sustainable and environmentally friendly solutions;

31. calls for support for urban mobility and its better connection with peri-urban and rural parts of the Metropolitan Regions, creating well-functioning integrated public transport systems primarily through regional authorities and their operational programmes for the coming 2021-2027 perspective. It is essential to make use of the wealth of experience, knowledge and potential of regional authorities, which ensures coordinated, effective and efficient action;

32. in this regards supports sustainable environmentally friendly public transport to be eligible under the specific objective for 'a greener, low-carbon Europe by promoting clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investment, the circular economy, climate adaptation and risk prevention and management' (PO 2) under the European Regional Development Fund and Cohesion Fund (ERDF-CF) Regulation — Commission proposal COM(2018) 372 final (as amended by COM(2020) 452 final), which will contribute to bettering air quality and noise reduction and significantly help the metropolitan regions to achieve the Green Deal objectives and transition towards climate neutrality;

Quality of service of public transport and anticipating crisis situations and ensuring safety in the event of threats, including pandemics

33. points out that in order to make public transport competitive compared to individual motorised transport, it is necessary to ensure high quality standards of public transport. Factors thereof include: spatial availability, operating times and frequency of service, punctuality and reliability, competitiveness with regard to travelling time, direct connections or efficient transfers, and comfort and safety of the means of transport;

⁽³⁾ Opinion CDR 2633/2020 (OJ C 440, 18.12.2020, p. 183).

34. points out that due to the critical situation caused by COVID-19 pandemic, MRs might experience a reverse of the shift towards using public transport. Citizens are again keener to use cars and, in many cases, commuting as solo travellers. At the same time, the MRs must invest significant financial resources when applying preventive hygienic measures in the vehicles of public transport. However, the higher costs have not resulted in more passengers using the public transport and the MRs lost a great share of the price of the tickets. At the same time the MRs are confronted with a substantial reduction of their regional budgets due to a lack of finance in the public sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the MRs budgets needs to be compensated and we shall take lessons and develop resilient public transport systems, which will be able to be a fair choice in the time of a next possible crisis;

35. calls for the use of the Just Transition Fund to support cities and metropolitan areas in their shift towards decarbonised public transport;

36. suggests joint EU-wide public procurement tenders also for clean minibuses, used for transport of particularly the elderly, disabled and school children, who need more tailored solutions. These minibuses are more expensive per passenger kilometre than bigger vehicles and have longer depreciation times but are just as important for a fully clean public transport network;

37. points out that, for public transport to be efficient it must be integrated in terms of space, organisation and tariffs. This is important particularly in metropolitan areas, regions with the capital cities and larger urban agglomerations where commuting involves connecting urban, suburban and local transport with national transport, but also in rural areas, where particularly the frequency of public transport can be challenging. Integration means a common pricing system and better interoperability between different public transport companies active in the same metropolitan area, including train companies. Integration also concerns soft mobility, ease of access to public transport stops for non-drivers and in the case of railway stations in sparsely built peri-urban areas, for individual motor vehicles;

38. underlines that we also have to improve railway station facilities and create smart mobility hubs, consisting of logistic hubs but also meeting spots that create a pleasant environment for both change of transport mode but also human interactions;

39. points out to the European Commission the need to speed up work, in cooperation with public transport operators, on EU cooperation on the provision of public transport information. It should be simpler to plan and make journeys by public transport also using the websites of individual regional transport operators;

40. suggests to the European Commission to establish and adopt, in cooperation with public transport operators, a Europe-wide framework allowing for efficient use of public transport in different cities in Europe. A variety of options that are sustainable in the long term should be considered;

41. suggests to the European Commission the possibility to develop, in cooperation with public transport operators, a Europe-wide framework for linking train tickets with urban transport tickets in departure and destination cities (e.g. for a set fee). Users would profit greatly from a single platform or mobile application and payment system. Such solutions are already in practice in various Member States and providing this possibility throughout the whole EU would make it easier to plan journeys;

42. calls for a systemic solution to the issue of unjustifiably high charges for carriers charged by rail network operators in connection with crossing national borders within the EU, which are passed on to passengers. These charges should not exceed the actual technical costs of the change of network, if there are any and should be abolished if there are not. This is one of the fundamental conditions for making long-distance rail travel competitive again, which in turn would promote an increase in use of public transport in destination cities;

43. stresses the need to develop Europe-wide standards for prevention and detection of specific threats, including pandemics, and practices to guarantee the safe movement of people should they occur. It is necessary to use the experience and examples of proven measures taken in many of the EU's regions and cities to combat the effects of COVID-19, in the ongoing work on the *Comprehensive Strategy for Sustainable and Smart Mobility*, which will replace the *White Paper — Roadmap to a Single European Transport Area — Towards a competitive and resource efficient transport system* ⁽⁴⁾.

Brussels, 10 December 2020.

The President
of the European Committee of the Regions
Apostolos TZITZIKOSTAS

⁽⁴⁾ A public consultation on the *Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy* is ongoing, in line with the Action Plan (feedback period to 23.9.2020) (Ref. Ares(2020)3438177 — 1.7.2020): <https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12438-Sustainable-and-Smart-Mobility-Strategy>