

Response by the North Wales Economic Ambition Board

Introduction

The North Wales Economic Ambition Board ('the Board') welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Welsh Government Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee. Until now there has been no overarching and independent process for assessing the long-term infrastructure needs of Wales so the Board sees the establishment of a National Infrastructure Commission for Wales ('the Commission') in principle as a positive step forwards.

The Board responds to the preliminary questions as follows:

1. What the role, remit and objectives of the Commission should be;

Both the remit and the objectives for the Commission must be clearly defined. The role should go beyond just 'analysing', 'advising' and recommending' as set out in the Consultation document, which is output that that could be achieved through the existing infrastructure assessment framework. The Commission needs to add something over and above this.

- The Commission should identify what the prioritised infrastructure needs across Wales as a whole are so that the WG can take informed decisions. The Commission's brief will be not just to assess what infrastructure schemes it considers necessary but also to measure what economic benefit will be accrued and how the projects meet the objectives set out in the Well Being Future Generations legislation.
- Being limited just to advising or making recommendations alone is not considered to be strong enough. In order to add weight to the Commission's findings, where an assessment or study is proposed there should be a requirement for the WG to consider it and respond within a specified time period.
- If a proposed infrastructure scheme is progressed then the Commission should have a monitoring role of the WG's progress on delivery.
- The Commission's remit should be to consider infrastructure that has an positive impact in Wales, and that would include both devolved and non-devolved infrastructure. There may well be instances, where the UK NIC is assessing either non-devolved infrastructure in Wales or infrastructure on the English side of the border. In these instances the Commission's remit must include the discretion to be actively engaged so that Welsh interests are taken into account.

- The WG should set a fiscal limit so that the Commission is enabled to make recommendations that are affordable and realistic.
- Two clear objectives should be developing long-term sustainable economic growth across all regions in Wales, and improving the quality of life for everyone living or working in Wales.
- Although the primary purpose of the Commission is to examine the economic impact of infrastructure investment, it should also consider the potential impact of infrastructure decisions on housing supply.

2. How the Commission should operate, and what methodologies it should adopt for conducting its work;

- The Commission must operate within the terms of the remit and objectives set down by the WG but the Chair and Commission members must have the discretion to operate and adopt methodologies they deem necessary to deliver the outcomes. If the framework is too prescriptive it could compromise the quality of the outputs.
- The Commission must be enabled to request data and analyses from WG departments, Regulatory bodies, and all relevant Public Bodies. Those bodies should be required to provide information reasonably requested by the Commission.

3. How the Commission should be governed and funded to ensure its independence from the Welsh Government;

- The legal status of the Commission is essential to it securing the necessary powers and support to the job tasked of it by the WG. Being seen to have an independent voice will strengthen the Commission's authority and influence.
- The Commission should be able to work independently of government departments within its remit but subject to guidance issued by the government.
- As a further guarantee of independence the WG may want to consider setting up the Commission as a Non-Departmental Public Body.

- Any studies completed by the Commission should be laid before the Senedd.

4. Examples of UK and international best practice that the Commission could learn from;

- It would seem sensible that the WG refer to the UK Government's NIC as there has already been a full consultation resulting in many valuable recommendations made to the UK Government as a result.
- Note that the Scottish Parliament has an Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, whose key role is to scrutinise the Scottish Government's policies and expenditure but not to consider and recommend infrastructure schemes.

5. How the work of the Commission should incorporate the principles of the Well Being of future Generations (Wales) Act 2015;

- The Commission should be added to the public bodies already listed in the Act. That would compel the Commission to comply with legislation and ensure that it would be working towards improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well being of Wales. As one of the Public Bodies covered by the Act the Commission will fall within the ambit of the Future Generations Commissioner and the Auditor General for Wales both of whom have the power to call the Commission to account for compliance.
- The WG should include the Well Being objectives as part of the overall objectives for the Commission. Any work then undertaken by the Commission would have to take those objectives into account and be accountable to the WG for compliance.

6. How and to what extent the work of the Commission should influence Welsh Government decision making and prioritisation of infrastructure projects;

- The sole reason for establishing the Commission should be to provide expert guidance on the Welsh infrastructure needs and to prioritise projects. It should follow therefore that the recommendations set the course for future infrastructure investment.
- The general public also need confidence that the recommendations made by the Commission are given proper consideration by the WG. Part of the

process could be that the recommendations are laid before the Senedd for debate and the WG should give a formal response

7. How the work of the Commission should interact with regional infrastructure priorities and City/Growth Deals; and

- At any time there will be many regional infrastructure plans either at the planning stage or underway. If the Commission's remit is to look at overarching infrastructure schemes there's a possibility of either overlap or conflict with other schemes. To avoid this it's essential that the Commission is fully aware of all regional schemes either being planned or underway. A suggested way of doing this is for regional bodies to feed into the Commission so that there is the awareness of the schemes and how they may impact on infrastructure work that the Commission is assessing.
- It's a similar situation with the City/Growth deals but easier as there are fewer of them for the Commission to be aware of and take their plans into account. Nevertheless it's important for both sides to interact as the work of one can strengthen the other and *vice versa*.

8. What relationship the Commission should have with the UK Government's Commission on cross-border issues and infrastructure in areas that are partially devolved.

- The UK NIC will only deal with non-devolved infrastructure and the devolved administrations will deal with responsibilities that have been devolved for infrastructure. It is logical for the WG Commission, UK NIC to be aware of circumstances where respective responsibilities may overlap and to develop consultation arrangements to allow for this.
- Notwithstanding the point above, infrastructure can straddle the border with rail being just one example. It makes sense that if such an infrastructure need is identified that it is treated as a single scheme rather than there is a division at the border and that can only be achieved if the Commission and the NIC are working collaboratively.
- Any infrastructure related matters, whether cross border, partially devolved or non-devolved should have the input and scrutiny of the Commission if it will impact on Wales in some way. In practice this will mean that a close working relationship between the Commission and the UK NIC is essential.