

## **CASE STUDY – THE REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION STRATEGY**

### **Background**

‘Shaping Our Future – The Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025’ contained a commitment to develop a Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) to consider transportation options for Northern Ireland over the 10-year period from 2002 to 2012.

### **Approach**

To deliver this commitment a dedicated Regional Transportation Strategy Division was established early in 2000 within the Department for Regional Development. The project to develop the Regional Transportation Strategy lasted for two years and resulted in the production of a Strategy that was widely and warmly welcomed and which enjoyed a broad consensus of positive opinion and support. Central to the development of the RTS was an extensive, meaningful and honest communication and consultation process which involved several distinct stages.

#### Spring 2000

A communication project team was established to manage this process. This team developed a communication strategy which detailed what was to be communicated when, with whom and by what method. This strategy also identified the need to educate and inform participants in the process as well as collecting and considering their opinions. This team was responsible for developing and regularly updating a website, preparing, organising and participating in presentations and meetings, handing responses to enquiries and comments, issuing documents to interested parties and coordinating Assembly and Committee business.

The initial stage in the consultation involved the collation of views from all 26 District Councils in Northern Ireland and other targeted representative and interest groups. Submissions were sought on eight issues that were considered key to the development of a Transportation Strategy.

The information received was used to:

- Define and agree a vision for the future regional transportation system;
- Identify the characteristics that such a system might have;
- Produce a list of transport problems and potential solutions; and
- Identify potential funding sources.

#### Summer 2000 - Railways Task Force

Over the summer of 2000, some RTS division staff participated in the work of the Railways Task Force which considered the future for railways in Northern Ireland. Consultation carried out during this exercise subsequently informed the development of the RTS. The aim was to inform and collect the widest possible range of views to inform the decision-making process. Around 1,200

people attended public meetings and 210 formal responses were received during consultation on the work of the Task Force.

#### January – April 2001

'Developing a Regional Transportation Strategy - A Consultation Paper' was issued in January 2001. This document drew on the consultation to date and sought to present information and seek views on the key issues affecting the movement of people and goods in Northern Ireland. Over 2,000 copies of this consultation paper were issued and meetings were held with 77 stakeholder representative groups. Around 140 formal responses were also received. Quantitative and qualitative attitudinal research to gather information on the current and possible future travel behaviour and the acceptability of potential solutions was carried out across Northern Ireland. Two thousand household interviews were conducted and 12 focus group meetings held.

The feedback on the consultation paper, together with the results of the attitudinal research, led to significant amendments and additions being made to the characteristics of the vision and the lists of transportation problems and potential solutions. It also informed consideration of additional funding sources and provided information that supported the preparation of the associated draft Equality Impact Assessment.

#### September 2001

The analysis of the responses to the consultation to date and the quantitative data collected was published in the RTS Consultation Process Interim Report which was included in the information pack for an independently facilitated conference held on 28 September 2001. Around 200 participants, representing key stakeholders, were asked to consider alternative potential strategies. The views of participants were recorded and published in an independent report produced by the facilitators. These were taken into account in the development of the 'Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy'. The question and answer session at the end of the conference involved the panel of experts who were advising the RTS team.

#### February 2002

The 'Proposed Regional Transportation Strategy' was published and generated a significant level of interest including a further 149 formal submissions and around 1,300 post-card and e-mail responses as a result of a Friends of the Earth campaign. This information was considered during the preparation of the RTS and associated Equality and Health Impact Assessments. A final consultation report was also published.

#### Throughout the two-year RTS development period

An inter-departmental committee was established to elicit the views of, and impacts on, other NI Departments. Great efforts were made to obtain the views of Assembly Committee members and to gain their support. This involved attendance at many Committee meetings and additional meetings were with individual members who had specific concerns. Our Minister(s) was actively engaged throughout the strategy development.

## **Outcomes**

The underlying principles and strategic direction of the RTS were unanimously agreed by the Assembly on 3 July 2002. Transportation budgets have increased considerably and are approaching the levels identified in the RTS.

## **Lessons Learned**

- Do not underestimate the time involved in communicating effectively.
- In a policy environment that includes a high public interest, consultation documents should strike a balance that allows the layperson to understand issues without alienating the expert by oversimplifying complex issues.
- Be aware of the level of understanding of your target audience(s) and prepare communications accordingly.
- Addend technical information and supporting detail in appendices or supporting documents. Do not overload consultees with detail or technical jargon.
- Use several different means of communication - written documents, internet, meetings, phone calls, presentations, conferences, qualitative and quantitative research, and different media upon request (e.g. audio tapes for blind).
- Communicate your key messages in a number of ways. Be explicit in detailing how improvements will impact upon, for example, different interest groups (e.g. people with disabilities, children etc) as well as services and how proposals support other government policies and objectives.
- Prepare and circulate 'lines to take' and responses to common queries so that all members of staff can participate in dealing with consultees if needed. Prepare representatives thoroughly for participation in meetings and conferences.
- Think carefully about what you ask consultees. Consider how do you intend to use the feedback from every question asked and be prepared for both negative and positive responses. Learn from the feedback as it will add value to the process.
- Try and get stakeholders to prioritise their 'wants' and 'needs' and to group together when responding.
- Consider in advance how you will analyse the information collected. For example responses might be grouped into business sector, government bodies, voluntary and community sector, and private individuals.
- Consider if it is appropriate to give 'extra weight' to responses from certain key stakeholders, if so, be prepared to justify this.

- Independent and respected facilitation and reporting lends credibility to conferences as can a panel of experts.
- Don't hide behind consultants.
- Provide easily identifiable evidence of the direct link or relationship between consultation feedback analysis and strategy content. This might be in the form of 'track changes' to policy statements, or strategic proposals, showing differences between what was prepared pre and post consultation.
- Don't expect to please everybody and never assume anything!