Public consultation on the announced future European Strategy for Sustainable and Smart Mobility

A contribution from the Peri-Urban Regions Platform Europe (PURPLE)

Preface

The Peri-Urban Regions Platform Europe (PURPLE) is grateful to the European Commission for the opportunity to take part in this consultation exercise. Although that exercise addresses both an evaluation of the 2011 White Paper and plans for a forthcoming Sustainable and Smart Mobility strategy, our focus is almost exclusively on the second element as this paper's title suggests. We feel that others with a closer interest and expertise in the specific sector itself are better placed than we are in terms of making specific evaluative judgements about the White Paper. Our starting point is a more general place-based one considering the importance and impact of mobility structures and services upon peri-urban areas and their relationships with territories of different kinds.

We are also very much aware that some topics are more logically addressed at the level of a network such as PURPLE, others elements are better engaged with by individual member regions. To that end we have been selective in which elements of the on-line template we have completed.

In this paper therefore, we share some thoughts with specific regard to questions raised in the consultation template document as well as providing some context from a broader peri-urban perspective. As a European level network consisting of regions who consider themselves peri-urban (by which we mean places where urban and rural coincide, overlap and co-exist), we have a particular interest in the complex web of interactions and interdependencies between places urban, peri-urban and rural – and the ways in which those relationships manifest in contexts such as mobility and transportation.

PURPLE believes that identifying and reinforcing linkages between rural, peri-urban and urban areas is of paramount importance for the well-being of all types of territories across Europe. In that sense our interest in promoting understanding of the realities, interests and potential of peri-urban areas is not a "parochial" or self-interested one, but one based in trying to genuinely arrive at balanced and mutually beneficial arrangements.

Context

PURPLE sees an increasingly urgent need for a policy framework such as the Territorial Agenda 2020 which is genuinely place-sensitive. In which, and from which, all areas of policy might draw in a joined-up and cogent way. Such an approach would in particular balance and serve both "urban" and "rural" concerns whilst at exactly the same time acknowledging that such a crude binary model falls well short of capturing current European territorial reality. This point applies every bit as much to policy in the area of transport/mobility as to any other.

Indeed there is a particular salience around the topic of mobility in that it is of its very nature about linking and connecting places and people and it both impacts upon and reflects the ways in which that connectivity happens – or doesn't. At the same time as saying that, we will wish to be aware that connectivity is in part about physical connectivity and in part about digital/virtual connectivity. Digitalisation is to all intents and purposes a cross-cutting theme as reflected in the elevated status accorded to it in the notion of the "twin transitions" [or transformations] – green and digital. That in turn has a particular pertinence for considerations about mobility which must include cognisance of shifts from physical to virtual connectivity and the direct impact that has on travel patterns.

As regards any future strategy and the policy measures which might come to be adopted to support that strategy, PURPLE's starting point is, unsurprisingly, a call for measured consideration of peri-urban areas such as those represented by its member regions. Our key purpose as a network is to ensure that peri-urban interests are fully taken into account in all aspects of EU policy making; that the potential and actual impacts of all policies upon peri-urban places, people and businesses are understood; and that all policy and proposed implementation measures are effectively "proofed" in this regard in the same way as we talk so often about "urban proofing" and "rural proofing" policy and programmes.

As a network of regional and local authorities with interest in peri-urban territories, PURPLE rejects any binary urban-rural model and argues that territorial reality is rather more complex. Territories of different types inter-relate and are interdependent, and they rely one upon the other as part of functional areas – and this is to a great degree directly attributable to mobility and transport systems of course. There are complex sets of relationships between locations of different types and they compete and combine one with the other over finite levels of resource, natural, financial or other. Nowhere is this more clearly and obviously seen than in those places which we judge peri-urban – where rural and urban features coexist and coincide and from, to, across and within which, transportation and movement occurs every day.

That co-existence between territories of different types, including rural, peri-urban, urban, (and gradations between), requires policies and practices regarding sustainable and smart mobility, and a joined-up and equitable approach across a huge range of actors and with other policy areas, reflecting the different realities in different types of places, their characteristics, roles and contributions, potential, and the challenges and obstacles that each face – albeit not in isolation one from the other

Summary response

1 Lessons from the Covid-19 crisis
Clearly, for all its negative (indeed tragic) impact, which no-one would wish to downplay, the outbreak has presented an opportunity to reassess, rethink and reset what is done in policy terms in a myriad of different ways. Mobility and transport issues have been highly visible throughout the crisis with huge changes to travel and transportation patterns relating to passengers, goods and the delivery of services. Different journeys - and different volumes of journeys - have been made over the past months compared to past trends. Clearly the outbreak has impacted in different ways in urban, peri-urban and rural locations, and although it has come about in a way for which no-one would have wished, it has caused many to reconsider the complex web of interactions between places of different types to which we refer in the earlier sections of this paper. In particular we have been prompted to rethink the ways in which urban centres and the areas outside or beyond those centres inter-relate and are connected (physically and digitally).

It seems apparent that much will never return to quite the way it was previously, something that has immediate and important implications for the planning, delivery and maintenance of transportation infrastructure and service provision. If the nature of working lives is to remain anywhere near as far removed from the previous norm as it has done for the previous six months, with so many working partly or wholly from home with the assistance of digital technology (whilst at the same time recognising that for many home-working is not a viable option), then there are very clear and fundamental implications for future levels and nature of demand on human passenger services especially.

In similar vein, the implications for the financial viability of such transportation systems where they are operated wholly or partly in the private sector, and for the nature and extent of services demanded by citizens in the case of reshaped public services, - often already overburdened by financial pressures and struggling to react appropriately to many issues arising from the impact of the pandemic, - are equally obviously an area for immediate attention and concern.

2. Climate and environmental dimensions (the green transition)
The environmental impact of the dramatic changes that have been seen in the volume and types of journeys being undertaken over the course of 2020, has been well-documented with unprecedented drops in pollution levels associated with transportation, soaring rises in air quality and the reintroduction of habitats and species in places from which they had long been absent (or near absent). Again this has manifested very differently in urban, peri-urban and rural settings - in all of which circumstances already varied anyway of course. Much of the current policy debate is about the extent to which one or more of these changes might prove to be lasting as opposed to temporary, and whether otherwise unanticipated shifts might mow occur - for example a lasting reluctance to return to shared public transport services, leading to a higher proportion of journeys by private vehicles than was the case pre-pandemic.

Thinking beyond Covid related factors, there are points of consideration here about the different environments, landscapes, habitats and climate change related challenges etc. to be found in different types of places – urban, peri-urban and rural. Mobility and transport systems impact upon all these different environments with uneven effect, and with different results. For instance, the peri-urban is frequently (and stereotypically) associated with commuter routes of different kinds –

road and rail primarily – which will pass through such areas often as part of a complex web involving journeys (and transportation) to, from, and between, urban centres. That implies an environmental impact, in terms of infrastructure building (and resulting land use and landscape changes), of pollution and air quality, and detrimental health impacts alongside shifts and evolutions in quality of life in different places, upon access to services, goods, jobs and other places.

3. Overcoming barriers to sustainability in transport and mobility systems and services
The need for a joined-up series of mobility and transportation systems and services is a key prerequisite for fit-for-purpose sustainable and smart mobility. That in turn implies a joined-up policy approach - perhaps more accurately a joining up of different policy approaches. One obvious example of the need to move beyond policy silos is to ensure that policy regarding mobility and policies regarding digitalisation are "talking to each other". With the clear potential for more people and more businesses to adopt digital technology as a means to change the way they work (and of course this is not only about working), there are impacts and consequences ("externalities" as those beginning from a more economic starting point will often term it), on the journeys made by both people and goods. Digital policy will need to take account of those impacts, their desirability and knock-on effects, mobility planners will want and need to do exactly the same, especially in the context of planning infrastructure and services based on demand levels.

As well as the clear need for a full consideration of the impact and repercussions of the digital transition, physical connectivity is also a vital concern here, not just the need to connect major urban centres (so often the [over] focus), or even to connect major urban centres with the areas which surround them, but to connect these different "layers". If we follow the principle that a chain is as strong as its weakest link, then we will want to ensure that we do not over-focus on "primary" routes (of whatever kind") but also look at the ways in which these in turn connect (or fail to connect!) to secondary and tertiary routes. Unless all are connected we do not have a genuinely joined-up system.

This point manifests especially clearly in peri-urban areas where transport systems are frequently heavily shaped by their relationships with major urban centres – to which they are often considered to be no more than ancillary. In reality the interdependency between the two is genuinely (and literally!) two-way but all too often the system is designed to reflect the "interests" and priorities of the urban centres to an imbalanced extent. That for example can make travel within – as opposed to to and from, peri-urban areas unduly, complex, inefficient and costly with a marked scarcity of direct connections. The point extends indeed to the interoperability of systems across urban centres and peri-urban areas.

And in the same way again, the infrastructure that might go to support multi-modal travel is frequently less well thought out in peri-urban as opposed to urban areas – indeed the "drag" effect of transport nodes designed for the primary benefit of urban areas can have a directly negative impact on the sustainability of non-urban transport and mobility systems. It is imperative to get the design and location of nodes right if we are to achieve the modal shift towards which much policy interventions are aimed.

Specific observations:

1. Transport infrastructure and services constitute physical linkages within and between territories of different kinds. They can therefore ensure tangible synergies but at the same time may fail to do that or make those synergies harder to achieve

2. Cross-territorial public transport should be efficient, reliable, accessible and safe, to increase its uptake and decrease the dependency on private vehicles

3. Mobility systems and services are inextricably linked to issues of accessibility – the absence of such systems and services being an obvious cause of exclusion, but also serving as a brake in terms of regional/local development

4. From a peri-urban perspective, transport and mobility connectivity is often addressed through the prism of commuting – this and other forms of mobility and are extremely important for local and regional development …

5. …. But at the same time, peri-urban transportation and mobility issues extend way beyond commuting and we must not over-characterise in that one simplistic way

6. Different types of territories face distinct challenges in terms of transportation and mobility systems and services. That needs not simply to be recognised, but acted upon in real ways if the European Green Deal (EGD) goal of leaving no-one behind is to be realised

7. It is imperative to think in terms of functional areas (and not only functional <u>urban</u> areas); transportation and mobility is a determining factor of that functionality (and of course there is never only a single functionality in any one location)

8. Innovation, similarly, is place-dependant and the development and use of innovative solutions will need to take account of different circumstances in different types of places

9. This is of particular relevance to peri-urban transport and mobility considerations – often over-simplistically "swept-up" as part of functional urban areas -, they are in reality in many ways key parts of a complex web of functional mosaics, and a key connectivity point for urban and rural people and places

10. Transport infrastructure is the physical backbone of mobility, services should be conceived in such a way to maximise linkages and enable synergies not only between rural, peri-urban and urban areas but also within them

11. That last point constitutes a key element within more local/community resilience strategies and is important at that more general level also therefore

12. It also reflects the reality that transportation and mobility systems and services constitute important factors in the broader well-being of citizens, economic growth and territorial cohesion. They need to be regarded from that broader starting point

13. It is equally important not to lose sight of the behaviour change dimension of bringing transportation and mobility systems into better alignment with the EGD goals – this applies at the levels not only of individuals and communities but also to public bodies and private operators

14. Transport policy should be integrated between rural, peri-urban and urban areas

15. Transport policy should also be linked to other sectoral policies including measures relating to land use planning, protection of environment and climate change as well as local renewable energy

16. The net effect should be that EU transport and mobility policy, strategies, and regulatory and support measures, should be territorially sensitive and support integrated solutions that

serve residents of, businesses in and visitors to urban, peri-urban and rural areas – in all directions and in all combinations

17. Policy at all the EU, national, regional and local levels needs to be congruent in relation to the transport infrastructure including the Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T), as well as with national, regional and local networks

18. An update in the way in which TEN-T provisions on urban nodes are fine tuned so as to better link TEN-T and regional transport systems would be beneficial in this context

19. In doing so, and as a general rule of principle, the regional and local dimension must never be subjugated to considerations which are unduly weighted to the transnational and national levels

20. One key way in which to implement the joined-up policy approach is to work towards Intermodal regional transport hubs in peri-urban and rural areas as well as urban ones

21. Such hubs (with an emphasis on intermodal) serve as an efficient way to integrate urban and regional transportation networks that cover peri-urban and rural areas

22. That equivalence of importance of the transnational, national, regional and local levels needs to be directly reflected in funding and investment arrangements

23. Unevenness of investment and access to funds will at best result in uneven transportation and mobility systems and at worst in a fractured, disconnected set of systems and arrangements which fail to connect people and places and embed disadvantage and inequality of opportunity

24. The prima facie most obvious way in which transport and mobility might help to achieve the European Green Deal (EGD) ambitions is to reduce its levels

25. This applies regardless of how clean or green that transport is and how much progress we make as regards modal shift

26. The current Covid-19 situation with its elements of restrictions of movement and increased levels of teleworking etc. has brought about just that effect over the course of 2020 – reversing a long-time trend in the opposite direction

27. That change in levels of transportation and mobility has manifested differently in different types of places – urban, peri-urban and rural etc.

28. The lasting impacts and changes brought about by the pandemic are hard to forecast, but at least some elements of that change seem likely to persist

29. Some of these changes might be harnessed in a positive way (uptake of active travel modes post-lockdown, lower levels of commuting), as part of a more general strategy to achieve EGD goals

30. That need to keep broader EGD goals in mind should also prompt us to ensure adequate protection of green areas and their biodiversity is take into account while developing or enlarging transport infrastructure

31. Any plans to enlarge transport infrastructure should be calibrated against the current general public reluctance to use (shared) public transport which serves to drive down demand levels, congestion and income ….

32. …. Each of those elements has implications both positive and negative

33. Such changes triggered (or at least accelerated) are, in turn, likely to impact on the demand for mobility service and its related infrastructure and the commercial viability of transport operations and operators

34. At the same time, and notwithstanding any current reluctance to use public transport and the unclear commercial viability that this results in, a strong public transport system and a shift from road to rail and active mobility is required as much as ever

35. Peri-urban areas are prime examples of areas where bold public investment is needed to bring this about so that we have an EGD aligned transport system

36. This picture of investment requirements will vary in different sorts of territories – it is therefore imperative that approaches to transport and mobility are place-sensitive and rooted in the principle of equivalence

37. Similarly, when we think about cleaner and greener transport, it is vital to bear in mind that the scope and viability to use new forms of vehicles will vary from one type of territory to another – typically most straight-forward to apply in densely-populated and built-up areas, we risk disadvantaging other places here if a broader territorial approach is not used

38. The European Year of Rail 2021 gives us a key opportunity to revisit and further develop our thinking about much of what this paper addresses

39. As regards the governance dimension - Permanent governance bodies should be established to cooperate on issues relating to transport and mobility across urban, peri-urban and rural areas

40. These place-sensitive and inclusive governance bodies should be directly involved in the development of transport and mobility infrastructure and the provision of integrated public transport services

41. The role of such bodies should also be recognised by EU institutions in the shaping of programmes designed to implement policy, in their funding mechanisms and in the governance arrangements relating to those programmes.

PURPLE (Peri-urban Regions Platform Europe)

PURPLE is striving for greater recognition of Europe's peri-urban regions in European policy and regulation, to ensure long term sustainability for these important, complex, and multi-functional territories. Its members represent peri-urban territories, where urban and rural features co-exist.

These areas are working together to maximise the advantages resulting from their location in proximity to large cities while minimising adverse impacts on the character, landscape and environment that make them distinct and special. Peri-urban regions in Europe are facing over-pressure. The balance between sustainable open space, sustainable agriculture and urban spatial and economic dynamics needs to be re-established. There are opportunities as well as challenges for those living and working in peri-urban regions, which should be reflected in tailor-made policies and strategies.

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