

European transport policy

Mr Keir Fitch, Deputy Head of Cabinet of EU Transport Commissioner Siim Kallas, spoke on current issues and aspirations.

It was nearly a year since publication of the White Paper, "The Future of Transport - Roadmap for a Single Transport Area", which aimed for free movement of people and goods. Europe faced the challenges of the target of an increase in passenger kilometres of 50% by 2050 and an 80% increase in freight kilometres. Currently transport was 96% dependent on oil. Fuel security was an issue and the exploiting of fossil fuels was becoming increasingly problematic. The challenge of climate change had led to the setting of a target of 80% reduction in CO2 emissions by 2050.

Vice-President Kallas had stated, "restricting mobility is not an option"; and nor was taxing people to achieve modal shift. Rail had to be made more attractive for passengers and it had to become more reliable for freight.

In the autumn of 2011, the EU had agreed investment in the core TEN network for the next 8-10 years to ease bottlenecks and improve cross-border links. It was important to join key cities, ports and industrial areas. The European Parliament was still discussing which missing cross-border links should be funded.

A 4th Railway Package, possibly to be called "Better Railways", was due to be launched later this year by the European Commission. Much work was still to be done towards harmonisation of technical standards. At the moment each national railway was still too often "doing its own thing."

Our speaker said that freight liberalisation had led to innovation - "anyone can get a licence to run." Passenger liberalisation, however, had made more progress in some countries than in others. In Germany, for example, costs had been reduced by contracting out regional services. "Passenger liberalisation is not an end in itself", Mr Fitch stressed, adding "It is still important to preserve the network benefits of rail."

The European Commission would probably not adopt a "one size fits all" approach, but set a range of options from which member states could choose the one which best suited them.

The result had to be a service that was better for customers.

On passenger rights, Mr Fitch said that the European Union had done much in the past ten years and that air passengers' rights in Europe were now "the best in the world." By this time next year, there would be rights across all public transport sectors.

However, there remained a challenge to make multimodal journeys more effective.

Existing passenger rights had perhaps been tested more than anyone could have foreseen during the volcanic ash crisis. Questions had been raised about how far one could go with customer care and protection. There was currently a public consultation on air passenger rights and it was important that passenger organisations contributed to it.

Enforcement of passenger rights was also variable in different member states and needed to be improved. Passengers needed to be more aware of their rights, notably on accessibility, information, reimbursement, compensation (if appropriate), customer care in the event of substantial delays and quick resolution of complaints.