



DART Link to Airport

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DART Airport Link

The debate on how the State can upgrade vital public transport networks is brewing with practical and imaginative suggestions proffered across the public policy spectrum.

This is best encapsulated in the at times raucous discussion on a proposed Metro connected to Dublin Airport. MetroLink aims to construct a light rail system to connect Swords, Dublin Airport, and the city centre, eventually continuing south to Charlemont and eventually integrating with the existing Luas Green Line.

While the proposed line, which recently received planning approval, has been broadly accepted by various stakeholders and government ministers there are those who question the feasibility of the project.

The Chief Executive of Ryanair Michael O'Leary is of the view that the MetroLink is a waste of money.

Describing the total sum of €20bn as equivalent to “ten children’s hospitals”, O’Leary has claimed that 90% of the traffic from the airport is to the suburbs and countryside - currently not included in the proposed Link.

Indeed, the acclaimed businessman Dermot Desmond similarly dismissed the proposal suggesting that Artificial Intelligence (AI) will make such public transport projects obsolete.

But while the polemics of provocative and controversial businessmen attract attention, more nuanced and productive suggestions are ignored as they seldom make gravitating headlines.

Last year DAA Chief Executive Kenny Jacobs mentioned that while he is in favour of the Metro Link, a DART rail link connecting the airport with Clongriffin could be done quicker and cheaper. “I would not pause the metro to think about the DART,” he said adding, “I would do both.”

Of course, MetroLink will serve different catchments and is the National Transport Authority's (NTA) and governments prioritisation. A MetroLink project funding allocation of €2bn did feature in the recently revised NDP presumably with the intention of signalling to the market the government’s commitment to the project in the hope of bolstering confidence therefore prompting potential international consortia to submit tenders. However, there is no doubt a degree of political and public nervousness and scepticism is associated with the MetroLink; cost speculation is characterised by pendulum-like swings from €11bn to €23bn, and it may take longer than expected to deliver. These factors, alongside prudent concerns of the future financial health of the nation based on geo-political events surely warrant an alternative to the proposal as suggested by Mr Jacobs.

As such the government should consider dusting off the recommendations of the All-Island Strategic Rail Review.

The North South review was part of a cross-border joint project which concluded in July 2024 with over 30 recommendations for transforming the island's rail network to a higher-capacity, faster, more frequent, and electrified system by 2050. Some key proposals included the creation of new lines, the upgrading of existing

ones, the development of rail freight, and enhancing regional connectivity to support sustainable development and meet net-zero goals.

The rail review also proposed a DART spur to Dublin Airport.

The DART Airport link would complement rather than replace MetroLink, serving different needs and offering near-term benefits, it would be a practical interim step, particularly given the slow implementation timeline of MetroLink. The MetroLink is unlikely to be operational until 2038-2040, 2035 at the very earliest. The DART Airport link would be operational by 2030 with a cost estimate below €1 billion.

This heavy-rail corridor is relatively straightforward at approximately 7km long between the airport and Clongriffin station: across agricultural lands, elevated just to the east of the M1 to get over the motorway and remaining on stilts through the car park and parallel to the internal airport road. An airport spur, as proposed by the All-Island Strategic Rail Review, may also provide the opportunity for housing development at scale along its route with some new stations, therefore contribution to address of Dublin's housing challenge.

The MetroLink's underground construction is expected to elevate the price tag, this is not necessary for the DART Airport Link.

There is an objective at EU level to link EU core airports (of which Dublin is one) to the core TEN-T rail network. Dublin Airport is the biggest airport in the EU not directly linked with the core rail network. There are ample examples of airports being linked by both heavy and light rail serving different market segments. Seventeen of the main airports in the UK are served by heavy rail. Some of the larger airports e.g. London Heathrow and Manchester are also supplemented by metro type services.

The peaks at the airport do not coincide with peak commute times and as such this link could be accommodated in advance of 3 or 4 tracking north of Connolly (i.e. ongoing Four Track project).

Given the nature of the project, it may be attractive for EU and EIB funding. The spur is now part of the All-Island Strategic Rail Review – this is the first time it has been included in a government policy document.

The capacity of Dublin airport has been limited by road congestion concerns. These concerns could be alleviated by the proposed heavy rail spur which could remove a considerable volume of cars / buses from the road network.

Dublin airport, the key gateway to Ireland with passenger growth breaking all records, is required to achieve net zero emissions by 2030, those associated with vehicular access to from the airport will have to be curtailed by greater use of EVs and modal shift to public transport. The proposed heavy rail link could make a major contribution in this regard. Easy rail access would be available to both T1 and T2 with the station located broadly between them and with the station located at a short walking distance from both terminals.

This proposed rail link would provide enhanced connectivity and would be of significant benefit to citizens, tourists and business travellers offering easy and convenient access to the wider regional and national rail network including Dublin city centre, a range of hotels, the central business district including IFSC, Grand Canal Dock and Aviva Stadium.

The case for a DART Airport Link was first commissioned by the government in 1991 by a joint Aer Rianta / CIE study, and should now be reconsidered by Ministers to help avoid current cost overruns and stakeholder resistance. A connection of Dublin Airport to the national heavy rail network is an EU regulated requirement by 2040. With Metrolink now planning approved, albeit subject to a judicial review, there should be an opportunity for discussing heavy rail connection as a complementary initiative.