SUBMISSION FROM LIGHT RAIL SOLUTIONS

We would like to present evidence to the committee on the bill for the Glasgow Airport Rail Link (GARL), as currently proposed by SPTE, on the grounds that the scheme offers a less than optimum solution if adopted in the form of heavy passenger rail.

The provision of a short heavy rail shuttle service of the nature proposed for the Glasgow Airport link in the current parliamentary proposals is inappropriate because heavy rail infrastructure is relatively inflexible, much more costly to provide, much more costly to operate and, in consequence, like all heavy rail passenger services will always require continuing and significant annual operating subsidies drawn from the public purse than would a light rail alternative.

There are bottlenecks in the heavy rail network between the Airport and Glasgow which we believe will not be properly resolved by the scheme as proposed. This means that the reliability and punctualities of the existing timetables will be diminished and that future growth though more frequent train service patterns and passenger service levels will always be inhibited by the available capacity provided by this scheme at Glasgow Central and its approaches. Similarly Paisley Gilmour Street station offers serious capacity challenges to the additional services to the Airport.

The proposed link will be unlikely to deliver reliably, either the initial or planned future levels or frequency of service normally expected between city centres and major international airports. We believe that the scheme will not be able to deliver in full, the anticipated traffic growth forecasts for the airport itself.

We believe that the 50% increase in rail use, measured by passenger kilometres as originally proposed in Central Government’s The 10 Year Transport Plan (July 2000) and as adjusted in subsequent Scottish Government policy documents, and as adopted locally for the Greater Glasgow conurbation, will be significantly inhibited by this scheme.

Furthermore, the self-contained “dedicated shuttle” nature of the service means that it will not be directly connected to important destinations within Scotland. All rail passengers, normally encumbered by baggage, will require physical interchanging (detrain/walk/entrain) at Glasgow Central, therefore the scheme will not provide any benefits to populations beyond the airport or Glasgow Central, by connecting into the wider Scottish railway network. Consequently, the need for a heavy rail scheme is much diminished.

We believe that alternative more affordable solutions have not been properly explored nor considered sufficiently to justify the capital and revenue burden that this scheme will place upon the public purse, and that the business case and socio-economic appraisals are therefore inadequate and incomplete. A solution involving light rail should have been thoroughly considered which can provide higher frequency of service, less intrusive and much cheaper
infrastructure, better accessibilities, serving greater numbers of potential passengers, and providing better connectivity links within the city and with other parts of Scotland, much better and easier DDA compliance, and no future demand for significant annual public operating subsidy.

Therefore we wish to give evidence to the committee on the proposed scheme on the following grounds:

1. We believe the scheme does not offer the best value for public money, when compared with light rail alternatives, which have lower unit capital cost and do not require annual public operating subsidies.

2. We believe light rail alternatives will realise more benefits for passengers. We believe that the planned benefits of a light rail alternative are similar to those of a heavy rail solution but, based on other UK experience, their extent will be much greater. The impact on regeneration and social exclusion of the proposed heavy rail scheme and a light rail alternative has not been fully evaluated.

3. We believe that adopting a light rail alternative will improve the financial viability to an extent which requires no annual operating subsidy from the taxpayer and provide much more frequent services at lower cost as well as shorter journey times.

4. We believe that the capital cost of a light rail alternative will be significantly less than for a heavy rail scheme, thereby reducing the costs to the taxpayer of implementing an airport rail link.

5. We believe that the intrinsically lower capital cost of a light rail alternative, and the clear ability of light rail in the UK to trade profitably on the operating account means that there is scope for developing sources of funds, other than the taxpayer, via the private sector, unlike a subsidy hungry heavy rail airport link.

6. We believe that the limiting capacity of bottlenecks in the Glasgow rail network not addressed by this scheme means that the future growth potential of the link will always be inhibited by limited availability of train paths and the higher priority given to other rail services which share that limited capacity. A light rail alternative provides a much more affordable means of tackling these bottlenecks, reducing risk, improving frequencies, maintaining punctuality and service reliability as well as providing better network integration with local bus and rail services. A light rail alternative is more able to avoid detrimental effects on local passenger services within the local rail network.

7. We believe that the self contained shuttle nature of the proposed airport link is more suited to a dedicated light rail alternative, particularly since there is no stated intention to integrate the airport link into the wider rail network, thereby providing a choice of destinations within Scotland.
We look forward to hearing from you and the opportunity to present our evidence in person to you.