

## **Statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs**

**Jim Meade, Director, Railway Undertaking, Iarnród Éireann – 1<sup>st</sup> February 2017**

Chairman, Members of the Committee,

Along with my colleagues, thank you for your invitation to attend today, to discuss the topic of sustaining viable rural communities, as it relates to Iarnród Éireann. Our Chief Executive David Franks apologises that he is unavailable to be here today.

### **Overview**

Under EU Directives, Iarnród Éireann is organised into separate businesses – Railway Undertaking and Infrastructure Manager. As Director, Railway Undertaking, I am responsible for our train services, the maintenance of our fleet and our stations, while infrastructure maintains track, signalling and other infrastructure assets.

The services we provide are contracted by the NTA, and funded by a combination of fare revenue and Public Service Obligation funding from the NTA. Service levels, the level of PSO funding, and fares are ultimately determined by the NTA.

Firstly, I'd like to give you an overview of Iarnród Éireann's operations.

- In 2016, we carried 42.8 million passengers, an increase of 8%, and 100 million tonne kilometres of freight
- We operate with a fleet of 638 carriages across a network of 1,700 kilometres, maintaining both as well as 1,000 level crossings, 5,100 bridges, 4,900 cuttings and embankments and a range of buildings and structures which include 144 stations
- On a weekly basis, our team of almost 3,800 people maintain this network, and operate 4,300 passenger train services and 50 freight services
- Additionally, we are the Port Authority for Rosslare Europort, the State's second busiest port which handles 2.3 million tonnes of freight and 900,000 passengers annually.

### **Contributing to rural communities**

On a national level, excluding our DART, Dublin Commuter and Cork Commuter services, we operate trains over nine radial routes from Dublin, and three regional routes.

As well as providing transport services and employment directly, we are a significant contributor to local economies, with over €53 million spent contracting businesses outside the Dublin area for the supply of materials, goods and services.

Our rail network also contributes to the communities we serve nationally by:

- Connecting our communities to each other and to major urban areas
- Enabling us to meet our national environmental goals to reduce emissions from the transport sector under European Union and UN Paris agreement climate plans
- Facilitating access for all to employment, education and health services
- Supporting tourism and local businesses
- Partnering with private rail tourism operators, including Belmond Grand Hibernian, and Railtours Ireland
- Operating special services for events and groups ranging from Championship Football and Hurling to Gaeltacht specials
- Supporting the voluntary sector in our communities through our Journeys programme, which gives a free group travel trip to 100 community and voluntary groups each year.

We do not however exist in a vacuum. Public transport in general, and rail transport specifically needs planning to support the effective and efficient delivery of our services.

Effective planning generates the population and demand necessary to sustain our services, to maximise the key strength of rail at a national level, of providing fast and efficient connections between our population centres. We look forward to the launch of the Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework tomorrow and subsequent public consultation.

### **Current trends and Rail Review**

Like many organisations, both public and private, we have experienced an extremely challenging number of years. Following the growth and expansion of services, renewal of fleet, and upgrading of stations delivered up towards the end of the last decade, a catastrophic fall-off in economic activity, passenger demand and exchequer funding took a heavy toll.

Notwithstanding this, Iarnród Éireann prioritised the protection of existing services as we reduced costs and worked to address the crisis, with the vast majority of services retained, and indeed new lines opened including Cork to Middleton and Ennis to Athenry.

Thankfully, since 2013, passenger numbers are growing again across the network. However, as detailed in the recently published Rail Review, we remain significantly underfunded – by an average of €103 million per annum – for the levels needed to maintain current network and service standards.

The NTA's public consultation seeks to inform a policy on the future role of rail in Ireland, and examines options to address the funding gap. This ranges from significant levels of additional Exchequer funding to the closure of some rail lines – all involve difficult decisions with scarce resources.

These decisions are not ours to make – we will continue to focus on providing the service levels we are contracted to provide. However, we aim to continue to enhance our services to meet the needs of the country, and look forward to achieving the financial sustainability necessary to achieve this.

### **Service and investment plans**

As mentioned, we are seeing growth again, and this will in turn bring us challenges to cater for growth in demand. With the NTA, we are assessing the options for fleet expansion needed to cater for travel nationally to ensure we are able to respond to the needs of our customers in the coming years. This includes reinstating to service a small fleet of railcars which were withdrawn during the recession, and examining options for new fleet expansion.

Additionally, investment which will benefit customers nationally includes:

- The introduction in 2017 of our Customer First programme, which will transform ticketing, website and customer service channels to enable us to better provide for and understand our customers' requirements
- Line speed investment, which will continue in 2017 along the Dublin/Cork corridor, to improve journey times for many routes, including Dublin to Cork, Kerry and Limerick.
- Through the DART Expansion programme, build a network that has the capacity for growth on all of our services, including Intercity
- In the longer-term, plan for electrification of our network, to strengthen further rail's status as the most environmentally friendly mode of transport, as well as enhancing performance.

So while we face considerable challenges, we are also ambitious for our future.

I would note that tomorrow marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Iarnród Éireann, and indeed our colleagues in Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus as well. We want to maximise our contribution to the needs of our customers, the communities we serve, and the economy and environment of the State in the future, as we have endeavoured to do over the past thirty years.

We welcome your support and that of your parliamentary colleagues as we address both our challenges and our ambitions, and I would be happy to take your questions on these issues.