Report of the Joint Committee

on

Regional and Rural Transport Policy

July 2019

Laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas 17 July 2019
Tithe an Oireachtais

An Comhchoiste um Fhorbairt Tuaithe agus Pobail

Tuarascáil ón gComhchoiste

maidir le

Beartas Iompair Réigiúnaigh agus Tuaithe

Iúil 2019

A leagadh faoi bhráid dhá Theach an Oireachtais 17 Iúil 2019

Houses of the Oireachtas

Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tithe an Oireachtais</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Comhchoiste um Fhorbairt Tuaithe agus Pobail</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses of the Oireachtas</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tithe an Oireachtais</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Comhchoiste um Fhorbairt Tuaithe agus Pobail</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses of the Oireachtas</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Recommendations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Background</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.1. CEDRA Recommendation 17 (Road Network)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1.2. CEDRA Recommendation 18 (Rural Transport Programme)</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. Sustaining Viable Rural Communities (2017) (Joint Committee)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1. Rural Transport</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2. Flood Relief Measures</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3. Engagement With Joint Committee – Key-Issues</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.1. Flooding</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.2. Eastern/Western Imbalance</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.3. Decreasing Populations</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3.4. Atlantic Economic Corridor</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. National Planning Framework</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1. Key-Points of the Framework</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2. Engagement with the Joint Committee – Key Issues</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.1. Regional Imbalance</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.2. Connectivity Infrastructure</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2.3. Border Region</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Regional and Rural Transport Policy (1)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1. National Transport Authority</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2. Bus Éireann</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6.3. Engagement with the Joint Committee – Key Issues ........................................29
  6.3.1. The Licensing Process for Bus Services .....................................................29
  6.3.2. Cost and Fares Structure ...........................................................................30
  6.3.3. Infrastructure and Connectivity .................................................................31
  6.3.4. Climate Change Mitigation .........................................................................32
  6.3.5. Local Link ....................................................................................................33
  6.3.6. Rural vs Urban Fares ....................................................................................34
  6.3.7. Connecting Bus with Rail ............................................................................34
  6.3.8. School Transport ........................................................................................35
  6.3.9. Congestion and Timetabling ......................................................................36
  6.3.10. Bus Shelters .............................................................................................36
  6.3.11. Defining Commuter Services ....................................................................37

7. Western Development Commission ..................................................................39
  7.1. Role of the Western Development Commission ............................................39
  7.2. Engagement with Joint Committee – Key Issues .........................................40
    7.2.1. Knock Airport ...........................................................................................40
    7.2.2. TEN-T and the WDC ..............................................................................41
    7.2.3. Rail Freight Services ................................................................................42
    7.2.4. Transport to Work ....................................................................................43

8. Regional and Rural Transport Policy (2) ..........................................................45
  8.1. Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport .................................................45
  8.2. Engagement with the Joint Committee – Key Issues ....................................46
    8.2.1. Rural Hackneys .......................................................................................46
    8.2.2. Interconnectivity ......................................................................................47
    8.2.3. Accessibility – Bus Stops .........................................................................47
    8.2.4. Disability ..................................................................................................48
    8.2.5. Emissions and Environmental issues .......................................................49
    8.2.6. TEN-T ......................................................................................................49

9. Correspondence .................................................................................................51
  9.1. Report on Rural Transport - DTTS .................................................................51
  9.2. Update on the Western Rail Corridor - DTTS ...............................................52
## OPENING STATEMENTS AND SUBMISSIONS ................................................................. 53

10. **Action Plan for Rural development**............................................................... 53

10.1. Presentation on the First progress Report, DRCD, August 2017 ............. 53

10.2. Progress Report (Summary), DRCD, August 2017 ................................. 58

11. **The National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040 Our Plan**.............. 77

11.1. Damien English TD, Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development 77

12. **Regional and Rural Transport Policy**............................................................ 82

12.1. Anne Graham, Chief Executive Officer, NTA (1) ..................................... 82

12.2. Anne Graham, Chief Executive Officer, NTA (2) ..................................... 88

12.3. Deirdre Hanlon, Assistant Secretary, DTTS ............................................. 93

13. **Opportunities for Investment in Heavy Rail, and Flooding at Ballycar on the Galway – Limerick Railway** ................................................................. 100

13.1. Jim Meade, Chief Executive, Irish Rail 23 May 2018 (1) ....................... 100

13.2. Jim Meade, Chief Executive, Irish Rail (2) 27 November 2018, Carmel Kirby, Clare County Council, John Sydenham, Office of Public Works ......................... 105

13.3. Jim Meade, Chief Executive, Irish Rail (2) 27 November 2018 ............. 107

14. **Dr. Deirdre Garvey (Chairman), Ian Brannigan (CEO(a)), WDC** .......... 110

15. **Flooding at Ballycar on the Galway – Limerick Railway (Resumed)** .... 115

15.1. Carmel Kirby, Clare County Council; Jim Meade, Irish Rail; John Sydenham, OPW; John Fitzgerald, NPWS, 29 May 2019 ................................................. 115

16. **Investment in Heavy Rail (Resumed)** ......................................................... 117


17. **Flooding at Ballycar on the Galway – Limerick Railway (Resumed)** .... 122

17.1. Dr Ted McCormack, Project Manager for Groundwater Flooding, Geological Survey Ireland, 29 May 2019 ................................................................. 122
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29 November 2017</td>
<td>Action Plan for Rural Development</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 December 2017</td>
<td>National Planning Framework</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 March 2018</td>
<td>Rural Transport Policy: National Transport Authority</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 May 2018</td>
<td>Iarnród Éireann</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 June 2018</td>
<td>NTA and Bus Éireann</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 June 2018</td>
<td>Western Development Commission</td>
<td>282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 October 2018</td>
<td>Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 November 2018</td>
<td>Iarnród Éireann et al</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 May 2019</td>
<td>Iarnród Éireann</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ORDERS OF REFERENCE

18. Orders of Reference of the Joint Committee

18.1. Functions of the Departmental Select Committee [DSO 84A; SSO 71] .... 399
18.2. Scope and Context of Activities of Committees [DSO 84; SSO 70] .......... 402
18.3. Orders of the Dáil and Seanad ................................................................. 403
  18.3.1. Order of the Dáil 16 June 2016 (Establishment of Select Committees) 403
  18.3.2. Order of the Dáil 26 September 2017 (Establishment of Committee) 403
  18.3.3. Order of the Dáil 7 November 2017 (Number of Members) ............. 404
  18.3.4. Order of the Seanad 21 July 2016 (Establishment of Select Committees) ......................................................... 404
  18.3.5. Order of the Seanad 16 November 2017 Schedule (Extract) ............. 404
18.4. Powers of the Select Committee ............................................................... 405
  18.4.1. Powers of Committees (DSO 85 (Extract)) .......................................... 405
18.5. Powers of the Joint Committee ................................................................. 406
  18.5.1. Powers of Committees (DSO 85) .......................................................... 406
  18.5.2. Draft legislative acts: eight week limit to express opinion on infringement of subsidiarity (“yellow and orange card”) (DSO 114) .......... 408
  18.5.3. Legislative acts: infringement of subsidiarity: request for review by EU Court of Justice (DSO 116) ................................................................. 409
  18.5.4. Post-enactment Report (DSO 164A) .................................................... 409
18.6. Functions of the Joint Committee ............................................................. 410
  18.6.1. Oversight of the Department ............................................................... 410
  18.6.2. Policy ......................................................................................... 410
  18.6.3. Pre Legislative Scrutiny ................................................................. 410
  18.6.4. EU Scrutiny ................................................................................ 410
  18.6.5. Role of the Select Committee ......................................................... 410
  18.6.6. Public Service Management Act, 1997 ........................................... 410
  18.6.7. Engagement with Chairmen Designate of State Bodies .......... 411
  18.6.8. Oversight of Bodies under the aegis of the Department ............. 412
19. Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development (Oct 2017 —)

19.1. Dáil Select Committee (Deputies / Teachtaí Dála) .................................. 415
19.2. Seanad Select Committee (Senators / Seanadóirí) .................................. 415
19.3. Dáil Select Committee on Rural and Community Development ............... 416
19.4. Seanad Select Committee on Rural and Community Development ............ 417
32.5. Membership Changes .................................................................................. 418
32.6. Committee Contact Details .......................................................................... 419
Preface

Rural connectivity and in particular rural transportation has been a key focus of the work programme for the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development over the past three years.

The inherent social and economic potential which exists in rural areas has often been overlooked. This has led to a situation where there has been uneven distribution of public transport services in rural areas. As well as this, there has been a lack of joined-up thinking about transport service provision and connectivity in the regions.

For too long, infrastructural development has been concentrated in the east. This has resulted in a situation where all roads lead to the capital but there is poor connectivity between regional areas.

Encouraging rural connectivity must be a priority to ensure regional growth. This report focuses on regional and rural transport policy and considers the existing policies, including the National Planning Framework and the Action Plan for Rural Development.

The Committee on Rural and Community Development notes the positive steps that have been taken over the past number of years with the development of Local Link services, the increased frequency of some bus and rail services and enhanced connectivity between rail and bus services. However rural life needs good public transport. This is to ensure it is an attractive option for rural communities in the long-term.

The Committee held nine hearings with stakeholders on the issue of rural connectivity from 2016 until 2019. A separate report on rail transport in rural areas is also being prepared by the Committee to be published later this year.

There are fourteen recommendations in this report, all of which are underpinned by the need for increased funding to ensure access to rural transport and connectivity to and from rural areas.
To balance the over-concentration of road developments in the east of the country, the Committee recommends that new infrastructural developments are identified and a balance is struck between east and west in public transport development.

Additionally, it is vital that all Government Departments and agencies with rural transport responsibilities work together to ensure the rural transport agenda is kept to the fore and that funding, rather than just planning is provided.

These are just three of the recommendations in the report and the full list is available within. The Committee is fully committed to monitoring the implementation of these recommendations and intends to revisit the issue again in the future.

As Chairman of the Committee, I would like to thank my fellow Committee Members for their input and work in bringing forward this important report. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to express my gratitude to every organisation who came before the committee to give evidence and those who provided written submissions or correspondence to the committee.

I would also like to thank the Committee Secretariat for the work involved in producing this report.

_____________________________
Joe Carey
Cathaoirléach (Chairman)
17 July 2019
1. Recommendations

**Recommendation 1: Funding**

Provide increased funding for national, regional and local roads to ensure access to rural transport, and connectivity to and from rural areas.

**Recommendation 2: Infrastructural Developments**

Identify and fund new infrastructural developments to resolve over-concentration of road developments and public transport provision in the east of the country and create a balance between east and west in road and public transport investment.

**Recommendation 3: National Transport Policy**

Include, in national transport policy, an assurance that services, where appropriate, are strategically provided to create demand (rather than purely to respond to demand) through promoting development in the regions; and that this be a statutory function of the National Transport Authority through the creation of transport strategies for specific regional areas (similar to the Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy)

**Recommendation 4: Local Bus Services**

Develop expansion plans for Local Link services and undertake research on the location of relevantly-sized population groups and their interconnectivity.

**Recommendation 5: National Freight Policy**

Develop an environmentally sustainable national freight policy for the transportation of bulk products, utilising rail where possible for the transport of large bulk products.
**Recommendation 6: Subsidy Discrepancy**

Immediately address the discrepancy in subsidies per head of population in the funding of public transport between rural areas and large urban areas means that at present urban areas get multiple the rate of subsidy compared to rural areas.

Introduce equalisatation in fares per km between public service operators (PSO) urban and rural train and bus services. At present the fare per 1km in urban designated areas is much lower.

**Recommendation 7: New Study**

Commence work on a new study of town and hinterland populations and commuter services focusing on factors which influence people to leave their cars behind and use rail services.

**Recommendation 8: Rural Commuter Services**

Ensure that morning to very late-evening commuter services (up to midnight) are in place linking rural towns to urban areas with third level institutions, hospitals and major employers.

**Recommendation 9: Western Development Commission**

Increase Government funding to the Western Development Commission and replicate its structure in other regional areas as a successful development template.

Fully involve the Western Development Commission in Government applications for TEN-T funding.

**Recommendation 10: Western Rail Corridor**

Include the Western Rail Corridor in any Government policy as a significant component of any transport developments in realising the full potential of the western region.
**Recommendation 11: Insurance and Regulation**

Address, as a matter of urgency, insurance and regulation issues surrounding new rural transport initiatives, such as community taxi services.

**Recommendation 12: Developing Synergies**

Develop synergies between all Government Departments with rural transport responsibilities to ensure the rural transport agenda is kept to the fore and that funding, rather than just planning, is provided.

Streamline engagement between the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport with regard to eligibility applied in relation to school transport benefits for those, irrespective of age, with accessibility and mobility issues.

All second-level students should be, subject to usual criteria, be entitled to school transport supports, irrespective of age. Regulations relating to school transport supports should be re-examined to make them more compatible with the realities of rural life.

The possibility of providing block funding for schools, on a voluntary pilot basis, to provide school transport in isolated rural areas should be explored.
Recommendation 13: Bus Network

Expand the rural/local/regional bus networks and commission research on the location of relevantly-sized population groups and what is needed to connect to each other.

Facilitate closer interaction between Bus Éireann and Local Link services to ensure smooth connections without unnecessary long delays.

Increase the resources of Local Link companies through the provision of additional assistance with administration staff to ensure that they are in a position to deliver as services become expanded, and ring-fence resources for three to five years in order to provide certainty in forward planning.

Recommendation 14: Mapping

Map out bus route services in all counties and regularly update and publish them in consultation with local communities.

Address the issue regarding distance measurement from homes to schools whereby the distance to the nearest school is often measured by proximity to the home and not by the length of the bus route.
2. Introduction

The Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development decided to focus on regional and rural transport policy in Rural Ireland as part of its 2018 Work Programme\(^1\). The Committee held nine meetings on this topic over a span of three years in relation to this matter and met with a numbers of agencies with an interest in the issue.

A separate report will discuss rail transport in general and flooding of the rail line at Ballycar, Co. Clare, in particular.

This report consists of the following sections.

Section 1 – Recommendations lists the recommendations of the committee.

Section 2 – Introduction gives an overview of this report.

Section 3 - Background includes a brief description to previous research, and detail is provided on substantial research carried out in this area by CEDRA (Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas) and co-ordinated by Teagasc in conjunction with the Western Development Commission, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The former Joint Committee on Rural Culture and Gaeltacht Affairs prepared a report on the theme of ‘Sustaining Rural Viability in Ireland’ and based much of its findings on the information from the CEDRA report. More information on this is also provided in this background section.

Section 4 – Action Plan for Rural Development provides a summary of the discussion between representatives from the Department of Rural and Community Development and members of the Joint Committee in November 2017. The theme for discussion was the Action Plan for Rural Development which had been launched the previous January.

In the discussion with Committee members following the presentations from both parties above, themes covered included: imbalance created between infrastructures in the eastern and western halves of the country, depopulation of rural areas, and closer cooperation between Government departments on issues of rural transport in general.

Section 5 – National Planning Framework provides a summary of the engagement between Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development, Damian English T.D., at the Joint Committee’s meeting of December 2017. Members engaged with the Minister on the draft framework plan and expressed some concerns related to rural transport in particular. In

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the discussion with Committee members following the presentations from witnesses topics discussed included: weak connectivity structures, commuting between and within rural and urban areas, and revitalisation of the Atlantic Economic Corridor.

The National Transport Authority appeared before the Committee at its meeting of March 2018 and this is summarised in Section 6 – Rural Transport Policy (1). This meeting afforded the Authority the opportunity to present its summary of its new ‘Strategic Plan for Rural Ireland 2018-2022’ and further details on the Rural Transport Programme.

Bus Éireann also presented at this meeting to discuss the topic of rural based transport and access to it, and the role that Bus Éireann plays in facilitating its provision. In the discussion with Committee members following the presentations from both parties above themes covered included: the licensing process, cost and fares structure, infrastructure and connectivity, climate change, Local Link, rural versus urban school transport, connecting bus with Rail, congestion and timetabling, bus shelters, and defining commuter services.

Section 7 – Western Development Commission provides some reflections from the Commission’s meeting with the Joint Committee in June 2018. While the discussion of this meeting concentrated in the main on the Commission’s past performance and future strategy, some issues around local rural transport were also touched upon in relation to Knock airport, TEN-T, freight train services, and transport to work.

Section 8 – Rural Transport Policy (2) provides a summary of the engagement between officials from the Department of Transport, Tourism, and Sport, at the Joint Committee’s meeting of October 2018.

Each of the sections above contains a sub-section ‘Engagement with the Joint Committee – Key Issues’ which summarises Committee members’ key points and concerns and from which the recommendations above are drawn.
### Table 1: Public hearings related to the Joint Committee’s consideration of the topic of Connectivity in Rural Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TOPIC</th>
<th>STAKEHOLDERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29 November 2017</td>
<td>Action Plan for Rural Development</td>
<td>Department of Rural and Community Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 December 2017</td>
<td>National Planning Framework</td>
<td>Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 March 2018</td>
<td>Regional and Rural Transport Policy (1)</td>
<td>National Transport Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 May 2018</td>
<td>Regional and Rural Transport Policy</td>
<td>Iarnród Éireann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 June 2018</td>
<td>Regional and Rural Transport Policy (2)</td>
<td>National Transport Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 June 2018</td>
<td>Western Development Commission – Engagement on</td>
<td>Western Development Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Past Performance and Future Strategy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 October 2018</td>
<td>Regional and Rural Transport Policy (3)</td>
<td>Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 November 2018</td>
<td>Regional and Rural Transport Policy (4)</td>
<td>Iarnród Éireann</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 May 2019</td>
<td>Opportunities for Investment in Heavy Rail</td>
<td>Iarnród Éireann</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Background

In November 2017, the former Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (formerly the Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs) published its report on the challenge of sustaining viable rural communities in Ireland today. Its introduction referred to the high proportion of the Irish population residing in rural areas compared to other EU states.

Census 2016 data shows that 37.3% of the population resides in ‘aggregate rural areas’, which are population centres with fewer than 1,500 residents. The vast majority (80.61%) of these rural residents live in the open country-side with just under 20% residing in small villages (i.e. settlements with between 500 and 1,500 residents). 40.8% of the population live in electoral districts which are defined as rural. If the definition of rural were expanded to include all towns with up to 10,000 inhabitants, 1.75 million people live in rural areas.

OECD data, which categorises rural areas into those

a) which lie within a functional urban area,

b) which lie close to a functional urban area, or

c) which are remote,

found that 28% of the Irish population live in ‘remote’ rural areas, with only Norway (30%) and Greece (30%) exceeding this figure.

2 Following Government changes to departmental structures, the Joint Committee on Arts, Heritage, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs became the Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and remaining functions were transferred to a new committee, the Joint Committee of Rural and Community Development.


5 Brian Hughes, 24 May 2017. Data presented to the Joint Committee by Brian Hughes drawing on Census 2016 data.

6 Rural EDs are defined as EDs with population density below 150 persons per square KM.

7 Joint Committee, 24 May 2017. Data presented by officials from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

8 To distinguish between areas, commuting distances are used. See OECD, 2013 Definition of Functional Urban Areas for the OECD Metropolitan Database. Data used is from Census 2011.

The research for the Committee’s report above drew substantially from the CEDRA Report⁹, which was considered to be the most comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of issues facing rural Ireland and was very much informed by the more comprehensive CEDRA Research Report¹⁰.

The main aim of CEDRA¹¹, the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, is to develop a job creation strategy for rural Ireland through extensive public consultation on its future economic potential and examine how best to channel funding and resources between 2013 and 2025.

Following a public consultation on the future economic potential of rural Ireland it published its report in 2014 which contained the following recommendations with regard to rural transport in particular.

3.1.1. CEDRA Recommendation 17 (Road Network)

The continued improvement of road networks, particularly those outside of the greater Dublin area, should be prioritised as a well-functioning road network is crucial for the future economic development of rural areas:

- It is recommended that adequate funding is provided to maintain the improvements in road infrastructure undertaken in the past decade.
- In order to facilitate the development of significant enterprise and economic activity in rural areas, it is recommended that funding be reallocated for specific improvements to local/regional roads of significant economic importance with prioritisation given to relief roads that have potential to open up economic and employment opportunities in key towns.

3.1.2. CEDRA Recommendation 18 (Rural Transport Programme)

The Commission supports the Government’s initiative to improve and integrate the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) into the overall public transport system. The Commission recommends ongoing and comprehensive monitoring of the programme in order to ensure that it is meeting the transport needs of rural Ireland.

3.2. Sustaining Viable Rural Communities (2017) (Joint Committee)

The Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht published its report ‘Sustaining Viable Rural Communities’ in November 2017\(^\text{12}\) and one of the many themes it dealt with was that of ‘transport in rural areas’, (Section 5.2 of the Report). The report stressed the significance of good road access for rural development and the challenges for enterprises regarding the linkages between rural areas and the regional and national network as key issues due in the main to under-investment in local and regional roads. The Report refers to what it considers ‘the perceived preference by the Government for investing in national roads over roads promoting connections between and within counties’. Some rural areas remain negatively affected due to a historical lack of road infrastructure and there continues to be a need for investment to enhance roads in rural areas.

The issue of whether national transport policy, which is implemented by the National Transport Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland and local authorities, has integrated commitments in rural Ireland (as committed to in the Programme for Government and the Action Plan) is key. CEDRA recommended that the Government and all stakeholders maximise the potential of available funding mechanisms to support the economic development of rural areas.

A key theme arising during the former Committee’s deliberations when preparing its report related to models for prioritising public investment, in particular investment in capital infrastructure, primarily based on demand, a factor which reinforces the pattern of regional development with development concentrated in the east of the country. It was suggested that to resolve the issue of over concentration of development in the east of the country, infrastructural developments and initiatives not directly related to population needed to be identified in the rest of the country.

The view was also expressed that current polices and models have led to poor radial routes connecting rural areas to regional urban centres and have created an obstacle to social and economic development in rural communities leading to social isolation for both young and old. More on-demand flexible, imaginative solutions to rural transport could help remove some of these obstacles; suggestions included rural taxi services, and the introduction of pilot regular inter-town services subsidised by users, employers and public funding.

\(^{12}\) Sustaining Viable Rural Communities – Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (November 2017):
The report contains approximately fifty recommendations across many different themes; below is a list of these recommendations related specifically to rural transport:

- Increased funding is required for regional and local roads to ensure connectivity to and from rural areas. A commitment to fund Local Improvement Schemes on a continuous basis is necessary.
- Infrastructural developments and initiatives need to be identified in an effort to resolve the issue of over-concentration of road developments and public transport provision in the east of the country and to ensure these basic services are available to all.
- A holistic approach which sees parallel investment in both town and countryside needs to be adopted.
- A national transport policy needs to ensure that services, where appropriate, are strategically provided to create demand (rather than purely in response to demand) through the promotion of development in the regions as a statutory function of the National Transport Authority and through the creation of transport strategies for specific regional areas (similar to the Greater Dublin Area Transport Strategy).
- While welcoming the Local Link model and, in particular, collaboration between the Rural Transport Scheme and local service providers including the Health Service Executive (HSE), there is a need to support more on-demand, flexible, imaginative solutions to rural transport.
- There is a need to ensure that commuter services from rural towns and areas to adjacent urban areas with third level institutes, hospitals and major employers are in place, and also to ensure that these services run into the late evening, as happens in urban areas.

In its presentation to Committee members in November 2017, officials from the Department of Rural and Community Development outlined the main elements of the Action Plan for Rural Development\(^\text{13}\), which was launched in January of that year.

The Plan’s main aim is to go beyond the CEDRA Report in unlocking the potential of each rural area by providing an overarching structure for the co-ordination and implementation of initiatives across Government.

The objective of the plan is to advance economic and social progress in rural Ireland and improve the quality of life through time-bound actions and close monitoring of outcomes.

The Department stressed to members that developing and progressing rural Ireland is the responsibility of a wide range of actors, not just the Department of Rural and Community Development, and added that one of the key recommendations in the CEDRA report concerned the need to prioritise cross-Government co-ordination and the action plan aims to carry that out. The role of the Department of Rural and Community Affairs is to provide co-ordination to ensure the energy of government departments is directed towards rural development in a synergistic manner.

Reference was also made to the positivity and resilience of rural Ireland as highlighted in the public consultation which was carried out for the CEDRA report, and how this was reflected in the introductory section of the action plan where there is an emphasis on moving away from the perception that rural Ireland is synonymous with decline. The action plan is a whole-of-Government approach with key deliverables and according to the Department, it plays a key role in the revitalisation of towns and villages through the town and village renewal scheme, as does the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht through some of the heritage schemes and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government through other schemes. All these actions have been agreed with the responsible bodies for delivery. The actions are all for delivery within a definite time-frame and are monitored by a committee chaired by the Minister and includes key departments and rural representatives, and public bodies.

A copy of the Department’s Opening Statement (slides) to the Joint Committee is attached below under \textit{Opening Statements and Submissions}.

A copy of the progress report is attached below under \textit{Opening Statements and Submissions}.

4.1. **Rural Transport**

The Plan has a timeline of 3 years consisting of 270 actions across five thematic pillars. One of these pillars, ‘Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity’ contains 16 actions to be carried out by various government departments and State bodies which are intended to lead to the provision of high quality, inter-connected system of transport in rural Ireland. This is seen as key to the realisation of the inherent social and economic potential which exists in rural areas and must form the basis for improved transport connectivity between rural areas, local population centres, cities and international destinations. Proposed actions include measures related to rural public transport, the Rural Transport Programme, air travel, and transport solutions designed to meet particular needs. It is intended that these will assist in improved transport links to and from rural areas impacting positively on rural communities and businesses, particularly by reducing travel time and business costs.

4.2. **Flood Relief Measures**

The Plan also contains 13 actions for flood relief measures.

Led by the Office of Public Works (OPW) through the Interdepartmental Flood Policy Co-ordination Group and the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group, which is currently underway to proactively address and alleviate the risk and damage of flooding.

The actions which reflect the cross-agency approach encompass flood risk management plans to address risk through major flood defence, mitigation and coastal protection works, and measures to help public authorities and communities improve their readiness to avoid the worst effects of flooding.

It is intended that investment in flood relief works will be doubled by 2021.

A copy of the Action Plan for Rural Development is available on the Department’s web site\(^{14}\).

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4.3. **Engagement With Joint Committee – Key Issues**

There was discussion on many issues concerning rural communities but as this report is on transport a brief description of points raised under this theme only is provided.

4.3.1. **Flooding**

At a time when flooding is becoming increasingly prevalent the Committee complimented the Office of Public Works (OPW) on taking on the amendments to the minor works scheme, and in facilitating the completion of more flood schemes. The Committee also noted the importance of the home relocation scheme for those in rural Ireland for whom no other engineering solution could be found after being exposed to flooding.

As mentioned in the introduction above, a report on flooding at Ballycar on the Galway to Limerick rail line will be published by this Committee in the coming months.

4.3.2. **Eastern/Western Imbalance**

Members raised the issue of an imbalance created between road infrastructures in the eastern and western halves of the country where overdevelopment on the east coast has led to a poor quality of life, with people unable to live and work on account of the expense and the congestion, while underdevelopment on the western corridor had resulted in a low economy and weak connectivity, especially in road networks and broadband.

There was agreement that there existed a strong need to create a counterbalance, such as a new infrastructure consisting of an arc from Cork, Limerick, Galway and Sligo up to Derry and Belfast, through the building of new roads, railways, and the further development of connectivity, broadband, water and wastewater. Such actions would undoubtedly lead to new employment along the western corridor in particular. It was also noted in strong terms during the discussion how abundantly clear it was from any map that the main motorway networks are south of the Dublin to Galway line, and that there was very little in motorway infrastructure north of that line.
4.3.3. Decreasing Populations

The view was strongly expressed by those present that depopulation must be addressed and businesses encouraged to settle in rural and community areas. It was proposed that both the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Committee needed to work with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to ensure such an agenda is kept to the fore and that funding, rather than just a plan, is provided. Communities need to be incentivised to provide missing transport links by coming up with alternative initiatives, such as community taxi services, for example.

However, in addition to funding for such services, one significant obstacle still needs to be removed i.e. insurance costs and the regulations surrounding it. This is becoming an issue of grave concern for young people in rural areas in particular who are dependant on having a car as local transport in areas where the local transport is insufficient or does not exist.

Reference was made during the discussion to the need for young people who are getting married and having families to be able to live and work in their parishes and communities. The Western Rail Corridor was seen as being a very significant component of any such development in realising the full potential of the region. The gap between Claremorris and Athenry needs to be filled and further consideration given to linking the rail network to Shannon and Knock Airports.

4.3.4. Atlantic Economic Corridor

In responding to the above, officials from the Department stated they saw the Atlantic Economic Corridor as an example of the importance of a joined-up approach requiring the input of different Departments and local authorities. Such an initiative is in effect the joining up of economic hubs along that corridor, or arc, to create a balance with, and an investment alternative to, the east coast. The Committee was further informed that the Minister had established a task force to drive this concept forward involving Chambers Ireland and other business leaders and also includes the third level sector, key Departments and Government bodies. A subgroup was looking at the issue of infrastructure in an attempt to map out the infrastructure in a particular region and identify where the gaps are and what might be needed to progress the concept.

An official report of the full discussion held with the Committee is available on the Committee’s web site.15

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15[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_rural_and_community_development/2017-11-29/debate/mul@/main.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_rural_and_community_development/2017-11-29/debate/mul@/main.pdf)
5. National Planning Framework

Ireland 2040 - The National Planning Framework (the Framework)\(^{16}\) is an initiative of the Department of Housing Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) and comes under Project Ireland 2024, the Government’s overarching policy and planning framework for social, economic and cultural development of the State. Project Ireland comprises two parts: the National Planning Framework shapes future growth and development of Ireland to the year 2040, by guiding public and private investment, creating opportunities for people, and enhancing our environment; and the ten-year National Development Plan, which underpins the Planning Framework with €116 billion worth of investment. In the Joint Committee’s view the Framework is of the highest importance in supporting rural and community development and it invited Damien English TD Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development to come before it in December 2017.

While the Framework had not yet been published its key points are outlined in Section 5.1 below. Members engaged with the Minster on the draft Framework Plan and Section 5.2 below describes the discussion with the Minister outlining the Committee’s key-concerns on any future Framework.

5.1. Key-Points of the Framework

The Framework is in essence a guide for public and private investment to create and promote opportunities and to protect and enhance transport connectivity throughout the State’s three regional assemblies\(^{17}\):

- the Northern and Western Regional Assembly;
- the Southern Regional Assembly;
- the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly.

The objective is to have a more balanced growth between these three regions in order to address the over-concentration of population, homes and jobs in Dublin, and to a lesser extent across the wider Eastern and Midland area.

Rural areas located within the commuter catchment of the five city regions and large towns have commuter-generated housing planning which has affected the character and cohesion of some locations.
For rural areas that are outside commuter catchments with much less accessibility to cities and towns, it has been challenging to retain and/or develop community and social facilities and local infrastructure as populations decline.

Of the ten strategic investment priorities listed, three concern rural transport:

- National Road Network (Priority 2);
- Rural Development (Priority 3);
- and Environmentally Sustainable Public Transport (Priority 4).

Included in the intended national strategic outcomes, and of particular interest to rural transport, is the upgrading and improvement of inter-urban road connections by maintaining the strategic capacity and safety of the national roads network including planning for future capacity enhancements.

More specifically, accessibility to the North-West border area is an intended important outcome through utilising existing routes (N2/N14/A5), and upgrading northern sections of the N4 and N5 routes and sections of the N3/M3 national primary route.

Progressive development of the Atlantic Economic Corridor from Galway northwards by upgrading sections of the N17 northwards, where required and upgrading the N15/N13 link, is also intended to open up access to these areas.

In more general terms therefore, enhancing accessibility between key urban centres of population and their regions will ensure that all regions and urban areas in the country have a high degree of accessibility to Dublin, as well as to each other.

With regard to public transport, an important outcome in the Framework is the strengthening of accessibility to public transport and connectivity between cities and large growth towns in Ireland and Northern Ireland with improved services and reliable journey times. By expanding attractive public transport alternatives to car transport, congestion and emissions can be reduced and the transport sector enabled to cater for the demands associated with long-term population and employment growth in a sustainable manner.

For rural areas, in particular, the provision in the Framework of a public transport infrastructure and services to meet the needs of smaller towns, villages and rural areas is vital. Such an outcome is intended to relieve growth-pressure in and around Dublin and to some extent Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford and help to address the specific development challenges facing other regions, such as the accessibility and urban structure of the north-west or the economic underperformance of the South-East, and assist the more peripheral parts of Ireland in realising their full potential.
If successful, increased transport connectivity, including bus and rail services, between the main cities, to the north-west region and along the border region will be achieved over the life of the Framework.

5.2. **Engagement with the Joint Committee – Key Issues**

In his opening statement to the Committee, the Minister of State Damian English T.D. reiterated the Government's view that Ireland 2040 - National Planning Framework was aimed at delivering for all communities in Ireland, both urban and rural.

The NPF (National Planning Framework) was developed over 3 years and was informed by feedback from approximately 40 stakeholder events and hundreds of submissions received in the build-up to the publication of the first draft.

The Framework was primarily about planning properly for what will be one of the fastest growing economies in Europe over the next couple of decades and ensuring the potential of all regions, and all parts of regions, are fully realised.

The Minister was strongly of the view, in presenting the draft framework to Committee members, that the Framework therefore was about Ireland’s regions working more effectively, and both urban and rural development policies working in partnership, for the ultimate benefit of the communities being served.

The many different kinds of practical planning, development and investment policies, proposed for the Framework will only strengthen rural Ireland by including improved connectivity to weaker parts of our country.

A copy of the Minister’s Opening Statement to the Joint Committee is attached below under **Opening Statements and Submissions**.
5.2.1. Regional Imbalance

In response to the Minister’s statement Members expressed concern around the lack of planned growth areas north of a Dublin-Galway axis and the overall regional imbalance between the East and West and the need for investment in those regions which were not growing and were not being supported with strong connectivity infrastructure.

Reference was made to the vast region in the west and north-west of the country that is without critical infrastructure. In some Members’ views policies need to be weighted towards the west and north-west in order to counterbalance the congestion in cities and the big urban centres where there is a lack of housing and school places.

The view was also expressed that the concept of creating a counterbalance through the Atlantic Economic Corridor to the overdevelopment on the east coast was not being targeted properly in the draft NPF (National Planning Framework). One Member quoted the Western Development Commission which reported that in excess of 16,000 people living in the county travelled daily into Galway city for work. It was important therefore for the Minister and the Committee to examine how these people make this commute and how best the IDA, the local authorities and Departments can work together to make sure that when drawing up master plans, the roads are planned alongside the IDA parks.

5.2.2. Connectivity Infrastructure

Given its strategic importance and the lack of any direct rail infrastructure serving significant urban areas in the north-west along the route, the N2-A5 Dublin to Derry project should be prioritised to full motorway status. The purpose of the east-west link is to open up the region from Dundalk to Monaghan to Cavan and on over to Sligo. The Border region is totally dependent on that. There has been a great deal of work done and investment made to bring the proposal to design stage. There is more work to be done and there are routes to be decided upon.

A massive injection of cash is needed into large areas of the country lacking in connectivity infrastructure which can play a major role in addressing existing problems. If true consideration is not given to what is needed to revitalise these regional and rural areas, including the Atlantic Economic Corridor, where there are jobs and where young people can live and have families, then the plans outlined in the Framework will fail.

In addition, the heavy reliance on local authorities to deliver them without sufficient funding must also be addressed. In delivering plans, local authorities can at times be circumscribed by ‘vice-like departmental control’ thus obstructing any real devolution of powers or responsibility to them from the line-department.
In response to the above the Minister stated that connectivity is planned for, whether this be broadband, increased road infrastructure or high-speed rail, and then an infrastructure is to be put in place to facilitate it.

However decisions must be made regarding the location of such investment and further supported by means of a balanced capital investment plan. Such a plan should include rail, as well as road, but the critical mass of people must be there to justify it.

It was the members’ view that if this is carried out successfully regions can then compete with Dublin and other large cities and a balance can be struck. However it must also be borne in mind that Ireland’s larger cities in turn have to compete with other places in Europe and the rest of the world and the challenge is in getting the balance right between all of these forces.

5.2.3. Border Region

The development of the Border region was also stressed as being an important initiative in any future planning which should include the upgrade of the Dundalk-Cavan-Sligo east-west strategic route, considered to be a heavily used poorly aligned route serving significant FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) and indigenous businesses moving goods from Dundalk to ports in Northern Ireland and right over to Sligo.

Other issues of concern for members included the lack of a comprehensive plan examining the existing rail infrastructure and consideration of the need for rapid commuter services into the cities from rural and regional areas.

The view was expressed that at very little cost, one could put in place a fantastic commuter system that would enable people to live wherever they wanted and get to the centre very quickly. With regard to the bus network, the current Flexibus and Local Link operators were seen to be providing great services and expansion plans should be made, and research carried out, on the location of relevantly-sized population groups and what is needed to connect to each other.

An official report of the discussion held with the Joint Committee is available on the Committee’s web site18.

18https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_rural_and_community_development/2017-12-13/debate/mul@/main.pdf
6. Regional and Rural Transport Policy (1)

The National Transport Authority addressed the Committee at its meetings in March and June 2018 to discuss rural transport policy. Bus Éireann attended the June meeting. This section provides detail on information provided by both these bodies and the ensuing discussion with the Committee.

6.1. National Transport Authority

In its March opening statement to the Committee the National Transport Authority (NTA)\(^{19}\) described itself as a statutory non-commercial State body, operating under the aegis of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport with a remit to regulate and develop the provision of integrated public transport services (bus, rail, light rail and taxi) by public and private operators in the State; to secure the development and implementation of an integrated transport system within the Greater Dublin Area; and to contribute to the effective integration of transport and land use planning across the State.

It also has various arrangements with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to discharge functions on its behalf including responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, and including provision of the Rural Transport Programme.

With regard to the Regional Assemblies’ regional and economic strategies, the NTA is required to produce reports on issues the assemblies should consider when devising their regional and spatial economic strategies.

The NTA is responsible for public transport in rural areas which consists of services provided by Iarnród Éireann, Bus Éireann, and other commercial operators.

“Local Link”, the Rural Transport Programme, provides nationwide community based public transport system in rural Ireland responding to local needs through the provision of demand respond transport and scheduled fixed transport services.

The Rural Transport Programme is funded by the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport and the Department of Social Protection (Free Travel Pass Scheme) to a total value of €14.3m in 2018.

\(^{19}\) [https://www.nationaltransport.ie/](https://www.nationaltransport.ie/)
The Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018-2020 sets out key objectives for both the delivery and development of the Rural Transport Programme and contains nine key-priorities which include:

- sustaining the rural transport programme;
- route development and expansion;
- integration with other statutory services;
- the accessibility of services;
- access for all;
- ensuring the rural transport programme delivers an optimum customer experience;
- children and young people;
- encouraging innovation in rural transport service provision;
- and monitoring the progress of the rural transport programme.

Members were told how over the previous two years the NTA had supported the expansion of rural transport services to include regular commuter bus services. Operating at least five times per day over a 5/6/7 day per week schedule, these services are specifically designed to ensure connectivity with, and access to, other public transport services, thus facilitating passengers on their onward journeys.

Current work by the NTA includes a Review of Bus Éireann Direct Award contracted services to provide improvement and expansion of its services.

New town services are being provided in certain towns, and efforts are being made to provide an integrated public transport system of services and networks for all users.

In the NTA’s view, it is the only body that can bring modes and operators together in an integrated service pattern that provides the best service for rural communities.

Future improvements will also be made to key infrastructural items such as bus shelters, accessible bus stops and information at stops. However budgetary restraint in recent years has impeded such initiatives and the NTA expressed its hope that from 2019 onwards funding will be restored to required levels.

The NTA returned to the Committee in June 2018 to discuss rural transportation in particular. It explained how its approval must be sought with regard to any changes to Iarnród Éireann train services, Bus Éireann commercial Expressway Services and Bus Éireann subsidised public bus services. These services are provided by these companies under contract with the NTA and in the case where services are withdrawn, the NTA stated that it works to ensure that the local transport needs of communities are met.

20 [https://Local Link.ie/media/1351/ll_rural-transport-programme_online.pdf](https://Local Link.ie/media/1351/ll_rural-transport-programme_online.pdf)
The NTA described to Members the objective of the Rural Transport Programme in providing a good quality nationwide community based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs. In practical terms, ‘local link’ services are provided by over 400 private operators for 1.9m passenger journeys a year of which 47% are availed of by ‘free travel passengers’.

Rural transport services were expanded by the NTA in recent years to include regular commuter bus services which connect with other services allowing passengers to make onward journeys.

The NTA also presented a summary of its new ‘Strategic Plan for Rural Ireland 2018-2022’ which contains nine key objectives prioritising addressing rural social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services.

One of the listed actions in this strategy is the provision of evening and night services to address unmet transport needs in rural areas and following the assessment of applications, 53 additional services were approved and due to start operating in Summer of 2018.

Copies of the NTA’s Opening Statements to the Joint Committee are attached below under Opening Statements and Submission.
6.2. **Bus Éireann**

Officials from Bus Éireann also addressed the Committee to discuss the topic of rural based transport and access to it, and the role that Bus Éireann plays in providing those services.

Members were told that Bus Éireann currently operates c.650 buses, providing 6,500 services daily on over 220 routes in towns and villages across Ireland.

In addition to providing city services in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, it also provides town services in Sligo, Athlone, Dundalk, Drogheda, Navan and Balbriggan.

It provides urban/rural services linking ‘practically every town in Ireland’, and fills the rural transport gaps in locations where there is no rail link.

As the largest public transport provider in the State the company employs 2,500 and works closely with its large base of suppliers in communities right across Ireland.

In Bus Éireann’s view, as expressed to Committee members, it is the network of services provided within available funding and resources that makes mobility possible for all rural-based passengers. By connecting with a significant number of Local Link services across the country it believes that the provision of improved and enhanced services will further the opportunity for greater accessibility.

An example of such enhancement provided to the Committee was that of Athlone, where, with financial support from the NTA, a revised and enhanced service was introduced resulting in a 91% increase in passenger numbers in the town. It is the Company’s intention to invest further in bringing about similar enhancements in other cities and towns 21 thus providing greater access to local educational, employment and health facilities within the wider region.

In further enhancing the overall service structure Bus Éireann expressed its support for a proposal to facilitate a “town hub and spoke”, an approach where Local Link would interchange into the backbone network provided by Bus Éireann. In its view, this would make best use of the NTA investment in Bus Éireann services in recent years, and would be focused on increasing efficiency and effectiveness in the overall public transport offering outside Dublin.

In summary, Bus Éireann reminded Committee members that most of its services could not operate without public subvention, and it welcomed the increased subvention provided by the NTA in recent years and its commitment to provide further funding going forward.

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21 Cities of Galway, Limerick and Waterford; Towns of Drogheda and Sligo; Local services in Mayo, West Cork and West Clare
Furthermore it remained committed to providing as many interregional services connecting rural communities to the main population centres – including its Expressway commercial interregional and intercity services for which it does not receive any public subsidy.

6.3. Engagement with the Joint Committee – Key Issues

6.3.1. The Licensing Process for Bus Services

Concern was expressed on the protracted process involved in the licensing process where bus operators with no state intervention wanted to provide more services or improve current services with new bus stops at no cost to the State.

The NTA explained that policy regarding license approval had changed from being a Garda approval to a local authority approval and that the only legislative body that can approve the location of bus stops under the Roads Act is now the local authority.

While the NTA does not have a role in approving the location of bus stops, it provides guidance to local authorities about how and where they should locate bus stops, particularly those associated with rural services and encourage them to ensure they approve bus stops in a timely manner. However the NTA acknowledged that more work needed to be done in that area.

On the issue of the re-tendering of the Local Link service, the current four-year programme was due to expire at the end of December 2018 and the process for procurement for the 2019 to 2022 period was due to commence at the end of 2018.

The 2013-14 application process was not an open procurement process and the NTA confirmed it was receiving legal and procurement advice. It believed that in order to comply with both EU and Irish procurement legislation, a formal public tendering process would take place for this next stage.

In order to address the degree of anxiety and nervousness about what the procurement process might be, the NTA expressed its intention to go out to interested parties during 2018 and formally advise them on process through organising meetings, briefings, and question-and-answer sessions around the country.
6.3.2. Cost and Fares Structure

The Committee highlighted the inequity of the fares structure between urban and non-urban areas where fares per kilometre were more expensive in the latter.

In Galway for example, the designated urban area goes out to Barna, or in the Dublin area it has been extended to Sallins, but beyond that one’s fare doubles for going an extra kilometre.

It is the NTA generally who proposes the fare structure and it has found rectification and simplification of the structure, which it inherited over six years ago, to be difficult. It described to the Committee how its focus has been on simplifying the number of rail fares and fare stages, particularly in the short-hop zones in city areas.

It further explained that it took about five years to get some form of distance-based fare system in the commuter zone, but a lot more work needed to be done. The relationship between a standard adult single ticket and the deductions for a child or student fare is being simplified. However the NTA was insistent that it did not agree that there should be the same fare structure in the cities as there is in the rural areas, and expressed its view that in order to function, a city requires a lot more people to use public transport than does a rural area in respect of congestion, and as many people as possible must continue to be encouraged to use public transport in the cities.

A simplified fare structure and lower city fares will facilitate more services in meeting congestion in those areas. There is a greater cost associated with providing transport in rural areas than in city areas.

The Committee was told a review will examine the fare structures in Cork which while having been reduced slightly in 2017 were still at a level that is prohibitive, particularly to students. Bus Éireann informed the Committee that discussions were due to commence with the NTA on 2019 fares in West Cork intended to deliver better value fares for commuters in the area. The review is being done by Bus Éireann central services, with local people on the ground and the NTA.
6.3.3. Infrastructure and Connectivity

The only place where NTA influences the provision of infrastructure is in the greater Dublin area where it funds the capital investment in infrastructure.

The overall policy relating to the provision of rail infrastructure outside the greater Dublin area is a matter for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport which manages the infrastructure through a contract with Irish Rail for improvements and maintenance.

From a transport planning perspective, the NTA, as an authority, has views on rail infrastructure, including the importance of high-quality commuter services into the capital and into regional cities also. High volumes are required to cover the cost of providing the infrastructure and for its maintenance, while at the same time providing value for money.

The NTA also plays a role in putting forward proposals on the development of transport infrastructures, and looks at the capacity of bus and rail companies in providing services for the infrastructures, with the resources at its disposal, or what the costs associated with providing these are.

However, with increased resources having been made available to it, the NTA is further developing its service planning role and in doing so welcomes the views of operators in innovating services. To date there has been a push for evening services, off-peak services and services that probably do not provide the same return in terms of fares, but which for which there is an obligation to provide.

Outside of the greater Dublin area, the NTA supports the regional assemblies in assisting and co-operating with them in the preparation of regional, spatial and economic strategies. It is required to prepare a report setting out the issues which, in its opinion, should be considered by the regional assemblies in devising a regional spatial and economic strategy.

ITMS is the integrated transport management system. Issues were raised during the discussion with the committee around insufficient standards of the system on access to transport. NTA conceded that there had been some issues over the past number of years and these had been addressed in certain areas. However, much investment, time and resources continues to be made available in trying to resolve some remaining issues with the system in an effort to further improve the integrating it more formally with the Authority’s other systems in order that ultimately, the Local Link groups will be able to access the same mapping information and the same layering of information being used to inform all of its other planning processes.
6.3.4. Climate Change Mitigation

Members also raised the issue of climate change and recent Government announcements regarding the removal of diesel as a fuel for public transport vehicles.

The national development plan now requires that no 100% diesel-fuelled fleet is purchased for public transport after July 2019 and Bus Éireann informed Committee members that it was already considering moving to a low-emission fleet. Starting this year, it hoped to begin the procurement of a low-emission diesel fleet for its bus services.

Bus Éireann was of the view that the provision of public transport services is extremely important in the context of the environment and the reduction of our carbon footprint. It made reference to Dr. Eimear Cotter, director of environmental sustainability in the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, and her expressed view that Ireland was locked into a trend of rising carbon emissions. One suggestion put forward during the discussion was the development of a national freight policy which would lead to an environmentally sustainable way to transport bulk products.

Members struggled to understand why at a time when other EU member states were developing the rail freight networks, Ireland was closing them down.

The NTA shared its view that that in some cases it is more efficient and effective to provide a bus service rather than a rail service as the former is seen to be more flexible and can provide a frequent service for a much lower cost than that for rail services.

Already, since 2015, all buses purchased by Bus Éireann, in conjunction with the NTA, have been compliant with Euro 6 standards where emissions are 98% less than the emissions of standard diesel buses that existed even ten or 15 years ago, resulting in a significant decline in emissions. Therefore NTA and Bus Éireann are working together in moving towards low-emission fleet purchases reflecting the commitment set out in the national development plan that no diesel-only buses will be purchased after July 2019.

Bus Éireann reminded members to bear in mind that the cost for a lower-emission diesel fleet or diesel hybrid fleet is about 25% more per vehicle, and one can pay an even higher premium for a fully electric or similar type of fleet.
6.3.5. Local Link

Much of the Committee members’ interest during the discussion was on Local Link, the seventeen transport coordination units which manage the delivery of rural transport services nationally on behalf of the NTA.

The service is funded through the NTA and run by local boards. Concern was expressed during the discussion with NTA and Bus Éireann around the lack of ample resources at the disposal of local link groups in providing these transport services and in particular the shortage of staff as more projects are rolled out.

NTA explained that a national procurement process was due to commence in 2018 as part of the re-tendering of rural transport programme and the NTA was in the process of having a meeting with the managers and chairs of the boards of the Local Link groups before finalising a procurement programme.

With regard to the possibility of Bus Éireann and Local Link services interacting more closely, there was a view amongst Committee members that closer coordination was necessary to ensure smooth connections without unnecessary longer delays be in place and that this was not always currently the case.

In NTA’s view, the interaction of Local Link services with Bus Éireann’s services is a key consideration in relation to any proposal that comes in from a Local Link group. Committee members learnt that many of the Local Link team managers and support teams had already built up good relationships with their equivalents in Bus Éireann around the country and how the development of a route relies on those working relationships.

Improved interaction will be closely examined by the NTA as part of its review of the route network and the implementation of new services.
6.3.6. Rural vs Urban Fares

The issue of rural dwellers having to pay more for their public transport services than their counterparts in large cities such as Dublin was an issue of grave concern to the Committee.

It was pointed out that the rate per kilometre on rural services, non-Expressway, is twice that of urban services. While Bus Éireann receives a subsidy of €60 million to serve in excess of one million people in the most densely populated part of the country, it and Rural Link between them, get less than €50 million to serve up to 4 million people.

The subsidy per head of population is therefore minuscule in rural areas compared to large urban area and this needs to be immediately addressed.

The Committee has commissioned the Library and Research Service of the Houses of the Oireachtas for further research on the issue.

6.3.7. Connecting Bus with Rail

With regard to fare structure and linkages to rail services, Bus Éireann provided an example of what it was doing in Cork at the present time. An ongoing review of the west Cork network consists of examining a number of prime issues one of which is bus connectivity to and from railway services. The concept being currently developed includes operating all of west Cork services to both the bus station and the rail station in Cork city throughout all the day.

One of the key objectives of the rural transport plan is to “ensure that rural transport services are comprehensively linked to and integrated with public transport services provided by other entities including Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and other private operators”.

Members expressed the view that this was not happening and questioned whether the NTA mapped services in all counties and whether there existed a proper map of all the routes. It proposed that maps could be produced and regularly updated in consultations with local communities, consultations they believed were not happening at the present time.
6.3.8. School Transport

School transport was raised as a big issue in rural communities, where it was pointed out by some members, that ‘one shoe does not fit all’.

The School Transport Schemes\(^2\) which are funded by the Department of Education and Skills and operated by Bus Éireann, provide support for the transport of children living in remote areas from their nearest primary and post primary school and children with special educational needs.

Concern was expressed with regard to the measurement of distances from homes to schools whereby the distance to the nearest school is often measured by proximity to the home and not by the length of the route the bus takes. This can have an effect on eligibility criteria which in some Committee members’ views now need to be reviewed and re-evaluated in the context of current demand. While Bus Éireann only operates the system on behalf of the Department and does not determine policy or rules, it acknowledged that there were issues around the rules of eligibility and distance from the school, etc., as well as the family entitlement for siblings to go to the same school. These are ongoing issues for many rural communities.

In respect of a person’s age and when one reaches 18 years of age, it is a question of trying to get a co-ordinated response through bringing the various parties together on this. Another issue raised was the lack of coordination between Government departments once a child became 18 and where different eligibility applied regarding school transport benefits. The Department of Education and Skills co-ordinates school transport services schemes for those under 18 years of age with accessibility and mobility issues to the school or the location. This responsibility transfers to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport for those over the age of 18, however there would appear to be no direct engagement between the Department on changing and/or streamlining rules for the transition in age while one is still attending school and this needs to be urgently addressed.

\(^2\)https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/School-Transport/
6.3.9. Congestion and Timetabling

Adapting timetables to offset congestion at peak hours in different cities was seen by members as playing an important role in having an efficient transport system where rural and urban connectivity and accessibility can be more threadless with far fewer delays was seen as a challenge by many.

Bus Éireann conceded to the Committee that congestion had a significant impact on the company’s ability to align itself with the timetables and connectivity with other services. Bus Éireann put together a large team internally to work on this and it intended that this year more than 80% of all its routes would have new timetables implemented to take cognisance of connectivity not just with its different bus services, but with train services also.

However, the point was also made by Committee members that the provision of timetables and other forms of communication needed to be facilitated in order that people can find out what routes are available, bearing in mind that asking people to check a website was not the most practical advice because most of those who use rural transport services do not have access to broadband services or other technology.

Therefore means of communicating with people must be found to enable them to find out when routes are running and at what times.

6.3.10. Bus Shelters

The view was expressed that there appeared to be a conservative approach to setting up new Bus Éireann shelters quickly and that private operators were also encountering difficulties in getting permission for additional stops or licenses for new routes.

The NTA stated it did not underestimate the task in hand in trying to address the deficit in this area. It confirmed that there had been little increase in bus shelters in the previous two years as funding had been constrained in recent years and could only be made available for a limited number of bus shelters each year. On a more positive note however, it explained that additional funding was being made available over the next four years and that it now had a provider with responsibility for centrally rolling out a bus shelter programme.

It further added that there were also local difficulties in putting shelters in place, particularly in towns, because they are not always acceptable in certain locations.

NTA assured the Committee however that it was committed to continuing working with local authorities in rolling out a comprehensive programme which will increase the number of bus shelters, and wheelchair accessibility at those stops.
6.3.11. Defining Commuter Services

The question was raised during the discussion on what exactly defined ‘commuter services’ in rural areas i.e. whether it was for example one bus in the morning and one bus in the evening, with an hour and a half frequency after that, or something different. In order to attract commuters, there was a strong view that one needs at least half-hour frequencies during commuter times and maybe hourly at other times, but at an absolute minimum, every 30 minutes within the hours of 7.30 a.m. to 9 a.m. and every hour thereafter.

There was plenty of evidence in other public transport areas and in the private business sector in general that an increase in services leads to an increase in users.

NTA agreed that such a definition of a commuter service would be useful and it is currently engaging with Bus Éireann and other relevant stakeholders in trying to differentiate between regular commuter services and other feeder and town services. As more funding becomes available, it can further examine where expanding the reach of the day and to what time will it continue in the evening. In this way it may be possible to designate certain services in different categories.

On the issue of transport conducive to meeting the needs of children and adults with autism or non-physical disabilities the question was raised as to whether the NTA had carried out any research or was aware of any. The NTA responded that it had not carried out any such research but expressed its willingness to contact the National Disability Authority and seek its advice on the matter.

Official reports of the discussions held with the Joint Committee are available on the Committee’s web site.\textsuperscript{23,24}

\textsuperscript{23}https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_rural_and_community_development/2018-03-28/debate/mul@/main.pdf
\textsuperscript{24}https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_rural_and_community_development/2018-06-20/debate/mul@/main.pdf
7. Western Development Commission

7.1. Role of the Western Development Commission

The Western Development Commission25 (“The Commission”) was established in 1998 as a Government response to public pressure to take action in reversing population decline in the western regions. The Commission’s remit, as set out in the Western Development Commission Act (1998)26, is “to promote economic and social development in the counties of Clare, Donegal, Galway, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon and Sligo and to provide for matters connected therewith.” The Chair and Acting Chief Executive came before the Committee in June 2018 to discuss the Commission’s past performance and future strategy.

In their opening statement to the Committee, the Chairman and Chief Executive (acting) described how the Commission had developed a way of working that delivers a unique and effective response to the challenges encountered in predominantly rural region. It had sought over the years to establish a capability for future growth both for the region and its citizens by undertaking activities in: investment and creation of regional jobs; regional policy and analysis capability; regional capability to access EU programming funds; regional “access to finance” capability; and creation of a regional identity platform.

In addition to outlining its key strategic goals for the period 2015 to 2018, the Commission reminded members of specific commitment to reinforce the role of the WDC to support the implementation of the regional jobs plans in the West and North-West included in the Programme for a Partnership Government. It also made reference to ongoing preparations for the next strategic plan 2019-2024.

With regard to regional and rural transport in particular, a link to WDC reports was provided in an appendix to the opening statement making specific reference to outlining scope and issues related to commuting within and between the regions, and regional rail freight.27

A copy of the Western Development Commission’s Opening Statement to the Joint Committee is attached below under Opening Statements and Submissions.

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25 https://www.wdc.ie/
27 https://www.wdc.ie/publications/reports-and-papers/
7.2. Engagement with Joint Committee – Key Issues

7.2.1. Knock Airport

With regard to the members’ engagement with the Commission on the theme of connectivity in relation to regional and rural transport, specific mention was made to Knock Airport as a key infrastructural node within the region for inbound tourism. The suggestion was made that if one wanted to create jobs, one needed an infrastructure around Knock airport.

The WDC, for its part, described itself as long-term investors in the airport which it considered key to the region, especially the north west as it connects the north west internationally. The WDC had engaged with Knock Airport on publicity and PR, and previously had worked with the airport and local authorities on direct marketing campaigns to keep flights from Milan, Frankfurt and London flying into the region so that it could better serve the wider hinterland. It was currently engaged in an ongoing discussion with management about how to help the tourism initiative it is trying to create in the airport region which included increasing tourist numbers and getting the best value from the information on the region’s available tourism products.

With regard to the creation of an industrial zone or the requirement for a strategic planning zone, the WDC informed the Committee that some years ago it carried out an analysis with Knock Airport as part of a consultation on this issue. It believed in the importance of having a decent fiscal incentive in place to attract companies to ensure that there is a proper development hub at the airport but it had been some time since it had discussed this with Knock Airport and therefore had no further details on development in this area.
7.2.2. TEN-T and the WDC

Members referred to the 2040 Plan and its emphasis on job creation however it was pointed out that without a proper road network from Mullingar to Castlebar and from Letterkenny to the Tuam-Galway road (which would continue to Limerick and which would link up with the Cork to Mallow road), it could not be successful.

WDC agreed that road, rail, air and sea infrastructure were essential in creating jobs and that it was working with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in terms of the EU’s TEN-T programme28.

On the question of which infrastructure is key, the WDC explained that while it was difficult to answer that question, in its view roads seem to make the biggest difference to a wider economic hinterland.

Every time the Department makes submissions to this programme the WDC had a role in providing any additional information needs in assisting the Department with an application for transport funding from the EU’s TEN-T project.

However WDC was of the view that there was a need to look further into how it would be centrally involved in the project because it must fully buy into the idea that it needs to be on the core of TEN-T, which is important for infrastructural growth in the country and the region.

The WDC agreed that its role in relation to TEN-T needed be looked at again in terms of deeper involvement and influence however it is the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Government ultimately who has the most influence on that. (See also Section 8 below: Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport).

WDC welcomed the suggestion by a Committee member of the possibility of Ireland needing support in applying for TEN-T projects and the proposal that WDC could play its role in this regard.

WDC was more than willing to say to the various Departments, such as the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, that if there is a widening of its role in this regard it would be eager to put a case together for certain things that are in its region’s interests. It was very aware of the importance of the TEN-T process in getting infrastructure into the west.

28 https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure_en
7.2.3. Rail Freight Services

Concern was expressed on the May 29 2018 closure of the freight train service between Ballina and the Port of Waterford, the only port outside of Dublin with a direct rail connection, and the importance of trying to find ways to sustain such rail lines to improve interconnectivity between the regions and continental Europe.

It was suggested that the WDC could have a role in identifying replacement business, for example, by combining smaller volumes and then building the sustainability of freight train services between the west and south east.

The WDC stated that it was interested in all access infrastructure to grow the economy and recounted to members that about two years previously it had undertaken rail freight analysis\(^\text{29}\) that looked at rail freight as perhaps being a way to enter passenger numbers and so on to subsidise them. The analysis showed that three of the four freight lines in the country, of which Ballina-Waterford is one, emanated from or passed through the west.

WDC was aware that there is work ongoing in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and it was prepared to discuss further internally the possibility of carrying out a feasibility study in this regard.

7.2.4. Transport to Work

The point was made strongly by a Committee member that a good study needed to be carried taking the town and hinterland populations into account. Such a study would provide information on those factors which influence those to leave their cars behind and use train services and would project what numbers these may be.

Previous work carried out by the WDC on travelling to work in the region showed that half of Galway’s working population came from outside of the city. However the proposed study could uncover additional information on the numbers who come from the east, where there is an existing railway line.

Higher numbers coming from the east because of the rail line would clearly justify development of a western rail corridor and an improvement in services between Ennis and Galway, Ennis and Limerick and Athlone and Galway in particular. Commuter rail can be the driver, in this regard as it has much higher numbers of users than freight rail.

The WDC stated that it had just completed research on travelling to work and had information to hand it was prepared to bring back to its team for further internal discussion with a view to considering drawing up further proposals.

An official report of the discussion held with the Joint Committee is available on the Committee’s website\textsuperscript{30}.

\textsuperscript{30} \url{https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debateRecord/joint_committee_on_rural_and_community_development/2018-06-27/debate/mul@/main.pdf}
8. Regional and Rural Transport Policy (2)

8.1. Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport

Officials from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport attended a Committee meeting in October 2018 to answer questions on transport policy in rural and regional areas. Officials made reference to the changes made in the past ten years in the way that public transport is organised and governed.

The Department’s approach to how best transport capital investment could be prioritised in light of consequences of the economic downturn was published in 2015. The Strategic Framework for Investment in Land Transport concluded that the key priority had to be very much to direct existing funding into maintaining the existing, very extensive networks across both road and rail throughout the country in order that they remained operational and safe.

The Department also made reference to programme for Government commitments such as how best to improve the integration of services in the rural bus network within regions and an overall review of public transport policy. The public transport policy review is taking place against the background of Project Ireland 2040 where the transport sector features strongly.

Project Ireland 2040 is the Government’s overarching project initiative in planning ahead for social outcomes and values ahead of economic targets within the core themes of wellbeing, equality and opportunity. It comprises both the new National Planning Framework (see section 5 above) and the new National Development Plan.

A round table discussion took place in mid 2018 to discuss the policy review process and this is to be followed later in 2018 with a public consultation which will further inform the Department’s work on its review of public transport policy including the rural transport dimension and the development of a public transport policy statement.

The Department also provided details and provided a brief description of the following bodies’ responsibilities in the area: Minister and Department, National Transport Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, Commission for Railway Regulation, CIÉ and subsidiaries, and non-state participants in the sector.

A copy of the Department’s Opening Statement to the Joint Committee is attached below under Opening Statements and Submissions.

8.2. Engagement with the Joint Committee – Key Issues

8.2.1. Rural Hackneys

The point was made during the discussion that there is a little known provision in law in rural areas for rural hackneys or public service operation vehicle (PSO) cars and according to some members it is nearly impossible to obtain a licence.

When one tries to ensure there are local PSO vehicle licences, one is told there are five taxi licences, but those with a taxi licence are working in the city as they are not confined to a local area and are not available when one needs them. It was proposed that the Department examine the introduction of an attractive PSO local based licence system for new entrants, which would mean that such a licence holder would have to pick up and deliver a person within a certain radius.

The Department explained that the rural hackney licence was an innovation introduced by the transport regulator in or around 2012 in response to the fact that in rural areas there was an identified issue about the availability of taxi services. It was thought that this might provide an additional feature that could be availed of by some people. However the initiative has not proven to be too popular and some review work is now under way with the taxi advisory committee and the National Transport Authority, to look at the issue of rural hackney licences, although introduced as an innovation, have not been taken up much.
8.2.2. Interconnectivity

Regarding bus links to railway stations and the specific example of no such links whatsoever in the West Cork region, the Department acknowledged the real need to provide connectivity and interconnection by ensuring the various strands and facets of public transport linked up with one another.

It agreed with Committee members that if there is a bus service providing a given level of service and a rail service provider at another level, then it would make sense to have some level of integration with a healthy competitive tension leading to better outcomes. It is the NTA that has responsibility for interconnectivity between services and officials agreed to reference the matter to the NTA to examine.

With regard to bus licensing for a commercial operator interested in providing a bus service the NTA website provides information to parties interested in developing a proposal for a bus route.

In addition to providing guidance on how to make applications it also gives an outline of the timeframe for making an application, the timeframe within which an applicant can expect to have a licence application turned around and when the applicant can expect to have a response.

8.2.3. Accessibility – Bus Stops

While there is almost 100% accessibility for urban transport fleets there is much still to be done in rural areas. Department officials outlined to members that as Bus Éireann replaces its coaches, it is replacing them with coaches that have improved accessibility and has now reached a level now where 86% of its coach fleet is accessible. However in rural areas in many instances bus stops are not compatible with an accessible coach. Therefore it tends to be that journeys between bus stations are accessible but if one is getting off at other points in between places, which many people are, accessibility is not as good. For that reason, the NTA is rolling out a programme to improve the accessibility of bus stops throughout the country on a route basis. The routes it has chosen to start with are the Dublin-Donegal routes where there is no alternative public transport service and no rail service.
8.2.4. Disability

Transport for those with disabilities over 18 years of age has been highlighted by Committee members as a serious issue. Once a person reaches 18 years they may no longer avail of a transport service but are issued instead with a public bus pass and must make use of regular transport services which are often not at all suited for those with disabilities. This results in the 18 year old being driven to all those places in private cars generally by parents in the 60 to 70 year age bracket. A further problem arises for those who may want to avail of public services but who have to give 24 hours notice to use a public bus or train.

As mentioned in 8.2.3 above, Members also sought further information on the number of wheelchair–accessible bus stops in rural areas and the plans being made for further roll-out in consultation with local authorities. Some proposals made during the discussion included the insertion of a protocol to the effect that no new public service licences will be issued to operators unless they have a 100% accessible fleet; and address the discrepancy whereby private operators are not compelled to provide disability accessibility buses to the same extent as public services.

Members were informed by Department officials of an initiative outlined in NTA’s strategy statement and plan for the next four years, involving the integration of the non-emergency HSE transport services with the Local Link services.

However at present there is no requirement on commercial bus operators to provide wheelchair accessible coaches. However he NTA will publish proposals for consultation shortly which will set out minimum accessibility standards for commercial public transport services. The Committee understands it will engage in that consultation towards the end of this year. That will guide future ways of dealing with the licensing of commercial operators and whether there should be a requirement on them to provide fully accessible coaches.
8.2.5. Emissions and Environmental issues

Members expressed disappointment with the recently published Budget 2019 and the lack of initiatives therein on environmental issues. They sought information from the Department on its policy on carbon emissions in terms of transitioning away from oil-burning modes of transport, in particular. Other suggested actions in this regard was increased support for electric vehicles, better connectivity between cycle users and local bus and railway stations, and further research on bio-diesel buses. Concern was also expressed on the lack of mitigation measures around extreme weather events and the example of Waterford railway station was provided where heavy rains lead to station flooding with severe impact on services.

8.2.6. TEN-T

Under the programme for Government, there is a commitment that Ireland would make an application to Europe for Trans-European Transport Networks, TEN-T, funding for the west of Ireland. Nothing has been done.

There is a commitment in the programme for Government that a concept called the Qestern Arc, to which the Deputy referred, would be put forward by Government to the European Commission proposing its inclusion as part of the core network of TEN-T. Work in that regard is under way in the Department.

That is work done in the development of a national planning framework and the national development plan which has only been completed in recent months. If one goes to the European Union to look for the inclusion of particular corridors or routes as part of a core network across Europe, one has to have as good a case as one possibly can. It bolsters one's position in making the case if one can show a national development plan which gives strength to developing networks across the regions. There are various levels of funding available. Inclusion in the comprehensive or core network does not automatically lead to the giving of money, but it does mean that one can then compete in funding calls. One still has to compete with projects all across Europe.

An official report of the discussion held with the Joint Committee is available on the Committee’s website33.

9. Correspondence

9.1. Report on Rural Transport - DTTS

Mr Graham Doyle  
Secretary General  
Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport  
Leeson Lane  
Dublin 2  
D02TR60  
Our Ref: RCD-i-002-2017

Re: Report on Rural Transport as set out in the Programme for Partnership Government

Dear Mr Doyle,

The Joint Committee asked me to write to you in relation to the above. The committee has decided that Rural Transport is one of its priorities for the coming year. Accordingly, the committee requests that you provide an update regarding:

- The publication of the Report on Rural Transport, as set out in section 3.K of the Programme for Partnership Government;
- What progress has been made on the implementation of rural transport improvements;
- Any other information that might be of interest to the committee.

The Committee understands that the report was due to be completed within six months of the publication of the Programme for Partnership Government.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

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Leo Bollins  
Clerk to the Joint Committee  
6 December 2017
9.2.  Update on the Western Rail Corridor - DTTS

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<th>An Comhchoiste um Fhorbairt</th>
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<td>Baile Átha Cliath 2</td>
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Mr Graham Doyle  
Secretary General  
Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport  
Leeson Lane  
Dublin 2  
D02TR60  
Our Ref: RCD-i-003-2017

Re: Update on the Western Rail Corridor

Dear Mr Doyle,

The Joint Committee asked me to write to you in relation to the above matter.

The committee has decided that Rural Transport is one of its priorities for the coming year.

The committee notes that the Programme for Partnership Government included a reference to the Western Rail Corridor in section 3.J.

Accordingly, the committee requests that you provide an update on what progress has been made on this project to date, and in particular:

- The commitment to provide an “... independent costings and review of the Western Rail Corridor phase 2 between Athenry to Claremorris for passenger and freight use”;
- The commitment to take measures, as set out in the McCann Report, to ensure that the line “be preserved in its entirety by clearing, fencing etc.”;
- Any other information that may be of interest to the committee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Yours sincerely,

Leo Bollins  
Clerk to the Committee  
06 December 2017
Opening Statements and Submissions

10. Action Plan for Rural development

10.1. Presentation on the First progress Report, DRCD, August 2017

Background

- Launched in January 2017
- Whole of Government approach
- Builds on, and goes beyond the CEDRA report
- Developed following consultation process, including with Oireachtas members
- Consultation highlighted the positivity and resilience in rural Ireland, but also issues to be addressed
- No “one-size-fits-all” solution
- Aim is to help unlock the potential of each area
Objectives of the Action Plan

- An overarching structure for the co-ordination and implementation of initiatives across Government...
- To advance economic and social progress in rural Ireland and improve the quality of life...
- Through time-bound actions and close monitoring of outcomes....
- Answerable to Cabinet Committee on progress

A joined-up approach

- 3-year plan with over 270 actions across 5 Thematic Pillars
- For delivery across a range of Govt. Departments, State agencies, Local Authorities and other bodies
- Synergies with Regional Action Plans for Jobs and other sectoral strategies
- Value is the cumulative impact of actions focused on rural Ireland
The 5 Pillars

Supporting Sustainable Communities
Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity
Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities
Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential
Supporting Enterprise and Employment

Action Plan for Rural Ireland

ACTION PLAN FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT
Key Deliverables

- Support 135,000 NEW JOBS by 2020
- Increase overseas visitors by 12%
- Invest €50+ million in sports, recreation & cultural facilities
- Revitalise 600+ towns and villages
- Protect Vital Local Services
- Ensure ALL homes & businesses are CONNECTED TO BROADBAND
- Double investment in FLOOD RELIEF WORKS by 2021
- Support 4,000 new community projects
Ensuring Delivery

- Agreed actions, for delivery in a definite time-frame
- Monitoring Committee chaired at Ministerial level, includes key Departments and rural representatives
- Progress Reports published twice-yearly
- Also examining important thematic issues
- Further actions will be added on an on-going basis
- Included in the remit of the Economic Cabinet Committee
- Pat Spillane assisting as Ambassador for the Action Plan

Progress to date

- First Progress Report published in August 2017
- 201 actions due for delivery in Q1/Q2 2017, or multi-annual with activity scheduled for 2017
- 194 actions completed or in progress (where multi-annual)
- Progress Report available on www.drcc.gov.ie
- Measuring impact - a key objective for 2018
10.2.  Progress Report (Summary), DRCD, August 2017

First Progress Report - Summary August 2017
Minister's Foreword

I am delighted to present the first six-monthly progress report on Realising our Rural Potential, the Government's Action Plan for Rural Development.

So much has happened since the Government published the Action Plan in January this year, not least through the creation of a new Department of Rural and Community Development. I am honoured to serve as Minister in what will be a dynamic and forward looking Department. In my role as Minister for Rural and Community Development, I intend to take a pro-active approach to the challenges facing rural Ireland and I will place a strong emphasis on developing policies to support rural employment and rural communities.

The Action Plan for Rural Development has been in place now for just over six months and this report provides a detailed account of the progress being made, as well as highlighting some areas where further work needs to be done. As Minister for Rural and Community Development, I am responsible for overseeing the delivery of the Action Plan and I will work with my fellow Ministers to ensure that their Departments deliver on the Government’s commitments to rural Ireland.

Overall, I am delighted to see so much progress being made right across the five pillars of the Action Plan. It is the combined impact of these actions which will make a difference for rural Ireland.

By continuing to deliver on this Action Plan, we can truly realise the potential of rural Ireland for the benefit of people who live and work in our rural communities.

Michael Ring T.D.
Minister for Rural and Community Development
# Glossary of Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>BIM</td>
<td>Bord Iascaigh Mhara</td>
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<td>CIF</td>
<td>Construction Industry Federation</td>
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<td>CSO</td>
<td>Central Statistics Office</td>
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<td>DAA</td>
<td>Company formerly known as the Dublin Airport Authority</td>
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<td>DAFM</td>
<td>Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine</td>
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<td>DBEI</td>
<td>Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation</td>
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<td>DCHG</td>
<td>Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht</td>
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<td>DRCD</td>
<td>Department of Rural and Community Development</td>
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<td>DCCAE</td>
<td>Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment</td>
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<td>DCYA</td>
<td>Department of Children and Youth Affairs</td>
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<td>DES</td>
<td>Department of Education and Skills</td>
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<td>DESP</td>
<td>Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection</td>
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<td>DHPLG</td>
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<td>Department of Public Expenditure and Reform</td>
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<td>Enterprise Ireland</td>
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<td>Electricity Supply Board</td>
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Background

*Realising our Rural Potential*, the Government’s Action Plan for Rural Development was launched on 23rd January 2017. The Action Plan contains 276 actions for the delivery across Government, State agencies and other bodies over the next three years to support the economic and social progress of rural Ireland.

The 276 actions in the Action Plan are broken down across 5 thematic Pillars as follows:

**Pillar 1:** Supporting Sustainable Communities  
**Pillar 2:** Supporting Enterprise and Employment  
**Pillar 3:** Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential  
**Pillar 4:** Fostering Culture and Creativity in rural communities  
**Pillar 5:** Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity

Each action has been assigned to a lead body which will be responsible for implementation of the action within a definite timescale. Progress on the implementation of the actions is overseen by a Monitoring Committee which includes senior representatives of relevant Government Departments and key rural stakeholder interests. Progress Reports on the implementation of the Action Plan will be published twice-yearly.

This Progress Report outlines the progress which has taken place in relation to all the actions due for implementation in the first six-months of the Action Plan. A total of 227 actions were either due for delivery in the first half of 2017, or classed as 'ongoing' with activity taking place in the first half of 2017.

220 of these actions were either completed on schedule or are in progress (particularly where the actions are multi-annual or on-going, representing a 97% delivery rate. 7 actions due for delivery in the first half of 2017 were delayed.

A summary of the key developments under each pillar is provided over the following pages. Detailed progress reports on each of the 201 actions are included in the subsequent section of the document.
The seven actions which were not completed on schedule in the first half of 2017 were:

- Action 100 – research on the impact of Brexit;
- Action 113 – Finalise the Draft Bioenergy Plan;
- Action 118 – Publish a high-level Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy in Ireland;
- Action 238 – Remove development contribution charges for telecommunications infrastructure;
- Action 239 – Complete the duct installation on 95km of roadway on the M7/M8 corridor;
- Action 240 – Explore whether the take up of the Metropolitan Area Networks can be improved;
- Action 243 – Development of revised 'Exempted Development Regulations' to exempt 4G antennae from requiring planning permission.

The actions in question will be kept under review and updates will be included in the next Progress Report.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
HEADLINE
ACHIEVEMENTS

Pillar 1 – Supporting Sustainable Communities

If we want rural living to be viable and sustainable, we must support our rural communities. We must make rural Ireland a better place to live, enhance local services, build better communities and empower the people that live in them to ensure that their voices are heard.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. The 2017 Town and Village Renewal Scheme was launched on 13th April and will provide funding of €20 million over 15 months to support up to 300 towns and villages. The scheme is specifically targeted at rural towns and villages with populations of less than 10,000. Applications can range from €20,000 to a maximum of €100,000 and funding of up to €200,000 will also be considered for a limited number of projects which can deliver exceptionally strong economic benefits to a town and its outlying areas. (Action 1 – DRCD).

2. The Framework for Town Centre Revival was launched on 25th April to assist with the regeneration of rural towns. The Framework sets out the key characteristics of a successful town centre and identifies existing supports and best practice examples from around the country. It also includes an Action Plan for Town Centre renewal to guide towns and villages through the renewal process – this process includes stakeholder engagement, town centre health check and preparation of a Town Centre plan (Action 4 – DBEI).

3. The 2017 CLÁR programme was launched on 31st March to support disadvantaged rural communities through small capital projects. €7m was approved for 231 projects under four measures: Measure 1: Support for Schools/Community Safety Measures; Measure 2: Play Areas; Measure 3: Targeted Community Infrastructure Needs; Measure 4: First Response Support Measure (Action 10 – DRCD).
4. Over 80 offers were made to GLAS farmers nationwide to support the conservation of traditional farm buildings under the GLAS Traditional Farm buildings grant scheme which also supports employment in rural communities through the engagement of traditional skills people, architectural professionals and wildlife surveyors (Action 14 – Heritage Council).

5. A number of key initiatives were rolled out by the Health and Safety Authority to improve farm safety, including targeted inspection campaigns in March and May 2017 with a focus on livestock safety and tractor and machinery safety. Farm safety training was provided to over 300 Knowledge Transfer facilitators; the Code of Practice for Preventing Injury and Occupational Health in Agriculture was fully revised; farm accident awareness campaigns were broadcast on national TV and radio and social media. Over 1,000 farm safety visits have been carried out to date in 2017 (Action 16 – HSA).

6. 29 Local Action Groups are delivering the LEADER programme in the 28 sub-regional designated areas and over 5,000 expressions of interest have been received for LEADER funding in these areas. The Local Action Groups are working with project promoters to finalise applications for funding and more than 200 project approvals have taken place. D/R&CD has committed to implementing 31 actions, identified by the Local Action Groups, to improve the administration of the programme and facilitate a higher level of project approvals (Action 47 – DRCD).

7. A total of €3.6 million was announced under the Fisheries Local Area Action Group (FLAGS) Strategy for Ireland’s seven coastal regions. This will provide funding for a range of initiatives targeting job creation, social inclusion, tourism, community regeneration and market development (Action 48 – DAFM).

8. 500 additional Rural Social Scheme places were announced in January 2017. At the end of June 2017, there were 2,683 participants benefitting from the Scheme. Places will continue to be rolled out and DESP is working with the Implementing Bodies (35 Local Development Companies and Údarás na Gaeltachta) to ensure that all places are filled as quickly as possible over the coming months (Action 50 – DESP).

9. Application details for Social Farming Initiatives under the Rural Innovation and Development Fund were announced in June 2017. Total funding available is €370,000 for at least three social farming model projects which can demonstrate a national benefit (Action 51 – DAFM).
10. A new grant-aid scheme was announced in April 2017 for community groups to assist with the establishment of **community-based CCTV systems** which will help deter crime and assist in the detection of offenders (*Action 60 – DJE*).

11. A new €2m **Communities Facilities Fund** was announced in March 2017 to enhance communities, address disadvantage and improve social cohesion at local level. LCDCs are currently reviewing applications to ensure complementarity with the Local Economic and Community Plans (*Action 64 – DRCD*).

12. In June 2017, the **Irish Men’s Sheds Association** registered its 400th shed and are well on target to meet the target in the Action Plan of 450 by 2019. In addition, the ‘Sheds for Life’ programme was launched on 29th May in Offaly and several free health events have already taken place (*Actions 66 & 67 – Irish Men’s Sheds Association*).
Pillar 2 - Supporting Enterprise and Employment

Increasing employment opportunities for people across all regions of the country is a key objective for the Government. Supporting the growth of enterprises at regional level – whether start-ups, scaling companies or FDI companies – will bring increased job opportunities for people who live in in rural areas, and will increase economic activity in rural areas.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. All eight Regional Action Plans for Jobs have been published and implementation is well under way. Employment increased in seven of the eight regions in the year to Q1 2017 and over 77% of the new jobs added in year to Q1 2017 were outside Dublin (Action 68 - DBEI).

2. A competitive Regional Enterprise Development Fund of up to €60m up to 2020 was launched in May 2017 by Enterprise Ireland. The Fund aims to accelerate economic recovery in every part of the country by delivering on the potential of local and regional enterprise strengths. The Fund will support collaborative regional initiatives and the development of industry clusters. The closing date for the first call under the Fund was 18th August 2017 (Action 69 – Enterprise Ireland)

3. Significant progress has been made across the actions in Harnessing our Ocean Wealth. A report published in 2017 by the Socio-Economic Research unit at NUI Galway showed that the marine sector has grown significantly since the publication of Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth in 2012. In the period 2014-2016, there has been a 23% increase in turnover, a 20% increase in gross value added and a 10% increase in employment in the marine sector (Action 70 – DAFM).

4. Advance buildings in Sligo, Tralee and Castlebar have been completed by the IDA, designed to provide high quality production and office accommodation suitable for future technology or Life Sciences projects (Action 71 - IDA).
5. Innovation hubs are now operational in the Donegal and Kerry Gaeltacht areas to support entrepreneurship and start-up companies, with others to follow before year-end in Mayo and Galway (Action 85 – Údarás na Gaeltachta).

6. The Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) has deployed the Agriculture Cash Flow Support Scheme in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to provide flexible, low-interest loans to farmers in response to challenges they face due to price and income volatility and unfavourable market conditions (Action 89 – SBCI).

7. 'Brexit Readiness Vouchers' were supplied to companies to obtain specialist advice on a range of issues regarding Brexit (Action 101 - InterTradeIreland).

8. Through the National Waste Prevention Programme, the 'Stop Food Waste Challenge' has been rolled out in 50 mainly rural communities to reduce food waste. In addition 'Smart Farming' has worked with more than 1,000 farmers across all regions, saving an average €5,000 p.a. per farmer and reducing greenhouse gas emissions from their farms by 7-10% (Action 103 – EPA, DCCAE).

9. Progress across FoodWise 2025 has led to an increase in employment in the agri-food sector, now accounting for over 8.6% of total employment; agri-food exports at end 2016 were €12.2 billion (Actions 105&106 - DAFM).

10. To date, 585 companies, accounting for almost 95% of food and drink exports, have registered to take part in the Origin Green programme which contributes to improving the environmental, as well as the economic and social, sustainability of the sector (Action 107 – Bord Bia).
11. €28m in funding was announced in February 2017, for ongoing capital investment in Ireland’s six fishery harbour centres and smaller harbours to support safety, maintenance and fisheries processing and development (Action 111 – DAFM).

12. A workshop with key stakeholders in the bioeconomy sector was held in February with a view to informing the establishment of a baseline assessment of the current levels of Bioeconomy activity and opportunities across the various sectors in Ireland (Action 116 – D/Taoiseach).

13. Letterkenny IT has established a base in Pairc Ghaoth Dobhair to support local businesses as part of Údarás na Gaeltachta’s efforts to strengthen their links with ITs and Universities. This will help to build capacity in the region and support and promote research and innovation (Action 127 – Údarás na Galtachta).

14. ‘Expand your Horizons’ meetings were held across the country in February 2017 by Teagasc to promote diversification options for farmers and to outline funding available to support farming and rural communities (Action 132 – Teagasc).

15. A new round of funding of €1.75 million from the Dormant Accounts Fund was announced by Minister Michael Ring in March 2017, to support social enterprises that assist disadvantaged people, with an emphasis on rural areas (Action 138 – DRCD).

16. The Earned Income Credit (EIC) was increased by €400 to €950 per annum in Budget 2017 and is available to self-employed individuals, including farmers, who do not have access to the PAYE employee tax credit (Action 146 - DOF).
Pillar 3 - Maximising our Rural Tourism and Recreation Potential

Tourism is a key driver of economic development in rural Ireland. In 2015, 85% of visitors to Ireland visited at least one region outside Dublin. With the revenue this generates in the regions, tourism has a significant role to play in supporting sustainable jobs and growth in rural areas and will be supported through targeted marketing initiatives and co-ordinated approaches at national and local level. There is also potential to develop and promote Activity Tourism and capitalise on our rich built and natural heritage.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. A feasibility study in relation to the development of the 'Ireland's Lakelands' brand has been completed. Fáilte Ireland are examining proposals with a view to testing available options (Action 153 – Fáilte Ireland).

2. A tourism strategy for the Gaeltacht was approved in the first half of 2017 and implementation of the actions in the strategy has already begun (Action 154 – Údarás na Gaeltachta).

3. €450,000 has been announced for at least 9 projects supporting agri-food tourism initiatives under the Rural Innovation and Development Fund. This will focus on longer-term, wider impacting proposals such as business and skills training, network development, initiation and development of inter-county agri-food tourism schemes/trails (Action 163 – DAFM)

4. The tourism potential of the Border region is being developed through a number of initiatives,

   e.g. the development of the Ulster Canal Greenway and the Carlingford Lough Greenway, and the commencement of the Carlingford Ferry Service between Greenore, Co. Louth and Greencastle, Co. Down (Action 164 – Local Authorities)


6. Work has commenced on a number of initiatives to develop and promote our Blueways e.g. the development of the Royal Canal Blueway, which will provide 22km of paddling, centred around Mullingar, 140km of walking from McNead’s Bridge in Westmeath to Richmond Harbour in Longford, along with 60km of cycling trails; the development of a recreational activity hub in Carlow town; completion of the Lough Allen Board Walk. In addition, the Acres Lake section
of the Shannon Blueway and works to the canoe trail on Lough Derg at 14 sites are nearing completion (Action 168 – D/CHG and Action 169 – Waterways Ireland).

7. €11.4 million for outdoor recreational infrastructure was approved for over 200 projects across rural Ireland (Action 170 – DR&CD).

8. Funding was awarded to 70 applicants in 19 counties across the country in April 2017 under the Inland Fisheries Ireland Sponsorship Scheme to assist rural communities to engage with angling, angling tourism and environmental issues, with a further funding round anticipated later in the year (Action 179 – IFI).

9. €500k in capital investment was announced in January 2017 to boost the tourism potential of Ireland’s National Parks, as part of a strategic partnership between the Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht and Fáilte Ireland (Action 186 – DCHG).

10. €11.5m in funding was announced by Fáilte Ireland in April 2017 for 10 key Heritage Sites, including funding of €8.2m for 8 sites outside of the Dublin Region (Action 191 – OPW).

11. Funding of over €1.3m has been approved for 67 projects to conserve historic, heritage structures under the Structures at Risk Fund (Action 193 – DCHG).

12. The Heritage Council has allocated €700,000 in funding to over 170 groups in rural Ireland under the Community Heritage Grants Scheme in 2017 to support the development of conservation and heritage tourism in rural areas (Action 194 – Heritage Council).
Pillar 4 - Fostering Culture and Creativity in Rural Communities

Many rural communities all over Ireland have a thriving arts scene and it is important that facilities and assets in rural areas are enhanced to strengthen the social fabric of rural life. This Pillar aims to increase access to the arts and to develop culture and creativity in rural communities. The Irish language is also a vital part of our culture and heritage and is a key resource in Gaeltacht communities.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. 9 million was approved for investment in 56 arts and culture centres across the country by the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Heather Humphreys T.D., in February 2017. Over 80% of the investment will be in rural areas (Action 203 – DCHG).

2. €135,000 was allocated to 23 regional museums across the country ensuring access to our cultural heritage for rural communities (Action 204 – DCHG).

3. The Arts Council has agreed touring decisions for the first 6 months of 2018 in June 2017 under the Touring and Dissemination of Work Scheme to support quality professional productions to tour venues across Ireland, increasing access to the arts for rural communities (Action 206 – Arts Council).

4. Investment in small festivals around the country has increased by 22% to support greater participation in the arts around the country (Action 208 – Arts Council).

5. Creative Ireland co-ordinators and Culture Teams have been established in every local authority to better co-ordinate and maximise local arts provision. Each local authority has published a Culture and Creativity Plan for 2017 (Action 210 – DCHG).

6. All 31 local authorities hosted free, family-friendly Cruinniú na Cásca events on Easter Monday in their individual counties as part of the national Creative Ireland programme (Action 214 – DCHG).

7. As part of the Arts in Education Charter, Teacher/Artist partnerships as summer courses will be delivered in each of the 21 Association of Teachers/Education Centres in Ireland areas, as a model for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) this Summer (Action 219 – Arts Council, DCHG, DES).
8. A Connacht regional event was held in May in Colaiste na Coiribe, Knocknacarra, Galway to showcase projects developed by young people involved in "Techspace as Gaeilge" in various rural-based schools in the Connacht region. Work is now focussing on progressing the initiative in the Munster region (Action 225 – DCHG).

9. Additional funding of €22,000 was provided for Ealaín na Gaeltachta Teo to support their work in fostering creativity and the arts in the Gaeltacht (Action 227 – Údarás na Gaeltachta).
Pillar 5 - Improving Rural Infrastructure and Connectivity

The objective of this Pillar is to improve the connectivity of rural communities through improved broadband connection, improved transport links and by reducing the risk of flooding in vulnerable areas.

Key achievements to date under this Pillar:

1. The National Broadband Plan has been a catalyst in encouraging investment by the telecoms sector so that, to date, approximately 1.4m or 61% of the 2.3m premises in Ireland can get high-speed broadband of a minimum of 30 Megabits per second. In April 2017, a commitment agreement with Eir was signed to provide broadband to an additional 300,000 mostly rural premises on a commercial basis and this is already progressing (Action 232 – DCCAE).

2. An Implementation Group was established in March 2017 to drive the recommendations of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce and to accelerate the rollout of broadband infrastructure and mobile phone access in rural Ireland. D/R&CD is working with stakeholders through two Regional Action Groups to remove barriers to the roll-out of telecoms infrastructure (Action 233 – DCCAE & DRCD).

3. Funding has been provided to each local authority to appoint a Broadband Officer to facilitate the roll out of broadband across the country (Action 235 – DRCD).

4. New routes in development by the Rural Transport Programme during Q1 and Q 2 2017 included a total of 12 scheduled and demand-responsive transport services in Meath, Fingal, Sligo, Leitrim, Tipperary, Kerry, Waterford and Wexford (Action 252 – NTA).

5. In June 2017, approximately €2m was allo cated under the Regional Airpo rts Programme for the regional airports in Donegal, Knock, Kerry and Waterford (Action 260 – DTTAS).

6. Three new airlines, along with four new routes, are now operating from Cork airport which increases connectivity for the southern region and increase opportunities for tourism in the region (Action 261- DAA).

7. Progress has been made on maintenance activity by the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co- ordination Working Group (Action 273 - OPW).

8. In April, the Government agreed the administrative arrangements for a once-off targeted Voluntary Homeowner Relocation Scheme for certain houses
affected by flooding in 2015 and 2016 (Action 266 - OPW).

9. The Review of the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Schemes has been completed. As a result, the upper financial threshold has now been increased significantly from €500k to €750k per project and for the first time, farm yards and buildings will be included as commercial premises in all categories (Action 271 – OPW).

10. 40 Flood Monitoring Stations have been installed across Roscommon, Galway, Longford and Mayo to identify potential solutions to address the risk of flooding from turloughs (Action 275– GSI, OPW)
11. The National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040 Our Plan

11.1. Damien English TD, Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development

Making of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Rural and Community Development

Wednesday 13th December 2017

The National Planning Framework – Ireland 2040: Our Plan

Opening Statement for Damien English T.D., Minister of State for Housing and Urban Development

Chair, Committee Members,

As Minister of State with responsibility for Housing and Planning, I welcome this opportunity to listen to and discuss the Committee’s views in relation to the National Planning Framework.

I will put forward the Government’s views as what Ireland 2040 is aimed at delivering for rural Ireland and for communities in Ireland, both urban and rural.

Ireland 2040 – Our Plan, the draft National Planning Framework draws on input and advice from expert economic and analysis from the ESRI, on environmental assessments from RPS consultants.

Most importantly it draws from the views and inputs of a broad range of people and stakeholders across the spectrum from national, regional and local level.

The development of the NPF has taken place over a 3 year period. It included around 40 stakeholder events right around this country.

On top of the hundreds of submissions received in the build-up to the publication of the draft NPF, we have over 1000 submissions which we are determined should influence the final plan.

Purpose of the National Planning Framework

The NPF is primarily about planning properly for what will be one of the fastest growing economies in Europe over the next couple of decades. The plan will ensure the potential of all of our regions, and all parts of our regions, is fully realised, whether that potential is in an urban or rural context.
The Framework is about our regions working more effectively and both urban and rural development policies working in partnership for the ultimate benefit of the communities we serve.

The Framework sets a long-term strategic planning and investment context for Ireland over the next 20 years. It includes broad principles to better manage future population and economic growth than we did in the past.

We must bear in mind we need to plan for a population increase of 1 million extra people, an extra 660,000 people at work and at least the provision of 500,000 extra homes.

However, this is not a top-down plan. To work, the NPF needs to be truly – Our Plan.

The NPF will also be further expanded upon and developed at regional and local levels by the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSESs), and ultimately, in local authority statutory plans.

**Current Status of the NPF**

Approximately 1,050 submissions were received in the final public consultation. We are looking carefully at these submissions in shaping the final document.

Moreover, looking to the themes raised by the submissions, emerging areas for further drafting include:

- **Regions**: More detail on regional, (development) and critically rural, drivers outside of the five main cities;
- **Moving from Business As Usual to Compact Development**: Building in more scope to gradually phase in a transition from our current quite expansive or “business as usual” development model to a more “compact development” model as set out in the NPF;
- **Changing Work Patterns**: A stronger recognition of the impacts of changing work patterns, the impacts of technology and connectivity and the scope for people to work from home in that context;
- **Housing and Rural Development**: Reflecting the fact that wider “social” as well as economic considerations can be reasonable justifications for provision of housing in our rural areas. But let me come back to that later.
- **More Specifics on Investment**: With further details emerging through the draft capital investment plan from Departments/sectors, there is more scope to co-ordinate and cross-reference these in ensuring a joined up approach between the NPF and the Capital Plan.
Rural Development and the NPF

There is a lot in Ireland 2040 for rural areas, the most important being that the Framework is about having an overall plan for our country’s strategic development, urban and rural working together for the overall benefit of our communities and our future.

The NPF Will Strengthen Rural Ireland, Not Weaken It

There have been suggestions that the NPF will weaken rural Ireland. These suggestions are somewhat mischievous and quite misleading.

Carefully reading the draft NPF, one will see that it contains many different kinds of practical planning, development and investment policies, which will benefit rural Ireland by:

- Driving plan-led and community-led regeneration initiatives, aimed at re-purposing rural economies to benefit from new technology-driven economic activities and new living possibilities;
- Growing our regions outside Dublin and the East by more than would occur under a ‘business as usual’ scenario; and
- Improving connectivity to weaker parts of our country such as to the northern and western parts of the country.

Rural Development in Ireland

One of the main challenges in rural development in Ireland today is the necessity to create the new opportunities for the renewal and sustainability of rural economies.

Go to many smaller towns and villages across rural Ireland, and you’ll see the empty buildings, the shops that are closed, schools that are under threat. We have to get people living again among these empty streets and empty buildings, if these places are to have any future.

The NPF takes up this challenge, proposing smart growth initiatives to attract people and jobs into our small towns and villages, harnessing their attractions in quality of life terms and connecting them to the digital, connected and shared economy of the future.

In addition, Chapter 4 of the draft Framework sets out 14 specific national planning and development objectives for rural Ireland.

These support and build upon the Action Plan for Rural Development for the longer term and address key areas such as housing, economic development and infrastructure.

We need to match the emptiness and dereliction of many of our smaller towns with the desires of many people, seeking the opportunity to build their own homes. There are
many who find it really difficult to do so because no one will sell them a site or, if they did, it would cost a fortune or because there are no services.

In order to assist this, the NPF proposes that local authorities will be supported in undertaking the necessary land acquisition, site preparation and local infrastructure provision to deliver self-build development options in smaller towns/villages. That’s how we will breathe new life into rural communities.

We have a sense that there may be a misconception that in its focus on building up our rural communities and particularly our smaller towns and villages that the NPF will discourage rural communities being able to meet their housing needs in rural areas.

This is not the case because the facts show that Ireland meets a very large part of its housing needs in rural areas and in the countryside more specifically. Last year some 50% of housing was built in rural areas. In fact, in some of our more rural counties this was closer to 80%. As Minister and being from a rural area, I want to see vibrant rural communities and rural economies. I realise though, as the Government does, that alongside a lived-in rural landscape, we also mustn’t neglect the renewal of our existing built-up areas and the communities living in them. This is true be it in the inner city areas, in market town centres or the myriad of smaller towns and villages across the country.

**Capital Investment and Planning**

This Government made a decision in July to co-ordinate the National Planning Framework with the 10-year Capital Investment Plan, ensuring alignment between strategic planning and investment.

We are working closely with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure an effective alignment between the National Planning Framework and the mid-term review of the Capital Plan and longer-term infrastructure planning.

Close alignment of the 10-year Capital Plan with the NPF will avoid the mistakes of the past, when investment under the 2000-2006 National Development Plan came before the 2002 National Spatial Strategy, which itself was too diversely focused.

Through this alignment, we are essentially putting our money where our mouth is - our capital investment will underpin our planning framework so that these plans are real.
**Next Steps**

The enactment of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 will place the NPF on a statutory footing. It will put in place, through the new Office of the Planning Regulator, a regular process, including Oireachtas involvement, of monitoring, review and updating of the Framework.

The final Framework document will then be brought to Government for approval to publish, followed by a Strategic Environmental Assessment and the finalising of translation, design and printing. It is envisaged that the final NPF will be published in full in Q1 2018.

**Conclusion**

Committee members, I am certain that all of you here today would agree with the sentiment that actions to revitalise our towns, villages and communities outlined in the draft Framework are good for our regions, good for our communities and good for all parts of our dynamic and proud country.

We need to support the Ireland 2040 process so that Europe’s fastest growing economy for the next decade or so has a real chance for lasting change, and preparing us for a better planned and better future.

For our people, our communities – urban and rural, our future.
12. Regional and Rural Transport Policy

12.1. Anne Graham, Chief Executive Officer, NTA (1)

Introductory Statement from Anne Graham, Chief Executive, National Transport Authority

28 March 2019

Thank you for the invitation to attend. I understand that the Committee wishes me to address the topic of “Rural Transport Policy” and in my statement I focus in particular on public transport. To assist me in dealing with your subsequent questions I am joined by Margaret Malone who manages the Rural Transport Programme within the Authority.

Before dealing with the specific areas of focus, I would like to set the context by providing a brief overview of the remit of the Authority.

Remit of the Authority

The remit of the National Transport Authority is to regulate and develop the provision of integrated public transport services (bus, rail, light rail and taxi) by public and private operators in the State, to secure the development and implementation of an integrated transport system within the Greater Dublin Area, and to contribute to the effective integration of transport and land use planning across the State—please see Appendix 1 for more detail re the role and remit of the Authority.

In addition to its statutory responsibilities, the Authority has various arrangements with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to discharge functions on its behalf. This includes the assignment of responsibility to the Authority for integrated local and rural transport, including provision of the Rural Transport Programme.

Responsibilities of the Authority in relation to Regional & Economic Strategies of Regional Assemblies

The NTA is required, under legislation, to provide to the Regional Assembly a report on “the issues, which, in its opinion, should be considered by the regional assembly in making a regional spatial and economic strategy”. This is set out in Section 31FF of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The Authority has made those submissions as required.
Responsibilities of the Authority with regard to public transport services provision

Public transport in rural areas in Ireland is provided in the following ways:

a) Iarnród Éireann provides rail services under contract with the National Transport Authority. Any changes to the rail services, requires the approval of the Authority.

b) Bus Éireann provide a variety of services through its commercial Expressway services that are licensed by the NTA and through a network of subsidised public bus services under a Direct Award contract with the NTA. Both services serve many rural towns with frequencies varying from several times a day to a weekly service. Any changes to the subsidised services, requires the approval of the Authority.

c) Other commercial operators provide a number of town to town services and intercity services across the state without any state subsidy. If Bus Éireann or any commercial operator is required to withdraw any of its commercial services, the Authority will work to ensure that communities are not left behind.

d) Bus services are provided under the Rural Transport Programme. These bus services are contracted by the NTA and are managed by seventeen Locallink offices throughout the state. The services are primarily demand-responsive services (80% of all services) but there are regular scheduled services between towns also provided under this programme.
Rural Transport Programme – “Local Link”

The objective of the Rural Transport Programme is to provide a good quality nationwide community based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs.

Typical services provided by the Rural Transport Programme include:

1. Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) – these services do not operate on a fixed route but respond to requests for services by intending passengers and operate by making specific trips to pick up and drop off passengers at the door. They can be operated by large public service vehicles, hackneys or community cars.
2. Scheduled Fixed Transport – services with a regular route, stopping places and timetable

Key features of the Rural Transport Programme include:

- Completing of 1.9 million passenger journeys per annum with 0.9 million of those journeys provided for Free Travel Passengers. These figures include 0.2 million passengers who required assistance.
- Providing an average of 150,000 service trips annually
- Travelling over 11.8 million kilometres annually
- Over 400 Private Operators provide the services using the services of almost 900 drivers.
- The Programme funds the provision of ‘Once Off’ trips for individuals and community/voluntary groups to help address the lack of transport as a factor in social exclusion.
- 62% of service trips are defined as either fully or partially accessible.

Rural Transport Programme: Passenger Journeys and Revenues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Passenger Journeys (millions)</th>
<th>Percentage change on previous year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>No change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>+1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>+5.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over the past two years, the Authority has supported the expansion of Rural Transport services to include regular commuter bus services. Operating at least five times per day over a 5/6/7 day per week schedule, these services are specifically designed to ensure connectivity with other public transport services. This connectivity facilitates passengers to make onward journeys typically to access education/employment/health, recreational and other opportunities –please see Appendix 2 for a national listing of these regular services.

1. **Funding of the Rural Transport Programme**

Prior to the restructuring of the Programme, a myriad of funding streams supported the provision of rural transport services. Post restructuring, there are now two main funding streams from the Department of Transport, Tourism & Sport and the Department of Social Protection (Free Travel Pass Scheme).

As with other areas, funding for the Programme reduced significantly during the economic downturn. In recent years, the funding allocation has continued to increase thereby enabling further improvement and expansion of services.

*Rural Transport Programme Funding (Current) from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (DTTAS)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RTP Funding from DTTAS</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding Allocation</td>
<td>€000</td>
<td>€000</td>
<td>€000</td>
<td>€000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Funding Total</td>
<td>10.05m</td>
<td>11.5m</td>
<td>13.7m</td>
<td>14.3m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Department of Social Protection provides an annual funding allocation of €1.5 million under its Free Travel Scheme towards the cost of the Programme.

Other sources of income to the Rural Transport Programme include:

- Fare income
- The provision of transport services to other organisations such as the Health Service Executive which are funded separately by the relevant organisations.

The Authority has recently produced it’s Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018-2022 which sets out key objectives for both the delivery and development of the Rural Transport Programme for the five year period to the end of 2022.
The key priorities of the Programme continue to include addressing rural social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services. Nine key priority areas have been identified as follows:

- **Priority Area 1 – Sustaining the Rural Transport Programme**
- **Priority Area 2 – Route Development & Expansion**
- **Priority Area 3 – Integration with other Statutory Services**
- **Priority Area 4 - Accessibility of Services**
- **Priority Area 5 - Access for All**
- **Priority Area 6 – Ensuring the RTP delivers an optimum Customer Experience**
- **Priority Area 7 - Children and Young People**
- **Priority Area 8 – Encouraging Innovation in Rural Transport Service Provision**
- **Priority Area 9 – Monitoring Progress of the RTP**

**Review of Bus Éireann Direct Award Contracted services**

The Authority is continually working with Bus Éireann to provide improvements on its contracted services and is now looking at expansion of those services now that the budget for public service obligations has increased since 2016. The Authority also promoted the improvements in the regional cities which have seen phenomenal growth in passenger numbers. These improvements cannot be sustained unless significant improvement work is carried out by the city authorities in providing bus priority measures particularly now as car traffic congestion is growing rapidly. Improved town services have been delivered in Athlone following the success of the Sligo bus services enhancements. The work in enhancing the services provided by Bus Éireann has been delayed significantly as it has had to prioritise the changes required as part of its business recovery plan. It is expected that Bus Éireann will complete that work shortly and that we can recommence the service enhancement work.

**New Services**

The Authority recognises that there are many gaps in our services provision. We have focussed on the lack of service in our main towns and are prioritising the provision of new town services in Kilkenny, Carlow, Mullingar all of whom have a population in the 19,000 to 26,000 range.
Co-ordination of services

In exercising its functions the Authority seeks to achieve the provision of an integrated public transport system of services and networks for all users. Wherever appropriate, we seek to integrate and coordinate services to provide for seamless travel options where change of bus and/or mode is required. This includes the operation of rural transport services (“Local Link”), which can facilitate connecting to mainline inter-urban services, irrespective of the provider of those services. **In fact the NTA is the only body that can bring modes and operators together in an integrated service pattern that provides the best service for rural communities.**

Public Transport Infrastructure

There are a number of key infrastructural items that support public transport which are required to increase the attractiveness of public transport particularly in rural Ireland i.e. bus shelters, accessible bus stops and information at stops.

The provision of additional shelters has been very constrained in recent year by lack of funding. The contract for the provision and maintenance of bus shelters now rests with the NTA rather than each operator. Therefore we are now well placed to deliver a comprehensive shelter.

Information provision has improved – new bus stop poles and information was rolled out on a pilot basis in Cork city. Real-time information while not available on signs at every bus stop, is available on the TFI website and app and from an sms text messaging service.

However, our ambition to deliver in these areas has been very constrained due to lack of funding. It is expected that funding will improve from 2019, however the Authority needs to be in a position to put in place the resources that can deliver on our ambitious programme of improvements.

**That concludes my introductory presentation. I trust that we can answer any queries that arise.**
12.2. Anne Graham, Chief Executive Officer, NTA (2)

Introductory Statement from Anne Graham, Chief Executive,
National Transport Authority

20 June 2019

Thank you for the invitation to attend. I understand that the Committee wishes me to address the topic of “Rural Transportation”. To assist me in dealing with your subsequent questions I am joined by Tim Gaston, Director of Public Transport Services and Margaret Malone, Rural Transport Manager with the Authority.

Before dealing with the specific areas of focus, I would like to set the context by providing a brief overview of the remit of the Authority in relation to rural transport services.

Responsibilities of the Authority with regard to public transport services provision

Public transport in rural areas in Ireland is provided in the following ways:

a) Iarnród Éireann provides rail services under contract with the National Transport Authority. Any changes to the rail services, requires the approval of the Authority.

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d) Bus services are provided under the Rural Transport Programme. These bus services are contracted by the NTA and are managed by seventeen Local Link offices throughout the state. The services are primarily demand-responsive services (80% of all services) but there are regular scheduled services between towns also provided under this programme.
Rural Transport Programme – “Local Link”

The objective of the Rural Transport Programme is to provide a good quality nationwide community based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs.

Key features of the Rural Transport Programme include:

- Completing of 1.9 million passenger journeys per annum with 0.9 million of those journeys provided for Free Travel Passengers. These figures include 0.2 million passengers who required assistance.
- Providing an average of 150,000 service trips annually
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- The Programme funds the provision of ‘Once Off’ trips for individuals and community/voluntary groups to help address the lack of transport as a factor in social exclusion.
- 62% of service trips are defined as either fully or partially accessible.

Over the past two years, the Authority has supported the expansion of Rural Transport services to include regular commuter bus services. Operating at least five times per day over a 5/6/7 day per week schedule, these services are specifically designed to ensure connectivity with other public transport services. This connectivity facilitates passengers to make onward journeys typically to access education/employment/health, recreational and other opportunities.
Recent Initiatives in Rural Transport

The Authority recently produced its Strategic Plan for Rural Transport 2018-2022 which sets out nine key objectives for delivery upon over the life time of the plan. The key priorities of the Programme continue to include addressing rural social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services.

The Authority is currently implementing one of the listed actions in the strategy (under Objective Area 8-Encouraging Innovation in Rural Transport Service Provision) re. the provision of evening and night services to address unmet transport needs in rural areas.

Twelve of the seventeen Local Link groups applied for funding and proposals were assessed by the Authority having regard to the following criteria:

- Evidence of need;
- Previous experience in delivering evening and night time services
- Value for money
- Geographical spread on a national basis
- Range and mix of proposed modes of transport
- Connectivity / Integration with existing transport options whilst not representing a displacement risk to existing services
- Potential for mainstreaming of pilot projects
Outcome of Assessment Process

A total of 53 additional services were subsequently approved for funding (please see Appendix A for details of these services). Key characteristics of these new services include:

- 19 of these services are extensions to existing regular public transport services
- 34 of these services are demand responsive services.
- Services will be provided nationally across 19 counties
- Services will run on average from 6pm to 11pm typically on Friday and Saturday evenings

All 53 initially approved services will be operational by late June/early July 2018, running until Dec 2018 on a pilot basis. In terms of reviewing the usage/patronage levels on these pilot services, the Authority will closely monitor usage patterns/trends over the six month period and advise the Department accordingly.

As five Local Link groups did not make an initial application, the Authority advised in mid-May that it would consider any further proposed services from these groups should a need/demand exist in the TCU area. A revised closing date of **Friday 01st June** was set for receipt of applications and all five Local Link groups subsequently submitted applications.

These applications are currently being assessed by the Transport Planning team within the Authority and a decision regarding funding is due shortly.

Review of Bus Éireann Direct Award Contracted services

The Authority is continually working with Bus Éireann to provide improvements on its contracted services and is now looking at expansion of those services now that the budget for public service obligations has increased since 2016.

The Authority also promoted the improvements in the regional cities which have seen phenomenal growth in passenger numbers. These improvements cannot be sustained unless significant improvement work is carried out by the city authorities in providing bus priority measures particularly now as car traffic congestion is growing rapidly. The work in enhancing the services provided by Bus Éireann has been delayed significantly as it has had to prioritise the changes required as part of its business recovery plan. It is expected that Bus Éireann will complete that work shortly and that we can recommence the service enhancement work.
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The Authority recognises that there are many gaps in our services provision. We have focussed on the lack of service in our main towns and are prioritising the provision of new town services in Kilkenny, Carlow, Mullingar, all of whom have a population in the 19,000 to 26,000 range.

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There are a number of key infrastructural items that support public transport which are required to increase the attractiveness of public transport particularly in rural Ireland i.e. bus shelters, accessible bus stops and information at stops.

The provision of additional shelters has been very constrained in recent year by lack of funding. The contract for the provision and maintenance of bus shelters now rests with the NTA rather than each operator. Therefore we are now well placed to deliver a comprehensive shelter programme.

Our ambition is to deliver high quality public transport in rural areas. It is expected that funding will improve from 2019, however the Authority needs to be in a position to put in place the staff resources that can deliver on our ambitious programme of improvements.

**That concludes my introductory presentation. I trust that we can answer any queries that arise.**
12.3. Deirdre Hanlon, Assistant Secretary, DTTS

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Rural and Community
Development on 23 October 2018

Deirdre Hanlon, Assistant Secretary, Public Transport, Sustainability and Climate
Change, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport

Introduction

Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to present this opening statement on behalf of
the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. The Department has been invited here
today by the Committee to answer questions in relation to Transport Policy in rural and
regional areas, and to assist the Committee in its consideration of these matters. I am
joined by some colleagues from the Department where we all work on Land Transport: Mr
Kevin Doyle and Mr Garret Doocey each deal with matters of Public Transport policy; and
Mr Dominic Mullaney deals with matters of Roads policy.

Organisation of public transport

The Committee has already had several discussions about rural and regional transport,
and will know that there are many actors in the transport arena in Ireland. Also, over the
last decade, there have been several changes in the way that public transport is organised
and governed. Against this backdrop, it might be useful to the Committee if I briefly
outline how the institutions within the public transport area are organised and give you a
summary of the respective roles of the State bodies, including ourselves.

Minister and Department

As the Committee will be aware, the Minister and the Department have responsibility in
relation to three overarching themes:

- policy and statutory frameworks;
- aggregate funding; and
- corporate governance in the State transport bodies and a shareholder role.

In fulfilling these responsibilities, we work on a number of fronts. We develop transport
policy and also provide a transport perspective and input when other relevant Government
policies are being devised. We develop the statutory and legislative frameworks to govern
the transport sector.

Through our Vote, we channel aggregate Exchequer funding. The Department’s total Voted
allocation in 2018 is approximately €2billion, of which €1.6billion relates to land transport.
Committee members might be interested to know that analysis conducted a few years ago
indicated that well over three-quarters of our spend on land transport was outside the Greater Dublin Area.

For public transport, the funding flows mainly to the National Transport Authority, for infrastructure investment and public transport service support. For roads, the funding flows to Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and to the relevant local authorities.

Committee members will be aware that during the years of the fiscal and economic crisis that followed the banking crisis of 2008, many areas of Government expenditure were reduced in order to regain fiscal stability. In the transport area this curtailed the current and capital budgets available to support services and invest in infrastructure. It impacted on roads and on public transport. At the time, the Department undertook an analysis to advise Government on how best to prioritise transport capital investment in these circumstances. The approach adopted was published in the 2015 document “Strategic Framework for Investment in Land Transport” (SFILT). It prioritised investing in maintaining the existing, very extensive road and rail networks in order to keep them operational and safe.

Since then, it has been a priority to return to the levels of maintenance and safety investment required to keep the networks at a steady state of service and reliability. Annual budget allocations have been increasing over more recent years, and are scheduled to rise further over the coming years. This is enabling the achievement of “steady state investment” together with targeted new projects under the National Development Plan and in line with the strategic objectives in the National Planning Framework.

Finally, as a Department we also oversee corporate governance in the State bodies involved with transport and exercise the shareholder role on behalf of the Minister in relation to the State-owned service providers, CIÉ and its subsidiaries.

**National Transport Authority**

The National Transport Authority (NTA) is the next significant actor in the sector. The NTA was established about 10 years ago under legislation passed by the Oireachtas to act as an independent regulatory, funding and strategy body, and it now has a considerable role in relation to the public transport sector in Ireland. Among its statutory functions, the NTA is responsible for: regulating and contracting PSO bus and rail services; allocating PSO funding to the operators; licensing and regulating commercial bus services; regulating taxi services; and developing integrated ticketing.

I am aware the NTA has been before this Committee both this year and last about their approach to such tasks.
Transport Infrastructure Ireland

Transport Infrastructure Ireland’s primary function is to provide an integrated approach to the future development and operation of the national roads network and light rail infrastructure throughout Ireland.

Commission for Railway Regulation

The Commission for Railway Regulation has statutory independence and it exercises two important roles: firstly, it is the national body for oversight and authorisations in relation to safe operation of the railways, and secondly it has a role in relation to the economic aspect of the railway and facilitating market access.

In many respects, our national regulatory framework for public transport reflects EU law that applies across all Member States and, like other Member States, Ireland now has independent transport-focussed authorities responsible for matters such as allocation of funding, licensing (viz. the NTA) and oversight of safety (viz. the CRR).

CIÉ and Subsidiaries

Within the State sector, the next set of actors in the public transport arena is probably the most visible to the travelling public as they are the bodies that actually provide services across the country. These are the long-standing Coras Iompair Éireann (CIÉ), and its three fully-owned operating subsidiaries: Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann, and Iarnród Éireann. The companies are responsible for running all their services and they also decide on strategy and operations in relation to the commercial aspects of their operations.

Non-State Participants in the Sector

Alongside the State bodies that I have described, there are also many private firms and community bodies involved in transport provision, and they do this under relevant regulatory, licensing, and/or funding arrangements with the NTA.

Department’s remit and Rural/Regional Transport

The Committee is primarily interested in transport matters that affect rural areas and regional travel. In relation to the work of the Minister and the Department, our remit for policy development and for overall transport funding is most relevant to the context and support for transport in rural and regional areas.
Programme for Government Commitments

On the policy front, the Committee will be aware that the Programme for a Partnership Government has a number of commitments that are relevant to the public transport area. One such commitment is to examine how best to improve the integration of services in the rural bus network within regions, and to provide a report on this to the relevant Oireachtas Committee. This matter is being examined and developed by the Department within the broader context of a wider piece of work that we have underway to review public transport policy, which is another commitment in the Programme for Government. That commitment is to review public transport policy “to ensure services are sustainable into the future and are meeting the needs of a modern economy.”

As a key part of this policy review process, the Minister hosted a Round Table Discussion in May, involving a broad range of organisations and individuals who are closely connected to the public transport sector. Specifically in relation to rural transport, these included representatives of the Rural Transport Network and Irish Rural Link. The purpose of the Round Table event was to give participants the opportunity to outline their perspectives on key public transport policy issues and, equally, to hear the perspectives of others and engage in a dialogue about the challenges of achieving appropriate policy balances. The discussions, papers and presentations from the Round Table Discussion are forming the basis of a public consultation that is planned to take place very shortly. The public consultation will further inform the Department’s work on the review of public transport policy, including the rural transport dimension, and the development of a Public Transport Policy Statement.

This transport policy review work is now taking place against the background of another notable policy initiative in which we have been deeply involved: the recently agreed Project 2040 plan which was developed in a cross-Government initiative led by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. Published earlier this year, it comprises both a new National Planning Framework (NPF) setting the vision and policy direction for Ireland’s development over the next 20 or 25 years, together with the new National Development Plan (NDP) which is the 10-year strategic capital investment plan for infrastructure development. As a key element of national infrastructure and a critical component of planning the country’s future development, the transport sector features strongly in Project 2040, and the document is very relevant as a context to future transport policy.
Rural transport services and infrastructure

The Exchequer funding provided for public transport includes subvention support, via the NTA, for the PSO operations of Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann – both of which have very substantial operations and services in rural Ireland and in regional connectivity – and investment in their infrastructure.

Exchequer funding also supports the Rural Transport Programme (RTP) which, obviously, is specific to rural areas and which is aimed at addressing social isolation through providing a public transport service that is tailored to local needs. This funding is also channelled via the NTA, which, since 2012, has national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the RTP. The programme is now operated under the “Local Link” brand.

While the delivery of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services remains a cornerstone of the Local Link programme, there has been an increasing focus on providing regular commuter services since 2016, in response to an identified local demand. These regular rural services are high frequency services running 5/6/7 days a week and are designed to facilitate access to education, employment, health and recreational opportunities. Key features include connectivity with other public transport services and better linkage of services between and within towns and villages. The NTA has advised that since 2016, 60 such regular rural services have been introduced into the Local Link network which are managed by the Local Link offices.

Project 2040 – Public Transport and Roads

A priority under the National Planning Framework is the essential requirement to enhance and upgrade accessibility between urban centres of populations and their regions, in parallel with the initiation of compact growth of urban centres. Compact growth, improved public transport and decarbonisation of car journeys are all necessary elements in our transition to a low-carbon future.

Furthermore another major objective under the framework is to make substantial progress in linking our regions and urban areas not just to Dublin but to each other.

Project 2040 rightly recognises that significant investment in public transport will be required to accommodate change and growth, while also providing more choice for the travelling public and improving quality of people’s lives. Project Ireland 2040 will build upon this investment. In June last, Minister Shane Ross and Minister of State Brendan Griffin launched ‘Linking people and places’ which involves investment of €8.6 billion specifically for public transport.
The aim is to link more people to more places, while improving quality of life, easing congestion in our cities and doing our part in delivering a low carbon society.

New major public transport programmes to be delivered under the NDP will be fully accessible for people with disabilities as part of the normal design and there will also be a continued investment programme to fund retro-fitting of older existing public transport facilities to enhance accessibility.

One of the flagship investments to be delivered within Project Ireland 2040 and the 10-year NDP horizon is BusConnects for Ireland’s cities, commencing roll-out in Dublin, followed by the other main cities commencing with Galway city. BusConnects is a key investment priority for public transport to address congestion in the short to medium term. The development of a BusConnects programme in the regional cities is to include new bus fleets; bus lanes with segregated cycling; revised bus service networks; and park-and-ride facilities. The objective is to deliver a bus system that will enable more people to travel by bus than ever before, and allow bus commuting to become a viable and attractive choice for employees, students, shoppers and visitors.

The funding priority for the inter-urban rail network under the NDP is to protect the investment already made in our national railway system by funding maintenance and safety projects needed to maintain safety and service levels in railway operations.

The sheer scale of Ireland’s road network is not well-known but, at a combined length of 100,000 kilometres, it is actually twice the European average per head of population. This road network is a workhorse of our economic and social infrastructure. Most of our freight is carried by road, all of our bus services rely on the road network, and our regional and local roads provide an essential role in connecting communities.

The importance of investment in the maintenance and renewal of the road network is recognised in the National Development Plan. Within available budgets, both Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and the Department are focussed on maintaining the network in as serviceable a condition as possible. In the case of regional and local roads the main grant programmes operated by the Department are targeted at specific policy objectives, for example: pavement sealing to protect the road surface from water damage; and road strengthening, based on pavement condition rating, to lengthen the life of road pavements. These grants, which are intended to supplement local authorities’ own resources, are allocated based on the length of the road network within a local authority area of responsibility, as this is seen as the most equitable basis for allocations.
The Committee may be interested to note that the Department’s grant funding for regional and local roads is principally directed to local authorities outside Dublin. This reflects the fact that, since the revision of the arrangements for the retention of Local Property Tax in 2015, the Dublin Councils no longer receive any grant assistance from the Department under the main road grant categories.

In addition to substantial support for the maintenance of the road network, the NDP lists 23 new national road schemes which are already at planning/design or construction stages, including the strategic road link between Cork and Limerick. At a regional and local level, another 13 significant road improvement projects are currently being advanced under the NDP. All of these schemes will better link local communities, reduce congestion and contribute to the local economy in their areas. Work is also underway on appraisal and early planning work related to a pipeline of projects identified as suitable for future development.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the Department works on providing the general policy context for all transport in Ireland, including land transport in rural Ireland and connectivity within and between regions. The road network and the public transport networks are integral to this and they each receive substantial levels of support from the State each year. This is set to continue into the foreseeable future and it is closely linked to key outcomes identified in the Government’s *Project 2040* development plan and investment strategy.

Chairman, we hope that we can assist the Committee today in its deliberations by explaining and discussing the policy context for land transport in Ireland. Also, as mentioned earlier in this Opening Statement, we are currently embarked on reviewing public transport policy; so we would also hope that in the course of the Committee’s discussions today we would get the chance to hear Committee members’ views and experience that would help inform and feed into our own policy review work.
13. Opportunities for Investment in Heavy Rail, and Flooding at Ballycar on the Galway – Limerick Railway

13.1. Jim Meade, Chief Executive, Irish Rail 23 May 2018

Statement to Joint Oireachtas Committee on
Rural and Community Development

Jim Meade, Chief Executive, Iarnród Éireann

23rd May 2018

Chairman, Members of the Committee,

Along with my colleague, Colin Hedderly, thank you for your invitation to attend today, to discuss the topics of flooding at Ballycar and opportunities for heavy rail investment.

Before I directly address those two issues, I would like to give you a brief snapshot of Iarnród Éireann today – our services, and service outlook for the future.

Our team of over 3,800 colleagues:

- Maintain a network of 2,200 kilometres
- Operate 4,300 train services each week
- Carry almost 900,000 customers each week
- Operate 144 stations in 23 counties across the country
- Transport 100 million tonne kilometres of freight by rail
- Bring 2.3 million tonnes of freight and 900,000 passengers through Rosslare Europort annually, for which we are Port Authority

After an extraordinarily challenging decade, in 2017 we equalled our previous record number of customers at 45.5 million, and undoubtedly 2018 will see a new record high.

Our funding shortfall, while not fully resolved and while the accumulated impact remains, has been reduced significantly, and the commitment in the National Development Plan to bridge the shortfall completely by 2021 is very welcome to give us the foundation to play the fullest role possible in the future.

We are ambitious for our rail service, for how it can deliver solutions to congestion and environmental sustainability for Ireland, and I will address that further as we look at opportunities for heavy rail investment.
Ballycar flooding

As Chief Executive of Iarnród Éireann, as a former District Manager in Limerick whose area of responsibility covered the Limerick to Ennis line, and as a Clareman, I am acutely aware of the impact of recurring flooding at Ballycar on our customers and our services.

We are all aware of the unique hydraulic constraints have been identified in the Ballycar Lough catchment:

- The underground section of the Ballycar Lough outlet channel is the main hydraulic constraint on the Ballycar Lough drainage system. This restricts outflow and thus causes flow backup and flooding in the vicinity of the Lough.
- The Ballycar Lough catchment is a very slow response type catchment. This is due to its very mild nature of topography.
- Diversion of the Rosroe Lough catchment flow to the Ballycar Lough catchment increased the flows in channels within the Ballycar Lough system. The stream channels do not have adequate capacity to deal with this increased flow, and
- The inadequate capacity of the existing bridge/culverts located at various locations on the drainage system also restrict flows.

Without delving too much into history, it should be noted that while the railway line has been in existence and operational since 1859, and no flooding was recorded prior to 1930, the year after the Rosroe Lough catchment diversion above was undertaken by the Office of Public Works.

The 1930 flooding was the first of seventeen to occur since. The fact that five of these flooding closures have taken place in the past decade illustrates how climatic factors are increasing both the frequency and severity of flooding, particularly as the line has been raised by 0.7 metres in three separate works programmes between 1984 and 2000.

The most prolonged flooding event occurred from December 2015 to May 2016, with a peak flood level of 1.4 metres over the rail, while the most severe in 2013 saw flooding peak at 1.9 metres over the rail. The flooding event earlier this year saw the line close for seven weeks from late January.

In 2011, following engagement with the Department of Transport, Office of Public Works, and Clare County Council, we in Iarnród Éireann commissioned a study by RPS to examine potential flood alleviation options. The consultants and Iarnród Éireann worked closely with the OPW in particular in undertaking the study.

The study, which has been provided to the Committee, identified five potential flood alleviation options, 1-5, with three flood flow discharge routes A-C.
The optimum solution which as well as alleviating flooding impacting on the railway line, ensures that flooding risks in other areas such as Newmarket on Fergus are not worsened was option 1C, namely a 1.5 metre diameter piped culvert, with inflow to and outflow from Lough Gash via the existing inflow and outflow stream channels.

It is Iarnród Éireann’s position that this approach should be pursued jointly with the OPW and Clare County Council, and that just as the railway is not the cause of this flooding, the solution is one that requires a more holistic approach than a focus on the railway line alone, given the potential impact on the wider catchment and the expertise of the agencies involved.

In the absence of progress on this optimum solution, Iarnród Éireann has identified an option of track raising which will reduce the probability of line closures. The cost of this solution is of the order of €10m and involves raising of the track by 1.2m. However, this would not resolve the issue, and would merely reduce the frequency of flood events to about a quarter of the current level, and with the length of individual closures reduced. It is therefore not as attractive as the optimum solution outlined above, not to mention the potential worsening of flood levels as the impacts of climate change continue.
Opportunities for Heavy Rail Investment

Turning to the issue of investment in our rail network, both the National Development Plan 2018-2027 and National Planning Framework, Ireland 2040, provide for significant rail investment and the expansion of our role in meeting the transport needs of Ireland over the coming decades.

While the National Development Plan explicitly details funding of €2 billion over a decade for the DART Expansion Programme, this refers to the physical location of these works – the benefits of the programme are national and network-wide.

Put simply, it will allow us operate more trains, with more capacity on all radial routes on the national network.

It includes:

- Meeting the steady state maintenance and renewal requirements of the network by 2021
- Delivery of the National Train Control Centre (NTCC), maximising the capacity and performance of the existing network
- Non-tunnel elements of DART Expansion, including increasing the capacity of key rail corridors such as Cherry Orchard to Heuston (benefiting all Heuston Intercity routes) and Maynooth (benefiting Sligo line)
- Improved InterCity journey times to be targeted on Dublin to Belfast, Cork, Limerick & Galway routes, with benefits also to Kerry, Westport and Waterford.
- Enlargement off the rail fleet by 300 carriages, giving network-wide benefit.
- Further appraisals of projects: Western Rail Corridor (Phases 2 and 3), Cork commuter rail and high speed Belfast –Cork, M3 Parkway to Navan line.
- Investments in Park & Ride facilities, rail station improvements, passenger information and accessibility enhancements.

The National Planning Framework is supportive of the above and of further investment. However, while it is silent on some aspects of the role of rail, we must stress that we in Iarnród Éireann see it as an extremely positive strategy.

Railways, more than any other form of public transport, rely on critical mass and higher density population centres to provide the economic case for investment, and the societal benefit. By developing strong cities to counterbalance Dublin, we ensure that the development of railways in Ireland in the future is beyond Dublin-centric commuting, as critical as that requirement is.
As it stands, while our existing network is underfunded, we in Iarnród Éireann must see that funding issue resolved before further network expansion can be considered, where increases in PSO funding are likely to be required.

While previous studies have shown a weak business case for further regional rail lines to be opened, the renewed studies under the NDP will definitively establish the position under the current Department of Finance investment guidelines.

In the meantime, nothing will occur which will prevent future development of railway lines should the business case support it. This brings me to the issue of Greenways, which are the source of considerable debate in many parts of the country.

Our position is that where there is no realistic medium term likelihood of a rail line being reopened, Greenways help protect the rail alignment from encroachment and adverse possession, while providing a public amenity on otherwise unused alignments. In every case where we, with CIÉ Property, issue a licence for the operation of Greenways on disused alignments it is with the explicit provision that the alignment would revert to us should a decision be made to invest in the reinstatement of a railway.

Conclusion

I have outlined our position for you on the items on the agenda, and welcome your questions on these issues.
13.2.  Jim Meade, Chief Executive, Irish Rail (2) 27 November 2018, Carmel Kirby, Clare County Council, John Sydenham, Office of Public Works


Flooding at Ballycar on the Galway - Limerick Railway

Chairman, members of the Committee,

It was agreed by the three agencies concerned Iarnród Éireann, Clare County Council and the Office of Public Works (OPW) to deliver a joint opening statement to the Committee. Collectively, we welcome the opportunity to update the Committee on developments since May 2018 when we previously attended.

Clare County Council were requested at that time to facilitate a process and to reconvene as a steering group to move the issue towards a resolution.

Clare County Council engaged with Iarnród Éireann and the Office of Public Works over the summer months, with a formal meeting early in October and a further meeting earlier this month. The latter was attended by Clare County Council, Iarnród Éireann, OPW, Shannon Group and RPS (Consultant to Iarnród Éireann).

RPS have been engaged by Iarnród Éireann to develop a feasible engineering solution to the flooding issue at Ballycar. The consultants have been given a more wide-ranging and a broader remit to include consideration of the downstream impacts and also to develop measures to mitigate against any potential impacts in the Shannon Area of any proposed solution. (A technical subgroup has been set up to liaise directly with the consultants, and technical input will also be provided by the Geological Survey of Ireland).

The updated report will take account of the following as necessary:

- Shannon CFRAM Study including the Shannon Estuary North and Mal Bay River Basin District hydrological study and the Flood risk management plan for River basin (27/28) Shannon Estuary North & Mal Bay.
- Recently completed and ongoing schemes including; Ennis - The River Fergus Lower (Ennis) Certified Drainage Scheme; the Ennis South Flood Relief Scheme and other Arterial Drainage Schemes and Drainage Districts.
- Any ‘Land Commission’ Embankments that may be in the study area.

Further meetings have been scheduled for December, 2018 and February, 2019. RPS are to finalise their new report and present proposals to Iarnród Éireann in the spring of 2019.
From this report, the most appropriate technically feasible option to address the Ballycar flooding issue will be considered by the bodies.

This represents the joint position of the three bodies, we are committed to the concept of sustainability and to the delivery of optimum service of key strategic infrastructure and will continue to work together to resolve the problem on the Rail Line at Ballycar.

We welcome any questions the Committee may have.
13.3. Jim Meade, Chief Executive, Irish Rail (2) 27 November 2018

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Rural and Community Development

Opening Statement By Jim Meade, Chief Executive, Iarnród Éireann

Investment in Heavy Rail

Carmel Kirby
Director of Services,
Physical Dev Directorate
Clare County Council

Jim Meade
Chief Executive
Iarnród Éireann

John Sydenham
Commissioner
OPW

28 November 2018

As I advised the Committee in May, while the National Development Plan explicitly details funding of €2 billion for the DART Expansion Programme, this refers to the physical location of these works. The benefits of the programme are national and network-wide, giving more capacity for more services on all lines through improved infrastructure and a fleet expansion of almost 50%.

Rather than reiterate the scope of that investment, I wish to advise the Committee of developments in the meantime, and how these will benefit the national heavy rail services we provide.

Most importantly, the continuing improvement in our funding situation means that we may approach the “steady state funding scenario” targeted under the National Development Plan in 2021 two years ahead of schedule in 2019. This means we will be properly funded to maintain our network and fleet, protecting what are vital national infrastructure assets.

We will introduce an additional Dublin/Sligo service in each direction on weekdays from Monday 10th December, which we hope will mark the beginning of a period of Intercity frequency expansion.

Further service expansion on the Sligo and Westport lines would be desirable, to hourly on Dublin/Sligo and two-hourly on Dublin/Westport. Fleet investment under the National Development Plan, which will free up Intercity Railcars currently used in the Dublin
Commuter area will assist in service expansion. However, further study would be required on infrastructure requirements.

On Rosslare/Dublin, there may be scope for additional daytime services to be modelled within the constraints of the existing intensively operated DART service. Strategically, we are also working with local authorities on the route to address the medium to long term strategies required to protect the line from coastal erosion, with 45% of the route in a coastal or estuarine environment.

Iarnród Éireann also has an ambition to increase frequency of Galway/Dublin services to hourly, and the National Transport Authority and Galway local authorities’ Galway transport strategy does target that “rail services will be increased in frequency, subject to passenger demand and usage.” This would encompass enhanced frequency of Galway/Athenry Commuter services. Double-tracking would facilitate this, with an interim measure of a passing loop and second platform at Oranmore to give a Commuter frequency of up to every 15 minutes.

This leads me to other service enhancements possible in our other regional cities. The National Transport Authority is also preparing a draft Cork transport study, which will include additional stations to be provided in tandem with development, and other measures to enhance frequency of services.

We have been working closely with Waterford City and County Council on the plans for the Waterford North Quays, which incorporate a relocated Plunkett Station, as part of an integrated transport hub. We are progressing signalling and station layout design to accommodate increased service frequency, and look forward to being part of an exciting development for the city, the region, and public transport services for both.

At Limerick, the transportation hub is targeted for completion, with rail services from Galway, Ennis, Limerick Junction and Dublin feeding in to this.

We are assisting the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the preparation of a feasibility report / business study on the development of the Athenry to Claremorris line.

We are working to terms of reference established by the DTTaS. Iarnród Éireann has advertised for, and will appoint, a consultant to undertake a financial and economic appraisal. This appointment will be made, and the appraisal will commence, by early January. The study will take 20 weeks. Thereafter this will be subject to a peer review by the DTTaS to complete the overall study.

Work on our new National Train Control Centre has commenced. This will see a new operations control and customer information centre established in Heuston to cover the entire network, and through modern technology will ensure we have a Control Centre
equipped to enhance service performance, and cater for the expansions in services planned over the coming decade and beyond.

We are also preparing plans for a comprehensive renewal of track on the Cork/Dublin route over the coming years.

The objectives of the track relaying programme is to renew up to 220 miles of track so as to provide a reliable and sustainable track infrastructure to allow optimisation of the line speeds with an associated reduction in journey times where possible. This will further enhance Cork, Kerry and Limerick Intercity services.

A summary of the main benefits of this track relaying programme are:

- More reliable track infrastructure with an optimisation of line speeds to 160kph where possible facilitating reductions in journey times
- Replacement of aged infrastructure with a minimum life cycle of 30 years
- Future proofing for anticipated increased utilisation of the route in the short, medium and longer term
- Improved, sustainable and reliable infrastructure for our customers on a key commuter and Intercity route

This approach will provide a model for further asset renewal and journey time improvement around our network.

This is a summary of our plans for the Intercity and regional cities network, separate to the critical requirements in the Greater Dublin Area commuter belt, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Jim Meade,
Chief Executive,
Iarnród Éireann
14. Dr. Deirdre Garvey (Chairman), Ian Brannigan (CEO(a)), WDC

*Western Development Commission (WDC)*

*Joint Oireachtas Committee on Rural and Community Development*

*RE: Invitation to discuss “Past Performance and Future Strategy”*

26 June 2018

Opening statement:

As stated by our Chairperson, the Western Development Commission welcomes the opportunity today to address the Joint Oireachtas committee on Rural and Community development today. As previously mentioned, the WDC is a statutory body formed in 1998, promoting economic and social development in the Western Region of Ireland. We operate under the aegis of our parent Department, the Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD). The general functions of the WDC are set out in the Western Development Commission Act as broadly being “to promote [ ], foster and encourage economic and social development in the Western Region”.

The WDC has developed a way of working that delivers a unique and effective response to the development challenges of a predominantly rural region. It delivers a critical capacity to the Western Region to identify, design and implement economic development and growth. Furthermore, it adds value and regional ‘sensitivity’ to the work of national and international bodies and actively engages with regional interests. The WDC has sought to establish a capability for future growth both for the region and all its citizens.

The WDC currently has the following key Strategic Goals1, which are outlined in our current Strategic Statement, namely:

- “To inform and influence policy-making on economic and social development in Ireland’s Western Region through high quality analysis.”
- “To promote the benefits of living, working and doing business in Ireland’s Western Region.”
- “To encourage the development of the Western economy based on the sustainable development of the Western Region’s strengths and resources.”
- “To provide risk capital to micro, small and medium sized and social enterprises (in their start-up and expansion phases) through the WDC Investment Fund (WIF).”

We are fully aligned with current and emerging national policy and best practice in the area of Regional Development. The recent “Programme for a Partnership Government”2, included a specific commitment to re-enforce the role of the WDC to support the
implementation of the regional jobs plans in the West and North-West. We also work with the Government to give realisation to the relevant commitments in Project 2040 and the on-going Regional Spatial and Economic strategies.

Similarly the recent strategic statement of our parent department, which includes a strategic goal to enhance Regional Development, states as an objective to “strengthen the role of the Western Development Commission in contributing to regional and national policy objectives”.

Past performance - The Impact of the WDC in recent years

I would now like to address the specific request of the committee to briefly comment on our past performance in the undertaking of our Regional Development remit.

The WDC, through its collaborative efforts in recent years, has directly supported hundreds of regional enterprises. Through partnering with regional stakeholders, relevant national and international bodies, and the departments, the WDC has also supported or created almost 5000 total jobs.

Critically it has acted as an enabler for our regions wider development through mentoring, advocacy and access to finance solutions for partners such as Local Authorities, LEO’s, Enterprise Ireland, the Design and Craft council of Ireland, Leader etc. Through our innovative regional promotional platform (www.lookwest.ie) we have created and supported an identity for thousands of citizens engaging in events and programmes.

In summary the key performance outcomes of recent years for the organisation have included:

- **Investment in regional jobs** - Since 2010 the WDC has sourced and directed over €13M in total funding towards regional enterprise and employment growth through exchequer, EU and its own revolved funds.
- **Realisation of regional jobs** – In recent years approx. 2700 direct jobs and 5000 total (indirect and direct), have been significantly supported by the WDC in the region (Many through our WIF facility).
- **Regional policy and analysis capability** – This offering of the WDC has provided a regional capacity for analysis and policy review which has led to advances in critical areas such as broadband roll out, proliferation of the gas network to towns in the region, showcasing novel growth sectors such as the creative economy and ensuring the region is at the forefront of national initiatives such as project2040, RSES, and recently the CEDRA initiative.
- **The WDC also offers the region a unique strategic Regional Development capacity to design and implement, with stakeholders, solutions for sustainable socio-economic growth within the Western region. This has led over the years to the**
realization of initiatives in key regional growth sectors such as: The creative economy growth program the *Creative West*. Where the WDC has championed and supported a critical opportunity in a sector containing around 5000 regional businesses. We have delivered targeted micro-loan offerings, a €2M regional film fund, an export platform; all have been developed and offered by us with partners to grow this sector. In 2018 NUIG have estimated the sector now has approx. 13,000 people working in it. In 2009 when the WDC launched the *Creative West* initiative the direct employment was around 11,000 direct employees. The WDC has also supported the Renewable Energy/Green economy regional sector. Through access to finance and sourced EU funding the WDC has delivered initiatives that have led to increased jobs and installed capacity within the regional sector. Installations and businesses in Donegal, Athenry etc. attest to these efforts.

- Similarly in recent years and responding to stakeholder needs, we have created a regional capability to access EU programming resources and funds – From a standing start in 2009 the WDC now has a regional capacity to develop and deliver significant funding across a range of key growth sectors. In 2018 the WDC are engaged in 9 EU projects with a total value exceeding €18M, and have supported a wide and diverse range of regional clients and stakeholders to benefit from this capacity, for example:
  a) Almost 120 creative industry businesses in the region have access to international markets through the [www.mycreativeedge.eu](http://www.mycreativeedge.eu) marketing platform. E.g. *Derry Hick sticks Mayo, Black hen design Roscommon, Howling hamster games Galway, and Secret life of plastics Ennis.*
  b) Renewable energy businesses are gaining access to markets, support and innovation funds to develop and grow their businesses in the region e.g. *Proair in Galway*, which is now evolving to EI support in order to grow further
  c) Through our EU capacity we have offered scores of stakeholders and hundreds of SME’s, access to EU expertise and resources e.g. *Local authorities, HEI’s, Údarás, SEAI, Marine institute, Design and Craft council, Galway film centre*, etc.

- The WDC has also developed and delivered to the region a unique, Regional “access to finance” capability. The *Western Investment Fund (WIF)* is a critical component in the WDC’s abilities to undertake its remit. This innovative solution to regional disparities was established by the Irish Government to be a unique source of risk funding to projects, businesses and communities in the region. Significantly it has increased the regional access to venture capital (VC) funding from 3% of total deals done in the state to over 7% in the last 10 years. Thereby addressing a key market failure for businesses in the region.
Cumulative gains to date include:

- €48 million invested
- 140 enterprises supported – Details available
- €208 M additional investment leveraged
- 2,500 jobs directly supported, 5000 in total
- Capital reserves available for more growth projects

Due to its dynamic and significant performance in supporting access to finance for regional businesses and its strength, the WIF offers the WDC an enhanced range of opportunities to realize regional growth opportunities.

- Regional identity – The www.Lookwest.ie platform has both given the region a brand with real reach (over 1M visits since launch, almost 20,000 social media “friends”), but has also allowed local authorities, organisations, individuals, and business engage with one another in all things of the West.

Novel collaborations such as a Talent Tool for the region are examples of how this work strives to retain and attract human capital and thus inward investment to the region.

Current context for the Region

The WDC seek to achieve a significant step-change in the effectiveness of key parts of our regional economy (70% of which is rural in nature). The goal of the WDC would be to upgrade the diversity and nature of the regional economy to make the region better able to sustain continuous long-term growth and contribute even more to the national success story.

Whilst recognising that our region is primarily rural in nature, it is understood that urban centres (such as Galway) may effectively anchor the regional growth. This is a positive aspect. What would make it an indispensable aspect is designing the support policies to effectively disperse the economic benefits to the wider hinterlands. As such consideration for design and implementation of effective spatial and economic development strategies will need to be considered to support such an aim. The WDC look forward to fully supporting the RSES process in helping realise this ambition.

Whilst in the main the WDC has today sought to inform the members on its recent strong past performance in delivering both on its remit and on the applicable national and regional policy directives, it is also important to note the current efforts on formulating an appropriate future strategy for the organisation.

Today the WDC is advancing the formulation of its next strategic statement. This is being led by the board who have appointed a dedicated sub-committee for the purpose of
guiding and co-ordinating the work-plan for identifying the goals of the 2019-2023 strategic statement.

So in conclusion, the WDC has demonstrated a strong performance in terms of its remit of fostering and supporting economic growth within its geographical boundaries. This is seen in the capacity, reach, investment and job support numbers outlined in this submission. However it remains apparent that the identified growth areas merit consideration on how to continue to maintain and indeed accelerate this rate of primarily indigenous regional socio-economic growth. Opportunities are apparent and regional support to unlock their potential is essential not only to develop a sustainable modern economy in the region but also in addressing potential disparities.

I would like to take this opportunity afforded to us by the committee to note the efforts of the WDC staff and board present and past for all their efforts in our endeavours.

Once again Chair, may I extend gratitude, to you and the committee for affording us the opportunity to discuss this matter with you today.

Ian Brannigan,  
CEO (a) & Head of Regional Development,  
Western Development Commission

Dr. Deirdre Garvey,  
Chairperson,  
Western Development Commission
15. Flooding at Ballycar on the Galway – Limerick Railway (Resumed)

15.1. Carmel Kirby, Clare County Council; Jim Meade, Irish Rail; John Sydenham, OPW; John Fitzgerald, NPWS, 29 May 2019

Chairman, members of the Committee,

It was agreed by the four agencies concerned Iarnród Éireann, Clare County Council, the Office of Public Works (OPW) and the National Parks & Wildlife Services (NPWS) of the Department of Culture Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DCHG) to deliver a joint opening statement to the Committee.

Collectively, we welcome the opportunity to update the Committee on developments since November 2018 when we previously attended.

As noted in November Iarnród Éireann have engaged RPS Consulting Engineers to develop a feasible engineering solution to the flooding issue at Ballycar with an updated report due in Spring 2019.

A draft report has been prepared by RPS and was issued to Iarnród Éireann, Clare County Council and the OPW in early April. The report identified a preferred option for the alleviation of flooding on the Limerick to Galway Railway line at Ballycar consisting of;

- Attenuation of some flows upstream of the Railway line in Finn & Rosroe Loughs,
- Removal of the underground restriction between the swallow hole and spring (downstream of Ballycar Lough),
- Construction of diversion pipe line and channel to divert excess flows around Newmarket-on-Fergus and Lough Gash
- Upgrading of existing stream channels and culverts,
- Construction of a flood protection embankment along the IAA infrastructure in Urlanmore.

Following an initial review of the report it was agreed that the option of diverting some flows to the Owengarney (Ratty) River should be further investigated and the recommendations in the report updated as necessary. This requires the completion of additional topographical surveys and hydraulic modelling which is currently being undertaken by RPS.
Following the finalisation of this report, the most appropriate technically and environmentally feasible option to address the Ballycar flooding issue will be considered by the bodies and the appropriate route for the progression of the works including funding will be investigated.

This represents the joint position of the four bodies, we are committed to the concept of sustainability and to the delivery of optimum service of key strategic infrastructure and will continue to work together to resolve the problem on the Rail Line at Ballycar.

We welcome any questions the Committee may have.

__________________________  ____________________________
Carmel Kirby                Jim Meade
Director of Services        Chief Executive
Physical Dev Directorate    Iarnród Éireann
Clare County Council

__________________________  ____________________________
John Sydenham               John Fitzgerald
Commissioner                Principal Officer
OPW                         NPWS
16. Investment in Heavy Rail (Resumed)

16.1. Barry Kenny, Irish Rail 29 May 2019

Chairman, members of the committee,

Thank you for your invitation to attend the committee today, to discuss opportunities for investment in heavy rail. Our Chief Executive Jim Meade regrets that he was unavailable to attend the committee today.

Mr Meade has previously outlined to the committee on our previous discussions about this issue the scale of our operations and our investment proposals. I will briefly recap on our operations, updated for the full year of 2018, and advise the Committee of investment developments since our November 2018 attendance, and how these will benefit the national heavy rail services we provide.

Our team of over 3,800 colleagues:

- Maintain a network of 2,200 kilometres
- Operate 4,900 train services each week
- Carry over 923,000 customers each week
- Operate 144 stations in 23 counties across the country
- Transport almost 90 million tonne kilometres of freight by rail
- Bring 130,000 freight units, over 800,000 passengers and over 21,000 trade cars through Rosslare Europort annually, for which we are Port Authority

Once again in 2018, a record number of customers travelled on Iarnród Éireann services – 47.9 million passenger journeys were made across our services, up from the previous high of 45.5 million journeys achieved in both 2007 and 2017.

This growth is most welcome, and is set to continue, but it also places acute pressure on our existing resources, across both urban and inter-urban services. This is why our investment plans are so crucial, both to cater for existing demand, and allowing us to expand the role we play in meeting transport needs. As the Chief Executive has said to you previously, we are ambitious for our rail service, for how it can deliver solutions to congestion and environmental sustainability for Ireland.
Before I address progress in our investment programme in recent months, I wish to advise the committee of a significant development in the ongoing “steady state” funding for the organisation. As you know, throughout the economic crisis, the company was significantly underfunded. The NDP committed to resolving this shortfall by 2021. However, we are pleased to say that this year, 2019, has seen the shortfall resolved, meaning we are adequately funded to maintain the network and services we are contracted to provide. This ensures a solid foundation to play the fullest role possible in the future.

**Investment developments**

Rather than reiterate previous statements, I will focus on key developments since we last attended the committee. However, I am happy in questions to address any queries on other aspects of our investment programme.

**New trains**

As mentioned, we are experiencing record demand, and to address this we need new trains along with enhanced infrastructure capacity.

On Monday, the process to order the largest and greenest fleet in Irish public transport history began as Iarnród Éireann, supported by the National Transport Authority (NTA), sought expressions of interest from global train manufacturers for up to 600 electric / battery-electric powered carriages over a 10-year timescale.

DART Expansion, a €2 billion investment under Project Ireland 2040, will see the capacity of the rail network transformed through investment in up to 300 new carriages, electrification of lines to Maynooth, M3 Parkway, Hazelhatch and Drogheda, and key infrastructure works to allow more trains to operate across the entire network.

However, the ambitious tender for up to 600 carriages allows for the planned fleet expansion, replacement of the original DART fleet (the 76-carriage fleet will be almost 45 years old at the end of the current National Development Plan in 2027) and other carriages, and ensure that the framework is in place for more carriages to be ordered if further growth in demand occurs.

The tender notice in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) and on etenders is expected to attract the interest of virtually every major global train manufacturer, such is its scale. It will ensure customers on our rail network benefit from up-to-date facilities and technology, and that there are scale benefits in the competitive tendering for the NTA-funded investment.

While electricity-powered trains are expected to make up the overwhelming majority of train orders, the tender process is also providing for a possible first tranche of battery-
electric hybrid trains. This is to ensure that, should funding or planning processes see the electrification of the first of the lines be completed beyond 2024, that new trains will be available from that date to meet the surging demand from commuters.

However, the overall order will see the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) total rail fleet, and up to 80% of all heavy rail journeys in Ireland, set for a potentially emissions-free future, as well as generating reductions in noise, and cost savings in train operations.

The full national network will benefit from this investment, with existing Intercity and Commuter trains currently utilised to meet GDA-demand then available to boost frequency and capacity nationwide. We are also planning to convert this fleet to diesel-electric hybrid, to reduce emissions on our national routes.

As well as this major order, Iarnród Éireann and the NTA are progressing shorter-term options to meet record demand on Ireland’s railways. With 47.9 million journeys in 2018, and capacity requirements becoming acute at peak times, this includes:

- Negotiations are underway between Iarnród Éireann and its supplier seeking to agree an order for at least 41 extra Intercity railcar carriages, adding to an existing fleet of 234 vehicles, to enter service from late 2021. This will allow us to increase capacity on key peak Intercity and Commuter services, ahead of the service expansion facilitated by the major order detailed above.
- A tender process is underway by the NTA for the possible purchase or lease of pre-owned trains, which also would involve modifications to fleet, particularly as Ireland’s track gauge differs from that of other railways.

**Cork Commuter**

The NTA has published this month the Cork Metropolitan Area Draft Transport Strategy, which sets out an exciting vision for sustainable transport in the Cork area.

Included is a strategy for the future of Cork Commuter rail, which includes:

- Eight new stations on the Mallow, Cobh and Midleton lines
- Double-tracking of the Midleton line
- DART-style frequency on all three Cork Commuter lines
- Future electrification
- Through running at Kent Station, and improved integration with other modes

The strategy will now be the subject of public consultation, with which Iarnród Éireann will engage. It envisages a Cork Commuter network with the capacity for 16 million journeys annually, a genuinely transformative scale of modal shift.

**Western Rail Corridor**
As the committee will know, both the current programme for Government and the National Development Plan committed to a financial and economic appraisal of proposals to extend the Western Rail Corridor.

Working to terms of reference specified by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, Iarnród Éireann has appointed consultants EY-DKM to undertake the independent appraisal and public and stakeholder consultation. The purpose of the appraisal is to establish if the proposed extension from Athenry to Tuam (phase 2) and from Tuam to Claremorris (phase 3) represents value for money.

We expect to commence the public consultation process next week, and will invite members of the public and interested organisations to participate in this process.

We will seek information and views on current transport usage, current transport services, views on the extension of the Western Rail Corridor to phase 2 and 3, and any other comments or observations.

EY-DKM are due to complete the appraisal and present the report including findings and recommendations to Iarnród Éireann and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport by the end of September 2019. The DTTAS will then undertake an independent peer review of the report and its findings and recommendations, to advise and inform policy decisions arising.

**Waterford Station and North Quays development**

Iarnród Éireann has continued to liaise with Waterford City and County Council (WCCC) on the plans for the Waterford North Quays, which incorporate a relocated Plunkett Station, as part of an integrated transport hub. As well as progressing our own signalling and station layout design to accommodate increased service frequency, and freight operations, we are facilitating all necessary site investigation and studies for the wider North Quays project.

**Summary**

Beyond this, the infrastructure studies necessary for detailed design to enhance capacity in the central Dublin area, and thus overall national capacity, are progressing, and plans for station facilities including but not limited to additional car parking, accessibility and customer information are also being reviewed, in cooperation with the NTA.

It is clear that as a country and a society, the sustainability of our economy into the future and the impacts on our environment are becoming a greater concern for our citizens and our customers.

As the most sustainable public transport mode, we see an investment programme that will not only effect modal shift from private to public transport, but minimise further the
impact on the environment of each journey made with us. With an accelerated electrification programme, this will also have cost benefits to our operations, thus yielding a return to our economy and society by all measures.

I welcome the committee’s continuing support for these goals, and am happy to take any questions you may have.

Barry Kenny
Corporate Communications Manager
Iarnród Éireann
17. Flooding at Ballycar on the Galway – Limerick Railway (Resumed)

17.1. Dr Ted McCormack, Project Manager for Groundwater Flooding, Geological Survey Ireland, 29 May 2019

Geological Survey Ireland Overview and Groundwater Flooding Programme Joint Oireachtas Committee

Overview As outlined to the committee in November, Geological Survey Ireland (GSI) is a division of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment (DCCAE) and is Ireland’s national geoscience organisation. The GSI carries out its role as a key knowledge centre and data repository with a library, archives and extensive digital data holdings. It provides an extensive advisory service, particularly to local authorities, and has statutory roles as a National Archive and consultee in relation to planning in areas such as County Development Plans, Windfarm Development, and Foreshore Licences. In addition to supporting government and local authorities, GSI provides data and advice to industry and research and acts as a project partner to all aspects of Irish geoscience, especially in European projects.

Groundwater Flooding, GSI has developed expertise in the area of Groundwater Flooding, particularly in understanding complex karst systems, including turloughs, as they can be important pathways for pollution. In 2016 the Programme for a Partnership Government under the area of Climate Change and Flooding, contained the following objective: (in relation to) “Turlough Systems: We will provide resources to the OPW to commission studies into individual problematic (prone to flooding) Turlough systems, if requested by a local authority or another relevant State agency.”

GSI have been tasked with gathering historic and new information to deliver on this objective and initiated a new dedicated groundwater flooding project in collaboration with researchers at Trinity College Dublin and the Institute of Technology Carlow. The core objectives of the project are to establish a permanent monitoring network to provide long-term quantitative flood data as well as producing national historic and predictive groundwater flood maps.

Progress since last meeting in November, 2018

Since the last Joint Oireachtas Committee meeting, the GSI groundwater flooding programme has been focussed on producing a national groundwater flood map while also installing and maintaining monitoring equipment at groundwater flood sites. A national maximum historic groundwater flood map was produced and supplied to the OPW in April this year. Work on a predictive flood map is on-going and the map shall be supplied to the
OPW later this summer. The predictive map will present not just the likely extent of groundwater flooding, but also the probability of a given flood occurring at applicable sites. These maps will assist the OPW in fulfilling their obligations as required under 2nd implementation cycle of the EU Floods Directive. In addition, Geological Survey Ireland has also recently had discussions with Met Éireann regarding potential groundwater flood forecasting capabilities.

**In regards to Ballycar:**

- Geological Survey Ireland has been taking part in the technical sub-committee meetings regarding the flooding Ballycar Turlough.
- Monitoring stations have been installed at Ballycar and Lough Gash turloughs. The stations record water level data at hourly intervals which is freely available upon request.
- In addition to these monitoring stations, Ballycar and other flood prone areas along the Western Railway Corridor are being monitored using Copernicus satellite imagery.
AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 29 Samhain 2017

Wednesday, 29 November 2017

The Joint Committee met at 9 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Seán Canney, Senator Martin Conway,
Deputy Michael Collins, Senator Maura Hopkins,
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice, Senator Colette Kelleher.*
Deputy Carol Nolan,
Deputy Niamh Smyth,

* In the absence of Senator Grace O’Sullivan.

In attendance: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

DEPUTY JOE CAREY IN THE CHAIR.

The joint committee met in private session until 9.10 a.m.

Action Plan for Rural Development: Discussion

Chairman: I welcome all those in attendance. This is the first meeting of the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development. I look forward to working with members, the Minister, Deputy Ring, and the Department to try to make this very important committee work for the people. The witnesses, whom I welcome, are in attendance to discuss the action plan for rural development.

I draw the attention of the witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect
that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

The opening statements submitted to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I ask members to turn off their mobile phones, which can affect the broadcasting system.

The committee will today discuss the action plan for rural development. To assist it in that regard, I am pleased to welcome Mr. William Parnell, assistant Secretary General, Ms Fiona Moylette, Mr. Eddie Forsyth and Mr. J.P. Mulherin of the Department of Rural and Community Development. I now invite the Department to make its presentation, beginning with Mr. Parnell.

Mr. William Parnell: I thank the Chair and members for the invitation to appear before the committee in order to discuss the action plan for rural development. Some members may be familiar with the plan through their involvement in the former Joint Committee for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. We would like to give members an overview of the plan and a sense of the progress that has been made to date. We have circulated a PowerPoint presentation of which members may have a hard copy through the secretariat, along with a summary of the first progress report on the action plan. I will go through the presentation in order to facilitate a further discussion and we will be happy to answer any questions members may have.

The action plan was launched in January 2017. It is a whole-of-Government approach to rural development and focuses on the economic and social development of rural Ireland. When it was launched, some sections of the media picked up on the town and village renewal initiative and one could be forgiven for thinking the action plan only addresses that aspect, but it is far more than that, with 14 Departments involved in its delivery, along with several agencies and the business and voluntary sectors. It is very important to realise, as the Minister has said, that developing and progressing rural Ireland is the responsibility of a wide range of actors, not just the Department of Rural and Community Affairs. The role of the Department of Rural and Community Affairs is to provide co-ordination to ensure the energy of Departments is directed towards rural development in a synergistic manner.

Members may be familiar with the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, CEDRA, report published in 2014. The action plan builds on and goes beyond that report, which was presented to Government with several recommendations. The action plan is a Government commitment to deliver tangible actions. One of the key recommendations in the CEDRA report concerned the need to prioritise cross-Government co-ordination and the action plan aims to carry that out. It was developed following quite extensive consultation. We had a series of meetings with rural stakeholders, agencies, local authorities and so on, along with several bilateral engagements. The then Minister for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, Deputy Humphreys, who was responsible for the action plan, invited input from Deputies and Senators and, specifically,
members of the former Committee for Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, from whom submissions were received.

The consultation process highlighted the positivity and resilience of rural Ireland. It identified issues that need to be addressed but we were very struck by the positivity encountered. The introductory section of the action plan contains an emphasis on moving away from the perception that rural Ireland is synonymous with decline because, although it has encountered challenges, there is much positivity and many very good things happening in rural Ireland and it is important for that to be acknowledged and built upon. We are conscious that there is no one-size-fits-all situation because every rural area is different. Areas only a few kilometres apart may have different sets of issues. Through the action plan, we hope to help to unlock the potential of various areas around the country.

The second slide which members should have deals with and contains a graphic that captures the objectives of the action plan. As I have stated, the action plan provides an overarching structure for the co-ordination and implementation of various initiatives across Government to advance the economic and social progress of rural Ireland. That must improve the quality of life of those living in rural Ireland, whether through employment opportunities, accessibility of services or developing social networks. The actions in the plan are time bound and closely monitored to ensure they are on track. We are even open to adding new actions. We have added a further action since the plan was launched in January. It is important to note that we are answerable to the Cabinet committee on the economy with regard to progress on the action plan.

The action plan is a three year plan which has over 270 actions for delivery across five thematic pillars. I will mention those pillars shortly but, as I have said, the plan is for delivery across a range of Departments, State agencies and local authorities and indeed other bodies, such as the business and community sectors. Since it is a whole-of-Government approach, there are many synergies with other Government policies. In particular, there are many synergies with the regional action plans for jobs. Food Wise 2025 is another example of an important strategy that ties in closely with the action plan. With 270 actions, we would not say that any one of them is the silver bullet, and members will appreciate that there are not always simple solutions to the sorts of issues we face in rural Ireland. The value is in the cumulative impact of those actions. If we can achieve what we are setting out to do by bringing Departments and agencies together to see the importance of working to improve the situation for people who are living in rural areas, the cumulative impact of those actions will make a difference. It is a three year plan so we recognise that it will take time for a new plan such as this to take hold and have an impact. We will give the committee a sense in a moment of some of the progress we have seen so far under the plan.

The next slide in my presentation mentions the five pillars covered in the plan. While there are many actions, some 270, they are grouped under five pillars and even within the five pillars there are subcategories of objectives. The first pillar is about supporting sustainable communities. That pillar is about making rural Ireland a better place in which to live and to work. We will be doing that through programmes like the town and village renewal scheme and the Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais, CLÁR and Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development, RAPID,
programmes. Another key objective under that pillar is to enhance local services whether through access to schools in rural Ireland or primary care. Empowering local communities is another theme in supporting sustainable communities. Building better communities is the final objective within that pillar. This will be delivered through ongoing investment in schemes like the Leader programme and other initiatives, such as the rural social scheme.

The second pillar in the plan is to support enterprise and employment. The areas we are looking at within that pillar are to grow and attract enterprises. This is where there was much synergy with the regional action plans for jobs. We have also made headway with the Atlantic economic corridor proposal. That is a very long-term objective but we have made good progress and the ultimate aim there is to support enterprise growth. We also have actions under the pillar of supporting enterprise and employment, to support growth in sectors such as the agrifood sector, the renewable energy sector and even the international financial services sector. We are firmly of the view that rural Ireland can and does deliver in these sectors as well as the traditional sectors that we are familiar with, such as tourism and agriculture. There is potential and we are seeing firms setting up in much more modern sectors that will produce high quality jobs.

The next pillar is maximising our rural tourism and recreational potential. We are probably all familiar with the increase in activity tourism and recreational tourism that is happening on a global scale. Ireland is well placed to capitalise on this area. Tourism numbers for rural Ireland have been increasing and the committee will be familiar with targeted initiatives such as Ireland’s Ancient East and the Wild Atlantic Way, but we want to build on those and develop activity tourism through the development of greenways and blueways. There have been notable successes with both greenways and blueways in the past two years or so. We have a lot of natural and built heritage that can support increased tourism in rural areas, particularly through our national parks and nature reserves.

Fostering culture and creativity is also an important part of the action plan. It covers quite a range of areas, including pure arts, which help to bring cultural activity into rural communities. Arts and creativity are also important for social interaction in rural areas and for people’s well-being. Within that particular pillar, we link in very closely with the Creative Ireland programme and local authorities have now established culture teams and are developing culture plans. The Irish language is a key part of our culture and within that particular section of the action plan, we have actions to promote the Irish language as a key resource within the Gaeltacht and other rural communities.

The final pillar of the action plan deals with improving rural infrastructure and connectivity. We have focused on three particular areas in this section. The connectivity piece ultimately involves the capital investment plan and investment in infrastructure, including roads, schools, health services and so on. We focused in particular on three areas that came to our attention during the consultation process. It will not surprise anybody that high-speed broadband is crucially important for rural communities and we have a number of actions in the plan to support that area. We have actions in the plan to support rural transport links too, both through such services as Local Link and support for regional airports. The third area that we focused on in that pillar is flood relief measures. This is an issue that causes much difficulty and I know Deputy Canney would be familiar with the actions that have been taken and will continue to be taken to deal with the flooding issues.
That is a quick overview of the five pillars. While the action plan might seem quite long, both an Irish and English version are contained in it. The plan itself only runs to approximately 70 pages and at the head of each section is a brief summary of the objectives I have set out. It is quite accessible to people who want to look at the plan in a little more detail.

Moving on to the next slide, I will emphasise that the action plan is a whole-of-Government approach. We have replicated on the slide a page from the action plan that shows some of the key deliverables in the action plan itself and some high-level targets. They include supporting 135,000 new jobs by 2020, increasing overseas visitors to rural areas by 12%, and investing more than €50 million in sports, recreation and cultural facilities. They include inputs from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport as well as our Department and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Our Department plays a key role in the revitalisation of towns and villages through the town and village renewal scheme, as does the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht through some of the heritage schemes and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government as well. I do not intend to go through all of the key deliverables, but they are in place to give us a sense of some of the headline targets for the action plan. Of course, we will be looking to measure not only the delivery of individual actions but the impact of individual actions as well.

That leads me to the question of delivery and how we ensure that we are making progress. There are more than 270 actions within the action plan. All these actions have been agreed with the responsible bodies for delivery. The actions are all for delivery within a definite timeframe. In some cases, the plan may refer to an action for delivery in 2017 or 2018. We have we followed up with the relevant bodies. We asked them to break down the detail between the first half of the year and the second half of the year in order that we can monitor more closely the progress that is being made.

The Minister has established a monitoring committee, which he chairs. The committee includes key Departments and rural representatives. It is a wide-ranging committee, involving Departments, public bodies, rural stakeholders and the business community.

We have said that we will publish progress reports twice each year. The first progress report was published in August. This committee was supplied with a summary of the progress report. The monitoring committee is examining some important thematic issues. At the most recent meeting of the monitoring committee representatives attended from bodies dealing with mental health and mental wellness issues. Issues such as rural isolation are not only for older people. They are relevant for younger people as well. We hear a good deal about sports clubs having to stop, perhaps because they cannot field a team and so on. Mental wellness is an issue for people of all ages. We had some good inputs from groups, including the Irish Men’s Sheds Association and Mental Health Ireland. We envisage that we will add further actions on an ongoing basis as they emerge from the monitoring committee. Indeed, we have added an action relating to a Gaeltacht region in the Iveragh Peninsula. Those involved are now developing their own action plan to try to support that particular area. It is part of our action plan in order that we can monitor and keep track of it.

I mentioned that we come under the remit of the Cabinet economic committee. We are being supported in the delivery or the promotion of the action plan by Pat Spillane, who was the chairman of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, CEDRA. I will outline progress. As I mentioned, the first progress report was published in August. I need to correct the slide before the
committee, which states that 201 actions were due for delivery. Actually, 227 actions were due for delivery in the first two quarters of 2017. They were either due for delivery or they were multiannual actions but with activities scheduled for 2017. Of those 227 actions, a total of 220 were completed or were in progress where they were multiannual in nature. The full progress report is available on our Department website. The website address is available on the screen for committee members.

I referred to measuring impact. A key objective for our 2018 workplan is to measure the impact of the actions. We have been working with some renowned researchers on rural development to try to develop a methodology to measure our impact. I will offer some examples of progress in the first six months. The town and village renewal scheme was launched for 2017. Funding of €21 million has been made available to support 280 towns and villages in the coming 12 to 15 months. One encouraging feature of the 2017 scheme involved asking local authorities to engage with local communities to identify projects that will have an economic impact on towns and villages and their outlying areas. We have seen some really good projects coming through.

In May and June, the Minister approved funding of €7 million under the CLÁR programme for 231 projects. As many committee members will know, the CLÁR programme focuses on areas that have suffered heavy levels of depopulation. A total of €11 million in funding was announced for more than 200 projects under the outdoor recreation infrastructure scheme. More recently, the Minister launched a seniors alert scheme with €2.3 million in funding to support older people with free personalised monitoring alarms. The local improvement scheme was launched in September with a fund of €10 million to improve non-public roads. In the past week, the Minister announced a further allocation for the scheme based on the level of work that local authorities have indicated they can complete by the end of the year.

There have been developments in other Departments as well. Enterprise Ireland has launched the regional enterprise development fund. The Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht has provided €9 million for 56 arts and culture centres. IDA Ireland has delivered advance buildings in Sligo, Tralee and Castlebar. Committee members are probably aware that Clare County Council has become the first council in the country to launch its own rural development strategy following from the Government action plan. It is encouraging to see local authorities take the objectives of the plan and try to replicate them in the local area. Údarás na Gaeltachta has a digital strategy for the Gaeltacht. The authority has innovation hubs operational in Donegal and Kerry. A great deal is happening. I am not suggesting this is all as a result of the action plan, but it shows what we can replicate, and I find it encouraging.

The EY Entrepreneur Of The Year awards were announced in recent months. Harry Hughes, who is the chief executive of Portwest, a company based in Westport, Mayo, was named as the EY Entrepreneur of the Year. Evelyn O’Toole, who is the chief executive of Complete Laboratory Solutions, won the industry category award. She was also named as businesswoman of the year at the Irish Tatler women of the year awards. Her company is a contract laboratory that provides testing to clients in the food, environmental, medical devices and pharmaceutical industries. The company has laboratories in Ros Muc and Galway. These are good examples of what can be done and what is being achieved in rural parts of Ireland. The Northern and Western Regional Assembly area has been named as the European entrepreneurial region for 2018.
We are keen to see and measure more of this coming through. Data are available on the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation website this month. There are a lot of high-value-added jobs being created by Enterprise Ireland client companies around the country, in places like Dundalk, Kilkenny and Ennis, and in areas such as pharma, financial services, biotech, cardio products and so on. This gives a sense of what is being achieved and what can be achieved. The aim is that the action plan will help to develop this and bring new and increased opportunities for people living and working in rural Ireland. Along with economic development, it is important we focus on the social fabric of rural communities.

I hope I have given members a good sense of the action plan and of what we are trying to achieve.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank Mr. Parnell for his presentation. The action plan is fairly clear as to goals and objectives. In the area of flood relief, I compliment the Office of Public Works, OPW, and officials on taking on the amendments I instigated to the minor works scheme, which is very important to rural Ireland. It will help more flood schemes to be done as they will be better able to satisfy cost-benefit analyses. Flooding is becoming increasingly prevalent, as we have seen in the past couple of weeks in Donegal and Laois. The home relocation scheme is another very important aspect of rural Ireland for people for whom no other engineering solution can be found. The Department is working very closely with the OPW to meet the concerns of rural people in this area.

Last Saturday week, I had the honour of opening a new men’s shed in Athenry, and I met many people who are involved in men’s sheds in east Galway. These are one of the most positive things I have seen happening in the regions. Men come together to discuss things, to carry out projects and invest back into the community in the form of services which would otherwise not be provided. I would like the Department to provide more support in the form of funding, because the regional organisers of the men’s sheds do it without payment and this is not sustainable going forward. There are more than 400 and I would like to see a structure put in place to support them. They are getting their governance right but it is important to recognise the asset we have in the men’s shed concept by continuing to support it and grow it.

Mr. Parnell mentioned the Atlantic economic corridor and it is of paramount importance that we push it for the sake of balanced regional development and rural western constituencies. It needs to be highlighted in the national planning framework and I understand the Department has made submissions in this respect. The Atlantic economic corridor is the future for Ireland, and not just for rural Ireland, because there is overdevelopment on the east coast and a poor quality of life, with people unable to live and work on account of the expense and the congestion. We need to create a counterbalance, and the key ingredient for the cities in an arc from Cork, Limerick, Galway and Sligo up to Derry and Belfast is infrastructure. In modern Ireland this includes roads, railways, connectivity, broadband, water and wastewater, and these need to be developed to create jobs. Mr. Parnell mentioned the need for parishes to field a team of 15 footballers and we need young people who are getting married and having families to be able to live and work in their parishes and communities. The western rail corridor is a very significant component of that, and to realise our full potential we need to close the gap between Claremorris and Athenry, and to look at linking the rail network to Shannon Airport and Knock Airport. It does not take billions to do these things and the cost of bridging the gap between Claremorris and Athenry would be less than €100 million, which is
not a lot in the context of overall public spending on transport. We need to work with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to ensure this agenda is kept to the fore and that funding, rather than just a plan, is provided.

Another important area is broadband, and the Minister, Deputy Naughten, is working on the national broadband plan and the broadband tender. I am sure all members will agree that the current roll-out of broadband is intermittent and divisive and is causing stress and consternation by being rolled out to sections of road and communities in a haphazard basis. There is no equality and it is creating a huge amount of division in communities. The broadband providers say they do not have the juice in the lines to bring them another half a mile up the road, and business in rural Ireland cannot access them as a result, even though they can see it on a pole down the road. I was at a meeting the other night in Knockdoe and the 30 people there said that one of their main problems was broadband. Ten years ago it would have been bad roads or potholes but broadband is right up there as an issue now. It is not so much that there is none of it but that there is some of it and it is not being delivered in a coherent fashion. This is the case in every parish in Ireland, and I have heard from other Deputies that it goes up one road, bypasses another and comes down another with gaps left in the middle, in no man’s land, for no particular reason. The technology is there to deliver it but the Department needs to put pressure on broadband providers to ensure they do not bring it into a road unless they can do the entire road or the entire area, rather than leaving it segregated as it is at the moment.

I look forward to working with the Department and the Chairman in this committee. We have a lot of work to do but we have the template with the Action Plan for Rural Development. I know that everybody in the Department is committed to it, as are the Ministers, Deputies Ring and Kyne. I lend my support to the plan.

Rural transport was also mentioned but we do not have rural transport at the moment. Last night I was in the Dáil canteen and was speaking to a political correspondent who told me they were getting the bus at 10 o’clock. I said I wished I could do that at home but we do not have these services. We have to create ways to incentivise communities to provide this missing transport link with a community taxi service, and we need to assist in this, not just on paper but with some sort of funding. The biggest obstacle seems to be insurance and the regulations around that. However, I compliment the work that has been done and welcome all the money that has been made available through the different schemes in the past year. I also welcome the additional local improvement scheme, LIS, money that came from the Minister, Deputy Ring, the other day, as it is vital and we need to continue to roll it out as it is showing tangible results in rural areas.

Mr. William Parnell: I thank Deputy Canney for his support and his comments. The first issue he mentioned was men’s sheds. I mentioned in my introduction that, at the most recent meeting of our monitoring committee, we had a presentation from the chief executive of the Irish Men’s Sheds Association, IMSA. It was a very interesting presentation. The association outlined its plans in terms of developing its network on a county basis. We are certainly aware of some of its funding needs. The Deputy mentioned that the association is trying to get its governance straightened out, not that I see any difficulties in that regard at the moment. We could have an ongoing engagement with the IMSA, and as it begins to develop its own plans for the future, we would certainly be open to talking to it. Many of the schemes we operate now are run on a competitive basis, but there may be funding
opportunities for groups such as the IMSA nonetheless. It is a very important area to focus on. As the Deputy said, it is quite new and it is bringing about positive change right across Ireland, in both urban and rural areas.

The Deputy also mentioned the Atlantic economic corridor. This issue was spoken about when we attended a meeting of the Select Committee on Community and Rural Development at which the Minister was present a couple of weeks ago. The Atlantic economic corridor again shows the importance of a joined-up approach because it will require the input of so many different Departments and local authorities. The Deputy is quite correct to talk about the importance of infrastructure, but the funding that will be provided and the projects which will be funded are matters for the capital investment plan, which the Government will be publishing in the short term.

To say a word about the Atlantic economic corridor and the practical progress which has been made, as the Deputy would know, the concept of an Atlantic corridor has come and gone down through the years. When talking about the Atlantic economic corridor, there is sometimes a perception that it is no more than a road. I do not mean that in any kind of disparaging way, but it is much more than that. The particular proposal on which we are working emerged from the business sector and the chambers of commerce in February 2016. The American Chamber of Commerce also supported it. It is more about joining the economic hubs along that corridor or arc to create a balance with, and an investment alternative to, the east coast. If it works, it could be a model which might also work in other areas.

The Minister has established a task force to drive this concept forward. It involves Chambers Ireland and other business leaders and also includes the third level sector, key Departments and Government bodies. The Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, is its chairperson. It has met four times but we have also established a few subgroups to take certain issues forward in between the main meetings of the task force. For example, there is a subgroup looking at the issue of infrastructure. It is trying to map out the infrastructure in that particular region and identify where the gaps are and what might be needed to progress the concept. There is a second group which is looking at enterprise space to see what enterprise space might be available to support start-up or scale-up companies. We also have a third group, which has just been established, to deal with communications and communicating the message of the Atlantic economic corridor in order that it is widely understood. We also had a group looking at the prospect of EU funding and at what would be available. We are trying to bring some of those ingredients together to inform the task force’s view on where investment might be needed. A number of submissions have been made into the national planning framework process, both from the Department itself and from Chambers Ireland, which have highlighted the potential of the Atlantic economic corridor.

We are acutely aware of the importance of broadband if we are to achieve the economic development I was speaking about, but also of its importance for social connectivity. So many people now stay in touch through social media, email and so on. As the Deputy is aware, the Department of the Minister, Deputy Naughten, has primary responsibility for the roll-out of the State-led investment in broadband in rural communities. I know the Minister is very familiar with some the issues Deputy Canney has raised. From the perspective of our own Department, we are playing our role in supporting the roll-out of broadband. As the Deputy knows, the tendering process
for the State-led intervention has yet to be completed. Our own Department has a unit which is facilitating and anticipating the roll-out of broadband and helping to prepare for it.

The Department is supporting the appointment of broadband officers in each of the local authorities. All 31 local authorities now have broadband officers in place. They look at both broadband and mobile phone reception. The initiative of appointing broadband officers has proven to be very well received by those in the industry because they now have a single point of contact in each local authority to whom they can go. Through the broadband officers, we are trying to resolve issues which might otherwise slow down the roll-out of broadband once the contracts are awarded. We are not confined to broadband roll-out under that particular strand or phase of the roll-out. The broadband officers are also there to facilitate providers who may be providing broadband commercially at the moment.

The Deputy may be aware that a task force on mobile phone and broadband access published a report at the end of 2016. An implementation group was set up to oversee and drive the implementation of the 40 recommendations which the task force made. The task force had very good representation from rural communities and rural stakeholders. Good work is taking place there. The progress report for the third quarter will be published shortly and will be made available on our Department’s website. With the local authorities and the broadband officers, we are starting work on the development of digital strategies and a digital readiness assessment tool for the local authorities in order that they can make the best use of high-speed broadband once it is connected and made available to them. We are also working with the local authorities to identify possible priority areas for connection once the broadband is rolled out in order that we can connect points which will have the best possible impact for a community. That might mean connecting a community centre or some other public building.

In a way, we are trying to pave the way for the full roll-out of broadband.

The final point that the Deputy made concerned the rural transport programme. Again, the committee will appreciate that this falls under the remit of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. In September the LocalLink branding and programme were launched, and some improvements have been made in routes already. Our understanding is that the National Transport Authority expects to deliver some additional routes, and we will be looking for a report from it through the monitoring process early in 2018.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the witness for that very in-depth presentation. I welcome the fact that one of the key deliverables of this plan is the creation of 135,000 jobs by 2020. However, I have concerns, in particular with the Industrial Development Authority, IDA. Rural counties like my county of Offaly have been totally neglected. The IDA does not seem to be interested. I wonder if a task force could be set up to make IDA more answerable in midland counties. What seems to be going on is unacceptable. There are very few visits. I have met an IDA representative on two occasions. On one of those occasions I brought him to the town of Edenderry in north Offaly, a town which has a very high number of vacant commercial buildings and is crying out for investment. It is a town with great potential. Nothing has been done, and as a Deputy, it is very frustrating. I would like to see 135,000 jobs created in rural Ireland, because we need them. Can something be done there? The only way forward is to set up a task force to drive this, and I believe the Deputies of the committee would agree with that.
force, because the IDA does not seem to be interested, and now is the time to make it accountable and answerable. Deputies should not have to run around after it. More needs to happen in that respect.

The setting up of the local enterprise offices, LEOs, throughout the local authorities was certainly a positive approach. They are working very hard and very well, providing mentoring for small and medium enterprises, as well as supports, such as micro-finance. However, they are on their own. We need foreign direct investment as well. Of course, we need a balance between the two. We need the local enterprise offices to do the work they do, and I believe they are working very well. However, we also need the IDA to take more responsibility and to be more accountable.

On the issue of broadband, I agree with what has been said by other members. There are serious gaps in high-speed broadband. The fact that we now have broadband officers is welcome, but the issue needs to be moved on more quickly, because it is holding us back. At a recent meeting in Athlone, IBEC pointed out that it was a huge disadvantage. We do not want the IDA having any more excuses than it already has, so I would like to see high-speed broadband put in as soon as possible. I would like to see high-speed action on this issue.

Rural transport is a huge issue which I have raised in the Dáil. The programme for Government stated that the report on rural transport would be done within six months. This is unacceptable. If this was a report on an urban area, it would have been published long ago. We can all see that we are disadvantaged and that we have to shout and demand things. We should not have to. Could this committee write to the Minister concerned to ask for the publication of that report as soon as possible? It mentions that it will look at the possibility of opening up new routes. That needs to happen because we are behind.

The plan is fantastic and I welcome it, but we need more accountability and more pressure on all concerned to realise the key deliverables of this plan. I look forward to seeing many of these aims delivered, and I remain hopeful and positive that they will be.

**Mr. William Parnell:** Deputy Nolan has spoken about issues that are outside the remit of my Department. For example, the question of the IDA is obviously a matter for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. However, I would say that the regional action plan for the midlands region is certainly one of the tools that the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation uses to progress the issue of jobs in the midlands. Deputy Nolan mentioned the LEOs and the IDA. Enterprise Ireland has an important role to play as well. Having worked in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation for many years, I know that far more jobs are created in rural areas by client companies of Enterprise Ireland than by IDA client companies.

There are some very good new initiatives being undertaken in the midlands. For example, the completion of the International Low Frequency Array, I-LOFAR, telescope in Birr is a really important development for the midlands region. The importance is not so much in the telescope itself, but the demand it can bring for data analytics and so on. One of the actions in the plan we were very keen to see developed was the concept of a tourism product for the midlands region. Fáilte Ireland has carried out a feasibility study, and in budget 2018 it was announced that Fáilte Ireland would receive €1 million in order to commence work on the branding of a lakelands offering. There are some good
things happening there, but I appreciate a lot more can be done. We have already spoken about broadband, and we understand the issue. Again, that is a matter for the Minister, Deputy Naughten’s Department. Similarly, rural transport and the report that Deputy Nolan mentioned are matters for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. The Deputy has raised issues that are of relevance to rural Ireland, on which we would like to see progress made within the action plan.

**Senator Colette Kelleher:** I thank Mr. Parnell for a really clear presentation and a very good plan. It is particularly good to see that the plan is a dynamic one, and that the Department of Rural and Community Development is open to new themes, ideas and issues being absorbed into it as it progresses. That means that when we are speaking with the Department’s officials we can flag issues that may need further consideration. The area I am particularly interested in is the social fabric in rural areas, particularly within the ageing population. On 26 October, the Economic and Social Research Institute, ESRI, published a report which stated that between 2015 and 2030, the proportion of the population over the age of 65 will grow from an eighth to a sixth, and the number of people over 85 is due to double.

I am the co-convenor of the all-party Oireachtas group on dementia, of which Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice, Senator Maura Hopkins and Deputy Seán Canney are active members. There are 55,000 people with dementia today, with very high concentrations in rural areas. On one of my first days here, Deputy Fitzmaurice pointed out to me that Roscommon probably has the highest rate of dementia in the country. The HSE’s National Dementia Office is currently carrying out a mapping exercise determining where people with dementia live. That body is also examining the match of services. We know anecdotally that where the concentrations are highest, particularly in rural areas, there are the fewest services. That is a big part of social infrastructure, and it is something that is going to grow. Also, the models that will work in rural areas will not be the same as the models that work in urban areas. For example, home care and assistive technology will be more important for people with dependancies such as dementia and disabilities. What consideration has been given to this piece of the social care infrastructure and is the Department open to ideas in that regard, including to working with the national dementia office or the Department of Health which has held a consultation on home care? Is the Department of Rural and Community Development open to cross-departmental engagement on this issue and to piloting innovative approaches in this regard?

In regard to housing, does the town and village renewal scheme include housing? There are currently 200,000 vacant and derelict properties/sites throughout the country. The house in which I grew up has not been occupied since we sold it many years ago. I come from a family of ten. The house has six bedrooms and it is located on the main street of my home town of Macroom. There are many more vacant properties around the country at a time when we are experiencing a housing crisis. What interface is there between the Department and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government in this regard? As well as jobs, rural people need a place to live and live well, particularly in the small towns and villages. I accept that the Department of Rural and Community Development is not the lead Department in respect of housing provision but housing forms part of sustainable communities. I would be interested to hear the witnesses comments on social care, in particular dementia services for older people, and on whether it is open to further engagement on the issue.
Mr. William Parnell: I thank Senator Kelleher for her questions. As I said in my opening remarks, it is important to consider social fabric. Within the action plan there is a series of actions in the health care sector, including, for example, to increase the number of GPs in rural areas by 2019. The Connecting for Life programme provides support for local strategies across rural Ireland, the aim of which is to address suicide and mental well-being. The Senator commented on the ageing population. There are actions in the plan around the delivery of new primary care centres and community intervention teams in rural Ireland. Action 31 of the plan deals with enhancing supports for older people in rural areas through a network of day care centres. The seniors helpline is another action of the plan. These actions are all for delivery by the HSE or the Department of Health but they are part of the process. We are conscious of the need to address issues such as mental health and also health care, including for older people. The Action Plan for Rural Development is available online, in respect of which we can provide the link to the Senator. We can also provide copies of the plan through the committee clerk, which might be helpful to the Senator. Actions 24 to 32 relate to the health care sector.

On the question of housing and the town and village renewal scheme, Ms Moylette is responsible for the management of that scheme and so I will ask her to comment on it.

Ms Finola Moylette: The town and village renewal scheme is an element of the overall plan, with a fairly high target in terms of the numbers of towns and villages for we hope to help get back on their feet and developing again. We are developing a pilot around residential occupancy in town and village centres and we are engaging directly with the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, the local authorities and others on the best approach that can be taken in this regard. We hope to introduce a pilot early next year around what we can do and so on. We are trying to figure out how we can bring properties that are available back into use for residential purposes. In this regard, we are looking at services in towns and villages and getting the right mix of people into those places. As I said, we hope to have something in place early next year.

Senator Colette Kelleher: In regard to social care, the actions in the plan are welcome but I am concerned about scale. In light of the ESRI report I believe we need to scale up. While what is contained in the plan is welcome I am concerned that it is, perhaps, not adequate in terms of the range of issues with which people are currently presenting and the likely increased challenges in this regard given many of the people concerned will be will be living in rural areas. I welcome the plan but I ask that the witnesses reconsider the scale of the response to the issue.

Mr. William Parnell: We will convey the Senator’s views to the Department of Health, which is responsible for social care issues.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank Mr. Parnell for his presentation. I welcome and commend the Minister on the additional allocation for the local improvement scheme, LIS, which, I understand, is money not utilised in other areas. In regard to CLÁR, we have been told by several councils that jobs are rated by CLÁR on a 1 to 20 basis and that if it does not rate a job very good the Department will not permit the draw down of funding. I would like the witness to comment on that issue.
Given Mr. Parnell’s statement that the Department of Rural and Community Development will communicate with other Departments one would think it is an agency. What input does the Department have into the national planning framework and can it veto it? As Mr. Parnell will be aware everybody across rural Ireland believes it is a lame effort. Can the Department of Rural and Community Development block or veto the framework or does it only have an input into such that it will come into force anyway?

I found Mr. Parnell’s comments in regard to the Atlantic economic corridor interesting. During the negotiations on the programme for Government, it was agreed that TEN-T funding would be made available. What was done in Foynes via TEN-T funding is excellent in terms of its connection to Limerick, Dublin and Newry. It also connects Cork with Dublin. The west of Ireland project was withdrawn in 2011. Am I correct that the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is refusing to even apply for TEN-T funding? If that is the case, then we are wasting our time talking about issues such as the Atlantic economic corridor or rural Ireland.

Mr. Parnell spoke about Men’s Sheds, CLÁR and local improvement scheme funding. Everything is good. What Senator Kelleher outlined is great in terms of what we can do but we are putting on a band aid when what we need is surgery in terms of how we fix the patient in rural Ireland.

Do the witnesses have any input into the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP? At the moment 80% of the money goes to 20% of the landlords, but the small family farm is not protected. Do the witnesses have a veto or rural proofing so that they can bring out a document and say this is not right? Can they go to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to talk about infrastructure? I know the local authorities are restricted. First, every council is 30% to 40% down on the funding it got for local roads in 2009. If we are going to create work we must get people to work by travelling on the roads. One has to have a middling good road. We may not need the 40% because we have become more efficient. In terms of the Atlantic economic corridor, I welcome the Taoiseach’s announcement on the Cork to Mallow road. This is not parish pump stuff. The corridor goes from Cork right up to Donegal. We need to build a road from Mullingar to Castlebar. That is not in my area but we need to do it. We need to develop roads from Donegal down as far as Cork. Are we going to do that? There is a three-year plan but I do not want us to draw up plans and not to bring them to fruition. We have 270 aspirations. We can tick them off, such as the one relating to the CLÁR programme, for example. The Department is responsible for certain parts. They are not the big money spending jobs. Will the big jobs be done or can the witnesses make sure they can veto some Department and say they do not agree with its proposal and that it will block it? Alternatively, the witnesses could come back to the committee to look for help.

The witnesses referred to broadband. The Department is funding a person in each council. I refer to the talks to form a Government. I do not blame Ministers and I am not having a go at the Government but we were told by Department officials that by June of that year there would be a tender but 18 months later it turns out there is no tender. We see broadband being extended to parts of rural Ireland whereby a company will go up a road and leave two or three houses unconnected because they know a few quid will be available in a year or two. The reality is that no matter how one does the figures or no matter how well things go that there will be 130,000 or
140,000 businesses and houses in rural Ireland in 2021 or 2022 that no one can tell us when they will get broadband.

They are two of the infrastructural issues. We talked about mobile phone coverage. It has disintegrated because some companies are trying to concentrate on one area. There are areas where I travel every day where the coverage has got worse yet we are talking about improving things in rural Ireland.

Do the witnesses meet the Department of Finance or the Central Bank? When the large banks got the money from us they absconded from rural Ireland. I refer to Ulster Bank and the main pillar banks. I am talking about the smaller towns. That has caused a problem because the people in the area were going into the town to spend money but now they are going up to 20 miles away and people are not going into the small towns as much. We need something to provide the service credit unions provided 20 years ago. We need companies to provide loans in the way credit unions did in small towns but they are being stymied. What does one do if one does not have a financial sector and one has the payments wrong and there is no infrastructure? I agree with what has been said that there are great things going on in rural Ireland. It is the best place to live but we must address the problems.

I agree with Senator Kelleher. Dementia is a major problem in Leitrim and Roscommon. We have a higher rate there than anywhere else. However, I am not talking about those areas alone, I am talking about Ireland in general. There needs to be some incentive to provide services in towns where people with dementia can be safe. We need pilot schemes. We must provide for elderly people as well. People want a little shop and a church and perhaps a community centre. That would allow them to have enough to be happy with life. I am talking about providing up to five chalets, for example, where people might like to live. There would be a lot of paperwork involved. Such issues need to be addressed. We can achieve that.

Is the funding in the context of flooding that was mentioned extra funding or is it the €460 million that is in the five-year plan? If it is the €460 million provided for relocation that amounts to ten houses because it will cost €2 million and it is €200,000 a pop. That is nothing new. We are talking about something I read about two years ago. Nothing has been provided for businesses that have been affected. We can get over a lot of the bits and pieces but we must address the main issue. The one critical issue is whether it is possible within the context of the national planning framework and the CAP – there will be a new CAP – to veto infrastructure. If Departments can do their own thing and not listen to us then we are not going anywhere.

Mr. William Parnell: I thank Deputy Fitzmaurice. He raised a huge list of issues and I will try as best I can to respond to them. He will appreciate that not all of the issues he raised fall within the Department’s remit. His main point was about the national planning framework and the infrastructure that is required. The Department has made a formal input to the national planning framework. We have also been in regular contact with officials in the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government on the national planning framework. We have indicated that we would like to see a strengthening of the section on rural Ireland and rural development and perhaps something a little stronger about the regions other than the cities. Deputy Fitzmaurice raised the
question of a veto. The national planning framework will be a Government document so the question is a matter for the Minister rather than officials. That would probably be a policy issue.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** The question is whether something is bad for rural Ireland. From the way Mr. Parnell worded his response he is not happy with the national planning framework. I agree. I thought what emerged in that regard was deplorable. If we are to drive on rural Ireland someone has to stand up and speak for it. This committee will not be afraid to stand up for it. In fairness to the Chairman, he will give us that opportunity. What I am saying is that if we do not stand up and block some of this stuff, where it is wrong, and get it right then we are wasting our time.

**Mr. William Parnell:** Sure. The point I was making is that I felt the section on rural Ireland in the national planning framework could be strengthened. I know there was a discussion at the meeting of the select committee on 15 November, which again focused heavily on the national planning framework. The Minister himself responded on that and perhaps offered some suggestions as to how the committee might make its views known.

I have to confess that I am not familiar with the situation regarding the TEN-T funding. I will try to establish the situation on that with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. Deputy Fitzmaurice had a question on our input into the CAP. I will ask Mr. Mulherin if he can answer that question.

**Mr. J.P. Mulherin:** I am responsible for managing the Leader programme. This comes under Ireland’s rural development programme, which is part of Pillar 2 of the CAP. The funding for that and the rest of CAP is set for the period until 2020. Discussions are only beginning at this stage as regards how the CAP will operate subsequent to 2020. There will be several facets to that, including discussions on the multi-annual financial framework, MFF, which will set the overall budget for what is available for CAP. Then there will be individual discussions on the different parts of it, including direct payments and the rural development programme, both of which are managed by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. There will be a consultation process as part of that. We have regular engagement with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on a variety of matters, particularly on Leader, as well as in other areas which come under the action plan.

The European Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, Phil Hogan, has commenced a consultation process on the CAP. It is early days and it will be over the next several years that matters will be finalised. We will continue to engage with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and other Departments that will have an impact on it.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** What about the 2017 mid-term review?

**Mr. J.P. Mulherin:** The 2017 mid-term review did not impact on the Leader programme.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Rural Ireland is more than the Leader programme.

**Chairman:** Will the Deputy address his questions through the Chair?

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I am sorry. Rural Ireland is more than just Leader. There is the Pillar 1 payment under the CAP where 80% of the money goes to a certain amount of people while 20% goes to 80% of the people. Has the Department of Rural and Community Development an input in that?
Mr. J.P. Mulherin: The Department of Rural and Community Development will, as part of the consultation process, have an input into the policy decisions taken by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. As I said, however, it is early days and the mid-term review did not impact on that division of direct payments. That will be decided as part of the new CAP. The consultation on that has just commenced with the European Commissioner, Phil Hogan. We will be feeding into that in the coming months and years.

Mr. William Parnell: The Deputy raised quite a broad range of issues. While I appreciate they are all important to rural Ireland, many of them fall outside of the remit of my Department. Perhaps some of the issues might be best answered by the relevant Departments.

It is important the issue of mobile phone coverage is raised. While we are aware of the feeling about broadband provision, mobile phone coverage is also important and relevant. Sometimes it can be lost in the discussion that takes place around broadband. Mobile phone coverage is part of the work in which the Department is engaged. Poor mobile phone coverage not only affects rural areas. Certain urban areas can have patchy coverage too. There are a variety of reasons why this could be. Handsets are not just phones anymore but cameras and mini-computers and there are many different functions happening in a phone which can affect the signal. Different handsets have different qualities in terms of reception. While we are all insulating our houses to make them warmer and to cut down on carbon emissions, the insulation material, particularly aluminium-clad board, can also impact on mobile phone signal.

The mobile phone task force made several recommendations which are being worked through. ComReg is doing some work around customer information, particularly concerning different handsets. It is looking at mapping the future needs of mobile phone and broadband services. The Department is working with some local authorities to run pilot schemes to deal with black spots. One of the key actions is looking at better use of State assets to provide infrastructure which will help boost signals.

Flooding goes under the remit of the Office of Public Works, OPW. I am not in a position to comment on its budget.

The Deputy referred to pilot schemes for dealing with dementia. One of the projects the Department is working on is to develop a national policy on social enterprise. Social enterprise often can be to the fore and proactive in looking at and addressing these social issues. The Deputy gave an example of a possible pilot where there might be a housing cluster. In the past few weeks we visited a housing cluster in Mayo which is a social enterprise and where some of the residents have dementia.

Senator Colette Kelleher: Where is it?

Mr. William Parnell: It is in Claremorris.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Is it Brickens?

Mr. William Parnell: There is Brickens but there is one in the town too - Mayfield.

Social enterprise is a sector which has never had a proper policy in place. Over the past several months, we have been working on developing a social enterprise policy, as well as working closely with the Social Finance Foundation in researching the sector with a view to developing a government
policy. This is an area where there is opportunity to see pilot schemes coming forward. There are pilots out there. Part of the objective must be to ensure these examples of good practice are replicated across the country. This will not be fixed overnight. We need, however, to start the process and change the perception again of social enterprise and what it can achieve.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Many of the issues Deputy Fitzmaurice brought up would be of equal concern to me, coming from a rural peninsula, Mizen Head, and a rural constituency, west Cork. These concerns are replicated across the country. I am involved in the Rural Independent Group and we all have the same concerns.

Last night, we met representatives from Vodafone. Mobile telephone coverage has regressed. Mr Parnell’s explanation is understandable that there is much on a mobile phone that was not there before. At the same time, however, the mindset in all Departments and companies involved must recognise that they need to work with the local community if they want a solution. I saw with Vodafone last night that it is willing to work with us. Maybe something should have happened about this five years ago. One goes back to the local community if one wants to resolve an issue. As a famous west Cork man said, a pencil pusher in an office or pressing buttons on a computer is not going to sort it out. Once it is thrown open to the local community, it will be resolved within hours, if it is going to be resolved at all.

I was on a local community council in Goleen which got wireless broadband for the area when people did not even know what it was. We went after it and took advice from all over the world. Local people thought we were off our heads at the time because they did not know about it. Broadband was first introduced in this country around 15 years ago. Unfortunately, no progress has been made in rural areas since then. While I acknowledge that many people are satisfied with wireless broadband, many are also trying to do business in rural areas and many people from rural areas living abroad or in cities such as Dublin would like to return home. Many of those living abroad have holiday homes in rural areas and they have made clear they would work at home if a good broadband service was available. We are hearing that broadband will be available next year or the year after. Unfortunately, I believe I will be applying for my pension before it is rolled out to my home.

The simple way to roll out broadband is to give communities responsibility. I assure the witnesses that if the Department provided funding to local communities, they would carry out a dig and lay fibre optic cable in every boreen and road. All that would be needed would be the connection. We listen to nonsense in the Dáil about rural broadband and millions of euro in funding being provided to this or that company. My hair will have turned grey before broadband is provided. In election after election, people tell me on the doorsteps that the service is not improving. Broadband should have been introduced under the Leader programme and funding should have been provided to communities. They would then lay fibre-optic cable before handing over to the telecommunications company to make the final connections. This is how to make progress in providing proper broadband in rural communities. If we do not do that, we will hear about millions being spent for another four or five years. Millions are flying around the place but nothing is being done on the ground.

We hear there are broadband officers in local authorities. I have never met anyone in the council who maintains contact with companies such as Eir. There is a housing estate in Bandon where 45 of
the 65 households have broadband. One house may have a broadband service, while the house next door may not have it. This is madness and shows a complete breakdown in understanding.

The Leader programme has collapsed. I shuddered when I heard the European Commissioner, Mr. Phil Hogan, is carrying out a review of CAP. This could mean curtains for ordinary people. The Leader programme is a shambolic disgrace. Officials appear at meeting after meeting and if Deputies were honest, they would agree that the Leader programme is a shambolic disgrace. I understand the programme will conclude in 2020. There is nothing happening with Leader in west Cork. The Department removed the excellent Leader company which was running the programme in my area. The European Commission had commended it as one of the best Leader companies in the country. The local authority now has responsibility for Leader and nothing is happening on the ground. I am not pointing the finger at one individual but this is a major disappointment. The way to get rural areas going is from the ground up. People running tourism projects in the local community get things done but nothing is happening with Leader at the moment.

The issue is no longer raised. Previously, when I attended meetings to discuss funding options, I would advise people to seek funding through the local Leader company. I no longer mention Leader and instead advise people to try other options such as sports grants.

The Government made a big hoopla about rural proofing legislation and stated it would sort out everything. As I stated in the Dáil a couple of weeks ago, this was the biggest cod every discussed because the chances of any Government policies being rural-proofed are as high as me becoming the king of England, which, as the witnesses know, will never happen to someone with a name like Michael Collins.

The Dáil is discussing separate legislation on alcohol and road traffic. Have these Bills undergone rural proofing? When I raised this issue with the Minister for Health, he stated he spoke to stakeholders, and the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport told me he was speaking to stakeholders. I am not pointing a finger at the officials but we need to work together if we want rural Ireland to start rebuilding. Rural areas are great places to live and they offer excellent opportunities. The road traffic Bill should be binned until it has been rural-proofed, which the Government promised for all legislation. I was present at the discussions on forming the Government when this issue was discussed. I stayed to the bitter end of the discussions but we have been continuously misled by the Government that legislation would be the subject of rural proofing. The road traffic Bill should not have been introduced before it had been properly proofed and we had determined how people from rural communities would travel into their local town to the shop or pub. They will not be allowed to go to the pub for a drink from now on. The Minister is misleading people when he claims that the Bill has been rural-proofed. He indicated he would meet representatives of the Irish Farmers Association and other groups. He should have done that before introducing the Bill.

The legislation on alcohol will result in supermarkets in rural areas closing because a bottle of wine has been advertised. Does the Government think we are blind? Does it believe people will drink a bottle of wine if they see one in a shop? Will we cans of drink be placed on high shelves so that no child will see them or will sweets be removed from shop counters? This is nonsense. The
Government is away with the birds and dreaming up schemes. It is as if we are all raving alcoholics who will go crazy if we see a drink. We must use our heads going forward.

In speaking about CAP, I will be slightly critical of the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Coveney. He does not deserve criticism because if it were not for him, we would not have a Government. As I made clear previously, he brought the Government together and he got little praise for doing so from his own crowd but that is not my business. I will be critical of his role in the negotiations on the reform of CAP. Deputy Fitzmaurice referred to some farmers receiving payments of €150,000, while others receive payments of €2,000 or €3,000. This is an absolute disgrace. I will not say what it was that the Minister and I nearly came to at meetings. These payments are totally unfair. The gap must be bridged if we want farming to continue. I do not expect payments of €150,000 to be reduced to €5,000 but they should be reduced to a normal level and payments at the lower end of the scale should be increased.

Fishermen’s issues are not being addressed in the Dáil. Fishermen live in rural Ireland. When inshore fishermen were going strong, communities thrived but that is no longer the case. I have spoken three or four times in the House about fishermen whose lobster pots were wrecked during Storm Ophelia. No one gives a damn about these fishermen who are seeking a small amount of compensation to prevent them from going out of business. Deputies claim to be fighting on behalf of the people of rural Ireland when we are really turning our back on them. Storm Ophelia hit the coast with tremendous power and wrecked lobster pots. A compensation package should be introduced. At a minimum, the Government should engage in discussions with the affected fishermen who are under severe stress as they try to make a living. They are being totally ignored.

I could go on but I do not want to finish on a negative note. There are also many positive developments. For example, the Health Service Executive provides a small amount of funding for rural communities such as Dunmanway, Scull and Goleen in west Cork. Meals and wheels are being provided to elderly people living alone with just a little funding. Rural areas receive a tiny amount of funding. Millions of euro in funding are provided in cities and nothing is done or it is camouflaged. It means a great deal to elderly people to receive a hot meal at home every day. The Citroen dealership owned by Denis and Mary Ryan gave us a van free of charge to deliver meals on wheels. A plethora of things can be achieved with a little funding. A little bit of funding will develop rural Ireland.

Mr. William Parnell: I am glad Deputy Michael Collins finished his contribution on a positive note. Within our Department’s remit, we have put some investment into rural Ireland through various schemes, including the town and village scheme, CLÁR programme and the local improvement schemes, to which Deputies referred. A small amount of money for a local improvement scheme can make a major impact.

I need to be careful not to stray into issues that are best addressed on the floor of the Dáil.

I will make one or two comments and then hand over to Mr. Mulherin, who might talk about Leader.

I take the point about mobile phone coverage and working with local communities. One of the advantages of these broadband officers is that they are acting as a go-between or facilitator between the local communities and the service providers. There is nothing secret about the names
of broadband officers. We have listed them in a reply to a parliamentary question so if a member needs the name of a local broadband officer, we can certainly provide it.

The other thing I can comment on is rural-proofing in so far as to say that in order to strengthen the concept of rural-proofing, the Action Plan for Rural Development contains an action to develop a new and effective rural-proofing model which will ensure that rural development issues are considered in the decision-making processes of all Departments and State bodies and agencies. When the Minister appeared before the select committee on 15 November, the issue of rural-proofing came up. My recollection is that the Minister indicated that he would be happy to have an input from the committee regarding moving forward with that particular action. Mr. Mulherin will be in a position to comment on Leader.

Mr. J.P. Mulherin: The Deputy raised three broad issues relating to Leader. The first one concerned the delivery of the programme. As the Deputy will be aware, the programme takes some time to get up and running. A similar situation would arise across other EU member states. Notwithstanding that, we recognise that there were issues with the delivery of the programme in terms of programme implementation and administration. As a result of that, a forum with all the stakeholders, including local development companies and the chairs of the local action groups, was held in May 2017 where we discussed the issues impacting on the programme and engaged with the different groups to come up with solutions to address those problems. As a result of that, we developed 31 actions to simplify and improve the delivery of the programme. Those actions cut across every aspect of the delivery of the programme. They involve fairly fundamental changes to how the programme is delivered. I would be happy to go through them with the Deputy at any stage. They are very significant changes. At this stage, we are beginning to see the impact of those changes. It will take some more time because it takes time for a project from an initial stage through to approval and completion. The figures that are approved right now show that for the first six months of the year, fewer than 45 projects were approved by Leader local action groups for less than €1 million. Right now, we are approaching the 500 mark so that is a tenfold increase in the second half of the year. All the indications from the local action groups are that this will increase significantly in the coming months so we are fairly confident that with the changes that have been made and the work that has been done at local level, the amount of funding allocated under Leader will increase substantially. We would certainly like the message to go out to encourage local communities and businesses to apply for Leader because the changes have been made and it will be of real benefit to different areas in rural Ireland. If the Deputy wishes to discuss the actions, I would be happy to do so.

The second point concerned broadband. As the Deputy will be aware, a strategy is developed for each local action group area. The strategy is developed under a set number of themes that have been developed for Leader. One of the themes relates to broadband. Each of the local action groups have had an opportunity to identify areas where they could use Leader funding to support broadband. Part of the conditions attached to that is that it would synchronise with and support what is being done under the national broadband plan. There have not been many broadband projects but my colleagues in a separate unit in the Department are facilitating part of the broadband roll out. They have met with a number of local development companies to discuss and
explore where Leader could add to the delivery of that broadband. They have taken the feedback from those local development companies and I expect we will have an event all the Leader local action groups in early 2018 to identify where Leader can add value and explore the opportunities for Leader to support the roll-out of broadband.

The third point related to the delivery of Leader in west Cork. As the Deputy will be aware, an independent selection process was used to decide who was going to deliver and who was going to be the local action group in west Cork. An independent selection committee chose the successful local action group based on the quality of the strategy that was submitted. Two strategies of a very high standard were submitted in west Cork but the one that scored the highest was ultimately chosen by the independent selection committee.

Chairman: Does Deputy Michael Collins wish to come back in again?

Deputy Michael Collins: With regard to the changes made to Leader, the changes are what messed up the whole thing because it was rolling out nicely in communities. Obviously, there would have been a bit of tweaking somewhere, although not in west Cork, thank God. Everything has changed. Mr. Mulherin could ask every Deputy in the country. It does not have to be an Independent Deputy. It could be a Government Deputy. The whole process is completely stalled. That is what is being said on the floor of the Dáil, in here and at other meetings. Mr. Mulherin says it takes time but it is nearly 2018, there are only two years left and nothing is happening. Local improvement schemes, which I welcome, were mentioned. They are brilliant schemes but the funding is coming out of Leader funding. The Minister said that here last week. Chunks of money are being taken out of Leader and used elsewhere.

In respect of the independent selection committee, I was well aware of the process in west Cork. It was quite questionable. I received no answers because I came in here on several occasions and looked for clear answers. I got no answers. How can a company that was commended by Europe and spent the money in an excellent manner, as West Cork Development Partnership did, score less points than a group that had never been involved in the roll-out of the programme? It is quite astonishing and questionable but then again, we might have an inquiry into these things down the road - who knows?

Senator Maura Hopkins: I apologise as I had to step out for another meeting. My first question concerns Pillar 2 - supporting enterprise and employment. The action plan has a number of key actions in that area. I want to ascertain how closely the new Department works with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation in terms of trying to support job creation in rural areas.

There are different challenges within different rural areas. What type of analysis has been done with a view to assisting weaker rural areas? Obviously, we know that parts of rural Ireland are doing quite well but there are other areas that require significant attention and support. I know there are a wide range of actions that feature across all rural areas but we need to support weaker areas. I mean that in the best possible sense. They do need support in terms of how we get five, six, ten or 20 jobs into those areas because without jobs, it is very difficult for families to be able to live there.

Mr. William Parnell: We spoke about jobs earlier in the session. We work very closely with the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. The regional action plans for jobs are key
instruments in trying to support job creation. As I said in my introduction, the action plan for rural development has a lot of synergies with other Government strategies, in particular the Action Plan for Jobs and the regional action plans for jobs. It is right to focus on jobs because if we are going to improve not just employment opportunities for people in rural areas, but the social fabric, we need to have more jobs and better jobs in rural areas.

I take the point on the fact some areas are weaker than others. In our discussion, we spoke about how there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Local enterprises have a role to play. Enterprise Ireland has a role to play. Over the past month, the website of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has had quite a spread of jobs throughout the country. We need to get further into the regions and see what can be done to support job creation. The Leader programme is one component of this because one of the themes is supporting enterprise and job creation.

This year, through our town and village renewal scheme, we have been trying to focus on projects that will have a real economic impact not just on the towns themselves, but also their outlying areas. The town and village renewal scheme is not simply about the public realm, although that is important. Once we get people into towns and villages, we need to increase footfall and economic activity for that public realm to make a difference. In areas such as Uíbh Ráthach on the Iveragh Peninsula in Kerry, a task force has been established, arising from our action plan for rural development, to see what can be done to support the particular region. It is a Gaeltacht area. The people there have brought together some of the key Government agencies as well as local stakeholders. It is a good example. If it works well, it could be a good model.

Clare is a very rural county, and I mentioned earlier that Clare County Council has introduced its own rural development plan. It is the first county to have done so and it has appointed a rural services director. There are other schemes such as CLÁR, which the Department delivers. It reaches out to the areas of highest depopulation. It provides support for small infrastructural projects. The objective is to try to retain people in rural areas to help them with their local needs. Jobs can make a big difference and we will continue to work with our colleagues in the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, and with other Departments such as the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on developing greenways, or blueways in the case of Waterways Ireland.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I welcome the extra funding provided for local improvement schemes this year. It is a positive although it came very late. The fact is the local authority could not spend it in the time it had to do so. The most recent allocation was announced a week ago. In fairness, the local authority could not accept the amount it received because it could not physically get the work done in the timeframe before the end of the year. The end of the year for having works completed to claim the money is 1 December. While I welcome the effort, it was too late to deal with the amount of money that could have been used. The Minister has promised he will give money again next year, but it is a shame to see money going back when it could have been spent if we had got it earlier. However, I am thankful for what we got in Kerry this year.

A big bone of contention for me is that people in rural areas are completely impeded from clearing rivers, and the rivers are all choked and blocked. It is costing the country a bomb to deal with flooding problems, blocked roads and flooded houses. It is just not right. If farmers go near a river, cross-compliance means they will lose their payments. This is wrong because over the years,
farmers were the custodians of the land. They looked after it and handed it down to whoever came next. They are now stopped from clearing out the rivers and this must be reversed. What is happening is not good for the fish because there is no daylight in any river. They are all closed in.

Rural isolation is a desperate problem in the parts of the constituency I represent, and to Joint Comite on Rural and Community Development think we have a Minister who will further affect people in rural areas. It is sad to think the Minister, Deputy Ross, will get away with his proposal to stop people having one and a half pints. They will have to stay at home. The only way they might know about what is happening around them is when they hear the deaths on Radio Kerry every morning. Their neighbour could be dead down the road and they would not know about it if it was not for Radio Kerry.

We have had no Leader programme since 2013. Whatever anyone tells us, it is just not happening. What are the obstacles? Why was it not left work away the way it was, besides aligning local development companies and local authorities? It is a farce to think a group that did not get Leader funding has permission to object to the people next door who did get an allocation. That is ridiculous. The red tape must be cut and the money must be allowed to be spent in the areas for where it is designated and intended. It is not happening. It is five years since Deputy Eamon Ó Cuív, and I publicly praise him today, had a system in place. Phil Hogan and Fine Gael blew it out of the water and we have had nothing since. That is the gospel truth.

People in rural areas need broadband just like people in urban areas. It is not happening fast enough. I cannot understand it. We have groups on to us now because while there is broadband a half a mile away on either side of them, they are in the middle and they do not have broadband. They cannot understand what is happening. Why was it not done in a methodical fashion? There are ructions and uproar because people cannot understand why they have been left out when the people next door have it. The local authority made a submission to address these areas. I ask the powers that be to ensure that these areas are filled in. Those people have the same rights as the people around them. They feel that having waited for so long, they may never get it now.

Mobile phone coverage has reduced in the past two or three years in most places. We had no coverage at the back of my house when mobile phones came out. It was fine for all the years in between, but we are going back to it again. It is the same for people who get out of the plane in Farranfore. Any one of the three roads out of it is a good start for people who have arrived in Kerry, but there is no mobile phone coverage on the three roads to Killarney, Tralee or Castleisland.

Payments to farmers under the areas of natural constraint, ANC, scheme were reduced by one quarter in 2008. At a time when every other group in society seems to be getting recognition, I ask that the full payment to which they are entitled is restored to participants in that scheme.

Rural parishes throughout the country are experiencing problems in hosting events such as field days and carnivals because they are unable to secure the necessary insurance. The Government must act to ensure people can continue to enjoy Puck Fair, the fair in Kenmare, the agricultural show in Kilgarvan, the St. Patrick’s Day celebrations in Sneem, the Patrick O’Keeffe festival in Castleisland and similar events in County Kerry and elsewhere. The only thing left to many rural towns and villages is their day out and it is an important part of their identity. The organisers of
these events struggled last year and fear they will not be able to operate next year. Our own show in Kilgarvan, which has been running for 27 or 28 years, faces great difficulty in securing insurance cover. Something must be done for these people.

Something must be done, too, for the young fellows in rural Ireland who are facing a predicament because they cannot go anywhere without a car. It is impossible now for a young man to get motor insurance and all we hear from the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, is that the parents of that young person should be put in jail if the latter is caught driving unaccompanied. I know a young fellow in Killorglin who was driving to Kenmare to partake of an apprenticeship. When his parents became worried that they might be penalised, he gave up the apprenticeship. Thanks to the Minister and his scaremongering, youngsters are being frightened off the road. It is shameful and disgraceful what Fine Gael is allowing him to do to rural Ireland. I am sorry for that young fellow, who is at home today in Killorglin.

**Chairman:** Many of the issues the Deputy raised were dealt with earlier in the meeting. As such, I ask the officials to focus in their responses on the points that were not previously addressed.

**Mr. William Parnell:** The Deputy referred to the local improvement scheme, LIS. County Kerry has been allocated just under €1 million this year for that purpose. There was an initial total allocation of some €10 million in September for such schemes across the State. Some days ago, the Minister announced a further allocation based on what local authorities indicated they could additionally deliver within the timeframe available to them.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** We are thankful for that.

**Mr. William Parnell:** Kerry received an extra €268,000 from the recent call, bringing its total allocation to €995,000. As the Minister indicated when he was before the select committee two weeks ago, he has been able to fund the LIS programme this year through savings that arose under the Leader programme. He further indicated that he has secured an allocation for LIS in its own right for 2018. The reallocation of funding from Leader in 2017 will not affect the overall draw-down of funding. There is an allocation of €250 million over the lifetime of the Leader programme, and that funding is part-supported by the EU. What we have is a case of re-profiling the expenditure. Indeed, the previous Leader programme continued beyond its initial projected period of 2007 to 2013. There is a process to allow for this type of re-profiling and it is consistent across a range of programmes.

One of several significant changes we have had in regard to the Leader programme is that it is no longer seen as a funder of last resort. Previously, one could only apply for funding under the scheme if the particular project one wished to advance was not being delivered elsewhere. We have changed that particular rule in recognition of the importance of Leader in its own right. Other improvements we have made, which we spoke about earlier, have brought additional benefits to the programme. My colleague, Mr. Mulherin, might wish to give further detail in this regard.

Some of the issues the Deputy raised are beyond the Department’s remit. As the Chairman said, we have already dealt with broadband and mobile telephony issues.

On the Deputy’s point about agricultural shows, we are aware that costs can be a problem. Our understanding is that some support is provided to assist event organisers through the Irish Shows
Association, which is under the remit of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I can clarify that for the Deputy, if he wishes.

Mr. J.P. Mulherin: An allocation of €1.7 million was approved for Leader projects in Kerry. An additional €400,000 is in the pipeline, which will take the total funding over the €2 million mark. Both Deputies Healy-Rae and Deputy Michael Collins referred to changes in the scheme. There are two separate issues at play here, one being the change in the delivery model that followed on from the Local Government Reform Act 2014, which has seen local community development committees, LCDCs, get involved in delivering the programme. The second factor is the changes we have made in recent months to the administration of the programme. As I said earlier, 31 actions were adopted to effect substantial reform of how the programme is delivered. We expect to see the impact of those actions in the coming months.

The delivery model itself involves local action groups, some of which are based on LCDCs and others on local development companies. In all cases, however, the local development companies in each area are still involved in the actual implementation. When one looks at the data on levels of approval around the country, there is nothing to suggest one model is preferable to the other. The highest number of approvals in the top three counties are where LCDCs are involved. Based on the information we have, both models are performing equally well. If the Deputy would like more information on the 31 actions we are implementing, we are happy to provide it.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I no longer pay attention to figures because we have been promised this amount and that amount for the past three or four years but nothing has been delivered. We had a perfect model for delivering the Leader programme but now there are more hoops to jump through and hurdles to be crossed. I am sceptical the new model will see the programme working in the way it previously worked. Why try to fix what was not broken? Local authorities have plenty to do without having to involve themselves in administering the Leader programme. It will be managers rather than local government members who decide where the funding goes. My concern is that urban areas will benefit rather than the rural areas for which the funding was earmarked. I thank the Chairman.

Chairman: Before we conclude, I want to comment on the plan. It is a very valuable plan and it is a first attempt at trying to draw together such a broad area. There are so many different actions and it is cross-departmental. While we need to interface with various Departments and set out challenges, it is important that actions are delivered on and that we can see their progress.

On the town and village renewal scheme, which was in the limelight when the scheme was launched, we can see the real impact of it. In County Clare, my village received €90,000 last year and another €100,000 this year. This has had a real impact on the village and I can see the difference it made. Deputy Michael Collins said earlier that if we give a rural community a chance and some moneys, it will explode. Consider Newmarket-on-Fergus down the road. Deputy Seán Canney will be familiar with the area as he visited there when he was a Minister of State. The local development group, Obair, put together a proposal for creating a hub in the middle of the village. It purchased the premises itself and the €200,000 that was allocated this year will enable it to set up a meals-on-wheels service in the building and to train up chefs. This is a massive initiative for Newmarket-on-Fergus. It is positive and it will create jobs in a rural area and have a direct, positive impact on the
outlying areas. We can all be down on rural Ireland, saying that it is dead and so on, but here is the real impact of the plan for rural development being delivered on the ground.

I welcome the extra provision under the local improvement scheme. This scheme was dead and gone, so its re-establishment and the funding for it is very welcome. The town and village renewal scheme had been discontinued for many years also, as was the sports capital scheme. As the economy has improved and we are in a better financial position, the Government has managed to fund these schemes.

There are, however, challenges, and we have heard about them today. One of the major tonics that rural Ireland needs is high-speed broadband. We have heard the issues involved in this.

A plan is in place and the Minister is doing his best, but I would like to see broadband rolled out faster. If high-speed broadband was available in rural areas of Clare, the county could compete with Dublin.

The other elephant in the room is the national planning framework. The gulf between Dublin and the rest of the State is glaring. Successive governments’ plans and strategic plans have failed. The national planning framework document gives us all an opportunity to try to address this imbalance. I agree that we need to create a counterbalance between the west and the east of the country.

Consider the Atlantic corridor road project and the provision of rail services and connections. If there is a rail service, it needs to be connected to a university or to an airport, such as Shannon Airport. To make the service user friendly, those connections need to be made right along the way. If this committee is to do anything, we need to make an impact on that particular document to counterbalance the provision of services in the Dublin area and the west. The national planning framework is for another day. Hopefully we will discuss that topic at our next meeting.

I thank the witnesses for their time, their answers and their engagement. I look forward to engaging with them in the future. Deputy Niamh Smyth would like to speak.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I apologise for not being here at the beginning of the meeting. I concur with the Chairman’s comments on the national planning framework. This committee should have an input into the framework as it develops. I also agree with the Chairman’s view on the gulf between rural and urban Ireland. When we look at a map of Ireland and its motorways, which is the very basic requirement when it comes to infrastructure in a region or county road networks, and given that Cavan and Monaghan have no public rail system, people are totally dependent on that road system. I welcome that additional money has been put into the local improvement scheme, which suffered a funding famine over the past ten years. So many people depend on this to get to their farms and homes every day because they are ruled out if their road is not a public road. The local improvement scheme is the only opportunity to have their road in a safe condition to get to and from their homes.

I would like to see this committee having an input to the national planning framework, and to dissect it and investigate it to see how we can best put forward our ideas for rural Ireland, especially constituencies and regions that do not have the public transport network we would like. When one looks at the map, it is quite frightening to see fabulous motorways across the country but for us they all lead, unfortunately, to Galway and south of there. When one looks north of the Galway to
Dublin motorway, there is very little to be seen in terms of motorway infrastructure. Even the M3, which stops at the Cavan-Meath border, really makes people in the Border region feel inferior and almost as though they are in a forgotten part of the island. When one comes close to the Border, the motorway suddenly stops at the Meath-Cavan border. Issues such as this must be addressed if we are serious about dealing with depopulation and encouraging businesses. We are never going to get companies such as Google or Facebook but we have a huge, indigenous population within our own communities that will get on their own two feet to create work for themselves and others if they are given the opportunity and if the infrastructure is put in place. There is a significant onus on us, with this plan coming to fruition, to ensure this happens in any way we can.

**Chairman:** I thank Deputy Smyth. I thank the witnesses for their time today and we look forward to further engagement in the future.

**Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** I wish to inform the committee that Senator Denis Landy has tendered his resignation to the Seanad and therefore will resign his position on this committee.

*The joint committee went into private session at 11.28 a.m. and adjourned at 11.38 a.m. until 11.00 a.m. on Wednesday, 13 December 2017.*
Committee Debate 13 December 2017: National Planning Framework

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 13 Nollaig 2017

Wednesday, 13 December 2017

The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Peter Burke,
Deputy Seán Canney,
Deputy Michael Collins,
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice,
Deputy Carol Nolan,
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,
Deputy Willie Penrose,
Deputy Niamh Smyth,

In attendance: Deputy Tony McLoughlin and Senator Michelle Mulherin.

DEPUTY JOE CAREY IN THE CHAIR.

National Planning Framework: Discussion

Chairman: I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones. Mobile phones interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for parliamentary reporters to report the meetings. Television and radio coverage and web streaming of the meeting also will be adversely affected. It is proposed that the meeting follows the following order: the committee will consider the national planning framework with the Minister of State with responsibility for housing and urban development, Deputy English. The session will be followed by a two-minute sos and will resume in private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Any submissions made to the committee will be published on the committee website after the meeting.
Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Chairman: I welcome the Minister of State and members to the second meeting of the joint committee. The national planning framework, NPF, is a cross-departmental initiative that is vital for effective rural and regional development. The Department of Rural and Community Development has a role as a key contributor to the framework. As the Minister, Deputy Michael Ring, said: “Ireland 2040 underpins... the Action Plan for Rural Development, which seeks to create vibrant, sustainable and self-determining communities across Ireland.” He also said: “Ireland 2040 will provide a framework to support rural and community development policy for years to come.” The joint committee considers Ireland 2040: the National Planning Framework to be of the highest importance in supporting rural and community development. The committee decided to invite the Minister to today’s meeting to discuss Ireland 2040: the National Planning Framework, together with the Action Plan for Rural Development which we discussed at our first meeting. I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, with special responsibility for housing and urban development, Deputy Damien English. I also welcome his officials. The Minister might introduced them.

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Damien English): They are very shy. Mr. Niall Cussen and Mr. Paul Hogan are the main authors of the report. Some members might have had a chance to engage with them at other meetings. They are very happy to engage and to take questions as they are the two individuals who put a lot of work into co-ordinating the main messages and they also took all the feedback from stakeholders in the public sessions.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. His opening statement has been circulated to the committee and will be published on the committee’s website after the meeting. I now call on him to make his opening statement.

Deputy Damien English: I thank the committee for its invitation. As Minister of State with responsibility for housing and planning, and on behalf of the Minister, Deputy Eoghan Murphy, I am delighted to be here with Mr. Niall Cussen and Mr. Paul Hogan. I welcome this opportunity to listen to members and discuss the committee’s views on the national planning framework, NPF. It is important that the committee has a role and will also feed into the process. I am pleased the committee is up and running in time to do that. We made a presentation to the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government and we had a good discussion there. That committee is co-ordinating the message and feedback from both Houses of the Oireachtas. We also had a good debate on the issue in both Seanad Éireann and Dáil Éireann.

Today, I will put forward the Government’s views on what Ireland 2040 is aimed at delivering for rural Ireland and for communities in Ireland, both urban and rural. Ireland 2040, which is the draft national planning framework, draws on input and advice from expert economic and analysis from the ESRI and on environmental assessments from RPS consultants. Most importantly, it draws on the views and inputs of a broad range of people and stakeholders across the spectrum at national, regional and local level.
The development of the national planning framework has taken place over a three-year period. It included approximately 40 stakeholder events right around the country. On top of the hundreds of submissions received in the build-up to the publication of the draft NPF, we have received more than 1,000 submissions which we are determined should influence the final plan. The NPF is primarily about planning properly for what will be one of the fastest growing economies in Europe in the coming decades. The plan will ensure the potential of all regions, and all parts of the regions, is fully realised, whether that potential is in an urban or rural context. The framework is about regions working more effectively and both urban and rural development policies working in partnership for the ultimate benefit of the communities we serve. The framework sets a long-term strategic planning and investment context for Ireland over the next 20 years. It includes broad principles to better manage future population and economic growth than was the case in the past. We see it as the business case for investment and it is important to look at that as well as the regional strategies that will feed out of this over 2018. We must bear in mind that we need to plan for a population increase of 1 million extra people, an extra 660,000 people at work and the provision of at least 500,000 extra homes. However, this is not a top-down plan. To work, the national planning framework needs to be truly our plan. The national planning framework will also be further expanded and developed at regional and local levels by the regional spatial and economic strategies, RSESs, and ultimately, in local authority statutory plans. The work on the regional strategies will happen mainly in 2018 and the follow-on will be in the county development plans from 2019 onwards.

Approximately 1,050 submissions were received in the final public consultation. We are looking carefully at the submissions in shaping the final document. Mr. Paul Hogan brings them home with him most nights and he is going through them bit by bit and getting through them. It is important that we hear everyone’s views and that is why I again emphasise the benefit of the chance to engage with committee members today to hear their views and make sure we feed them into the final version of the publication. Moreover, looking to the themes raised by the submissions, emerging areas for further drafting include regions, more detail on regional development, and, critically, rural drivers outside the five main cities. When we engaged with the regional authorities, the issue came up quite a lot. They wanted to beef up the content in the plan on the regions and for that to be clearly outlined. I imagine that will probably form part of the discussion here today also.

Another theme is moving from business as usual to compact development and building in more scope to gradually phase in a transition from our current quite expansive or business as usual development model to a more compact development model as set out in the national planning framework. The key is to develop brownfield sites. We want to see that in urban settings, especially in cities where an extra 40% of the increase in population could happen within the city boundaries and we utilise the land in a much more compact way. A further theme is changing work patterns. There is a stronger recognition of the impacts of changing work patterns, technology and connectivity and the scope for people to work from home in that context.

Under the theme of housing and rural development the intention is to reflect the fact that wider social as well as economic considerations can be reasonable justifications for provision of housing in rural areas. That is something we can touch on later also.
In terms of more specifics on investment, with further details emerging through the draft capital investment plan from Departments and sectors, there is more scope to co-ordinate and cross-reference those in ensuring a joined up approach between the NPF and the capital plan. We are very clear on that aspect. The Minister, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, will bring forward his ten-year capital investment plan, which potentially involves €100 billion of taxpayers’ money, and we want to make sure they are aligned and that one leads on to the other. The failing of some plans in the past is that they did not have the backing of capital investment and infrastructure behind them. It is important that we get that right and co-ordinate it as well.

There is much in Ireland 2040 for rural areas, the most important being that the framework is about having an overall plan for the country’s strategic development, urban and rural working together for the overall benefit of our communities and our future. Throughout the plan there are many references to partnership. One will not have rural development without partnership with urban settings in strong local villages and towns of all sizes as well as cities. The best rural areas will develop in partnership with towns and cities. A link is required between the two in order to develop. In areas of decline, there is a clear absence of a link with a large town or city that can have an influence on their development.

The national planning framework will strengthen rural Ireland, not weaken it. There have been suggestions that the national planning framework will weaken rural Ireland. Those suggestions are somewhat mischievous and quite misleading. We hear that quite a lot. We wish to be very clear; that is not the intention of the plan. The opportunity to have a discussion in that regard today is worthwhile. Carefully reading the draft national planning framework, one will see that it contains many different kinds of practical planning, development and investment policies, which will benefit rural Ireland by driving plan-led and community-led regeneration initiatives, aimed at repurposing rural economies to benefit from new technology-driven economic activities and new living possibilities and growing the regions outside Dublin and the east by more than would occur under a business as usual scenario. It is clear that if we do not implement a new national planning framework and put in place a plan like this in the years’ ahead, there will be further rural decline because the development will continue to focus on the east. We are trying to push out development and get the balance right. The concept behind this plan is to balance development through the various regions. We also wish to improve connectivity to weaker areas such as to the northern and western parts of the country.

One of the main challenges in rural development in Ireland today is the necessity to create new opportunities for the renewal and sustainability of rural economies. People often talk about the decline of rural economies in the past seven or eight years, but that is not the reality. There have probably been 30 or 40 years of decline in some rural areas that we are trying to rejuvenate. That is the reality because we have not planned to bring life back into those rural areas. It is often assumed the decline has happened in the past decade but that is not the case and the statistics will bear that out. If one goes to many smaller towns and villages across rural Ireland, one will see the empty buildings, the shops that are closed and schools that are under threat. If those places are to have any future, we must get people to live again in those empty streets and empty buildings, plan and co-ordinate the future and set out the economic purpose of each town and village in relation to the
cities and regions. The national planning framework takes up this challenge, proposing smart growth initiatives to attract people and jobs into small towns and villages, harnessing their attractions in quality of life terms and connecting them to the digital, connected and shared economy of the future.

In addition, chapter 4 of the draft framework sets out 14 specific national planning and development objectives for rural Ireland. Those support and build upon the Action Plan for Rural Development for the longer term and address key areas such as housing, economic development and infrastructure. We must match the emptiness and dereliction of many of the smaller towns with the desires of many people seeking the opportunity to build their own homes. People find it difficult to do so because no one will sell them a site or, if they did, it would cost a fortune because there are no services. In order to assist them, the national planning framework proposes that local authorities will be supported in undertaking the necessary land acquisition, site preparation and local infrastructure provision to deliver self-build development options in smaller towns and villages. That is how we will breathe new life into rural communities. Like many members, I come from a rural background. While many people want to live in a rural area, that does not always mean that they want to live in a one-off house. Deputy Eamon Ó Cuív is panicking, but he should not worry because one-off housing is provided for in the framework. Some people want to live in or on the edge of a village, but that option was never available because it was too expensive and services were not available. A balance needs to be struck in order that they can live on their own land, given the economic and social need to do so, while having the option to be part of a local village community which has been declining for a number of years and which could be serviced much better.

We have a sense that there may be a misconception that in its focus on building up rural communities and particularly smaller towns and villages that the NPF will discourage rural communities in being able to meet housing needs in rural areas. That is not the case because the facts show that Ireland meets a large part of its housing need in rural areas and, more specifically, the countryside. Last year 50% of housing was built in rural areas and in some of the more rural counties the figure was closer to 80%. In our discussions at county and regional level the feedback is that people assume fewer houses are being built in rural areas, but that is not the case. The statistics for the past four or five years show that almost always one-off houses comprise 50% of housing. That might not suit people’s views, but they are the facts and we do not make them up. As a Minister of State who comes from a rural area, I want to see vibrant rural communities and rural economies. I realise however, as does the Government, that alongside a lived-in rural landscape, we must not neglect the renewal of existing built-up areas and the communities that live in them. That is true, be it in inner city areas, market town centres or the myriad smaller towns and villages across the country. For many years sections of many communities have been allowed to decline. The plan tries to focus on areas of decline in large towns and small villages and how to address them in the longer term. The decline will not be addressed in six months or a year or two. However, in a planned way we can breathe life back into these communities.

In July the Government made a decision to co-ordinate the NPF with the ten-year capital 6 National Planning Framework: Discussion
investment plan, thus ensuring alignment between strategic planning and investment. That is key because there was not always that alignment in the past. There was the intention and hope, but it did not happen. We need to track the plan to ensure it will happen this time. We are working closely with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure an effective alignment between the NPF and the mid-term review of the capital plan and longer term infrastructural planning. In ensuring close alignment of the capital plan with the NPF we will avoid the mistakes of the past, when investment under the National Development Plan 2000-2006 came before the 2002 national spatial strategy which was too diversely focused. Through this alignment we are essentially putting our money where our mouth is. Capital investment will underpin the planning framework in order that these plans will be real, their progress can be tracked and we can all buy into them.

Enactment of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Bill 2016 which we hope to get back into the Houses before Christmas but which will probably not happen until early January will place the NPF on a statutory footing. Through the new office of the planning regulator, it will put in place a regular process which will include Oireachtas involvement of monitoring, review and updating of the framework, which is key. We want Oireachtas Members to be involved in tracking the framework and making sure the Government will stick to it and what we buy into it and want to invest in will happen. The final framework document will then be brought to the Government for approval to publish. It will be followed by a strategic environmental assessment and the finalising of translation, design and printing. It is envisaged that the final NPF will be published in full in the first quarter of 2018.

I am certain that members will agree with the sentiment that the actions to revitalise towns, villages and communities outlined in the draft framework are good for regions, communities and all parts of our dynamic and proud country. It is important that we get on with our work to put the plans in place. We are here to get the committee’s feedback and make changes to the framework. There were 1,000 submissions received which we are teasing through to make sure we will reflect all of them as best we can in order that we can achieve a balance. We need to support the Ireland 2040 process in order that Europe’s fastest growing economy for the next decade or so will have a real chance to make lasting change preparing us for a better planned and better future for the people and communities, both urban and rural. It is about our future and that of our children and it is important that we get it right.

I thank members for their time and look forward to further engagement with them.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: I welcome the Minister of State and thank him and his officials for their presentation. I come from a constituency in the north west. I am concerned about the line between Galway and Dublin because the Minister of State mentioned five growth areas, none of which is north of that line. That is vitally important because there is a huge need in that part of the country. The Minister of State mentioned the involvement of communities, local authorities and others to gain support for the framework, but it is important that Sligo be included as a sixth growth area. Many colleagues from the west and the north west will agree with me. The Minister of State is correct to refer to towns and villages. There are streets in Sligo town on which nobody lives. I agree with him that we need to get people back into these communities and rural communities.
I also referred in my submission to the regional imbalance, as well as the need for investment. People need to see that we have an infrastructure that can be worked on and that that issue will be addressed. It is fine to say the five areas highlighted will be looked after, but given the level of population growth in them, we are losing people in other areas. Sligo Institute of Joint Comite on Rural and Community Development.

Technology has been granted university status and we have a university hospital; therefore, we have the infrastructure needed. People from counties Donegal, Mayo, Roscommon, Leitrim and Cavan are buying into Sligo. We have one opportunity to get right the framework which will run until 2040.

**Chairman:** There is a big turnout. I will call three members before allowing the Minister of State to respond.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I welcome the Minister of State. The concept of creating a counterbalance through the Atlantic economic corridor to the overdevelopment on the east coast is not targeted properly in the NPF. That needs to be the big ticket item for us in the western half of the country from Cork through Limerick, Galway, Sligo and Donegal to Derry. The technological university status granted to the colleges in Galway, Letterkenny and Sligo is part of that concept. The Minister for Rural and Community Development has appointed a task force to develop the Atlantic economic corridor. The concept is supported by all of the chambers of commerce in the region, but the task force’s recommendations need to be stitched into the NPF, as otherwise they will become a separate arrangement. The Atlantic economic corridor is the bee’s knees in the programme for Government and exactly what we need.

According to the Western Development Commission, in excess of 16,000 people living the county travel into Galway city every day to work. We must examine how they get in and out of the city. They do so with great difficulty. In some cases, they have to stay in a car park for an hour before they can travel home from work. We are creating a plan for the next 20 years. I see this from the IDA’s perspective. It says it will create a park, but there is never joined-up thinking on how people are going to get in and out of it. For instance, in Galway, the success of Parkmore Industrial Estate is that there are 6,000 people are working there, but there is a single road going into and out of it. It is absolutely incredible that there has not been proper forward planning. We cannot blame the local authorities. The IDA, the local authorities and Departments must work together to make sure that when we are drawing up a master plan, the roads are planned alongside the IDA parks, so that when they are fully operational they actually work properly, rather than the situation we have at the moment.

We have spoken about improving towns and villages. I do not see enough meat on the bones. I would like to know how we are going to improve towns like Dunmore, Milltown in my area, or Headford, where there was a large number of shops which are now closed. There is nothing in them. People have moved out of the centre of the towns. There is nothing tangible to incentivise people to come back to live and work in these towns, and to support local retail. If we do not get the population back into the heart of the towns, they will die.
I am very much against positioning supermarkets and big shops on the edge of towns. That creates a doughnut effect. That must be nipped in the bud. We have had enough of it as it really is destroying the centres of towns. It has had this effect in England. We must have no more of it, and we must make sure we are actually creating shopping areas within the towns, not on their outskirts.

One other issue I have a concern about is that we really heavily on the local authorities to deliver all these plans. I can say here and now that the local authorities are not being funded sufficiently to do that. They do not have the resources. They have been stripped of a huge amount of their expertise over the last ten years due to staff retiring and people not coming into the service. There has been a huge loss of expertise. With all due respect to the Minister of State, I would say that one of the biggest problems in our housing situation is our reliance on 8 National Planning Frameworks. Discussion

Local authorities which do not have in-house expertise in planning, environmental assessment, procurement, delivering projects or managing budgets. We have to examine this. We must resource local authorities properly if we are going to rely on them. The national planning framework states that local authorities are going to do this, that and the other. We are loading them with a lot of responsibilities. Galway County Council is at breaking point financially, and it is not being supported. Even though there are wage increases, funds are not being paid out by the central Government. That is absolutely wrong. If we are going to rely on the local authorities, we must put them in a position where they can deliver.

I return the issue of the Atlantic economic corridor. In the west or north-west of Ireland, of which Deputy McLoughlin has spoken, or down in the south, the biggest problem is the lack of proper broadband. There are not the sufficient water and waste water services to take additional capacity. In many cases, there are not proper roads. We must also examine the rail network, which we are not using. I refer particularly to the connection between Claremorris and Athenry, which could be opened up to freight services and commuter services. I always say that the biggest and cleanest artery to get people in and out of Eyre Square in Galway city is rail. We are not using it to connect with north County Galway or the east. With 16,000 people coming into the city everyday to work, we need to look at this in a more serious way.

When we talk about enterprise and how it should work, the IDA has a big role to play. I refer to Athenry, which has been in the news lately, and towns like Loughrea, Gort and Tuam, which are situated along the new roadway that has been built in Galway. There is more potential along the west coast to Ennis. The IDA parks are already there. In Tuam, planning permissions have run out, and there is a 40-acre site there with nothing in it. Any industry in Tuam has been there for years and proven that it is sustainable. We have fine industry there, but we could have a lot more of it. Rather than trying to squeeze it all into Galway city, we should be looking at the towns.

We have to look at how we carry out the business of planning. I have had discussions on this with Mr. Niall Cussen and Mr. Paul Hogan, who are present. Many of the frailties in our planning have been highlighted by the events surrounding Apple’s application to build a data centre in Athenry. We must not carry out a quick fix, but whatever we do, we must change the way we do planning business. I do not necessarily mean creating shortcuts but we must provide definitive timelines, so that anyone coming to this country and looking for planning permission will know that there is a
definitive timeline by which their project will or will not be given the green light rather a process that
drags on for years. We are paying the cost of that at the moment, because we got very bad publicity
from the Apple affair. I look forward to working with the Minister of State and all the other
Government Departments to bring forward legislation to ensure we can tell potential investors that
their projects have a fair chance of being approved and the time it will take to decide on it. That is
very important.

**Senator Michelle Mulherin:** I support what Deputy Canney had to say and, for the most part,
what Deputy McLoughlin had to say. It is great that there is a fine turnout at this meeting. In
considering the national planning framework, we have to take stock of where we are, and of what
sort of planning and development has taken place to date. Balanced regional development never
happened. Deputy McLoughlin spoke about a line running from the north of Galway across to Dublin
or Louth. Consider that whole area, as we talk about rural development. Apart from the Tuam
bypass, which I very much welcome, there is no major inter-urban route. There are no high-speed
trains. There is no deep water port. There is a port in Killybegs, but it is quite limited in what it can
do. There is a vast region of the country, the west and north west, that is without critical
infrastructure. That contrasts with the south. If one is going to the ploughing championships, one is
tripping over roads. I am talking about the roads to Dublin city. There are excellent national primary
and national secondary roads, and even regional roads.

I support the call for more meat on the bones, for more specifics. We do not want a situation where
rural Ireland is supported in tourism but not much else. I very much welcome the town and village
renewal schemes, which have given hope to towns and villages. They are really about enhancing
them but we need economic drivers in these rural areas. Not all rural areas are the same. A rural
area that is not so far from a big town or city may be different from a place like Mayo. That county
has a population of about 135,000. It has three reasonably-sized towns, but the remaining
population is dispersed in rural areas. I would say the same applies to Roscommon, which is
represented here. Everyone will speak about their own area. If we do not develop the concept for
the region, which I acknowledge is being proposed, my concern is that Mayo will be a commuter belt
of Galway or Sligo. At the moment, we have a framework providing for economic growth and
development. We need more support. We need connectivity between the three main towns. I agree
with the Minister of State that the decline in rural Ireland has not been confined to the last few years
since the recession. The decline has been going on for scores of years, which is in keeping with the
situation throughout Europe. There is a big pull to the big urban centres. We did not get investment
in roads, which I described earlier, even during the Celtic tiger era, so we need policies that are
weighted towards the west and north west. Policies should be weighted and not equal. It has to be
done to counterbalance the congestion in cities and the big urban centres where there is a lack of
housing and school places. We have all of that in abundance in the west and north west, yet the
west and north west, including Donegal and Mayo, recorded a decline in population in the 2016
census. We have an ageing population in Mayo. I see that going down the streets. It is our young
people who are gone. They cannot live on fresh air. They need jobs so there has to be more
investment. We can scratch our heads over the magic formula. We should not continue to pursue
demand-driven economic policies, which means we only invest where there is critical mass, that is,
in cities and towns. I am not saying they should not be invested in but we really need to do a lot
more to put rural Ireland on a sustainable footing. If we continue as we are, we will become - I will not say a game reserve, because we are not game - merely a nice place for people to-----

Deputy Michael Collins: Jurassic Park.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: -----commute to at weekends. We live in a lovely spot but I have a bigger ambition. Everyone here has a bigger ambition for rural Ireland than the way it is at present. I welcomed the town and village enhancement scheme. We need a particular stimulus to identify our town cores in rural towns and villages. They are market towns. How do we bring people to live in them and how do we look after independent traders in those towns and villages to give them life? We should build, project and plan for some population growth in the future. We see it happening in the cities. We do not need to do a thing for it to happen in the cities because that is the natural order of things. Cities will keep growing. They will be congested and we will miss out on opportunities because they are too congested. Galway has been described like that. The key point I am making on the west is that we have to come up with a plan that has sufficient detail in order that it does not make a county such as Mayo a place where people just commute out of because there is a road going to Galway or Sligo. It is not just Mayo. It is the same story in east Galway and Ballinasloe which are right beside Galway, but there is no trickle-down effect or benefit to the rural areas from these big cities. That is the reality.

National Planning Framework: Discussion

The Minister of State said he will tease out the issue of how we will develop the regions. If we do not tease it out in this committee with everybody here, we can forget it. If we do not tease it out here, we will have a capital investment plan that will throw money at the big urban centres again. Public transport is an issue. Every time we see a report coming out from the National Transport Authority, it says it is going to shut down the railway lines into the west except for Limerick. It is incredible. We need to accelerate what we are doing and not just look around the country and say we are doing a little bit here and there. We need a massive injection into a massive area of the country that has an awful lot to offer in addressing the problems facing the country. If we do not consider what we need to do to get these areas going, including the Atlantic economic corridor where there are jobs and where young people can live and have families, then we are wasting our time.

Deputy Damien English: I will touch on some of the issues. I will not be able to answer every question in detail because the idea is that I listen to members’ contributions. There has been a lot of detail and the idea is we take it on board and try to reflect it in what we do in the weeks and months ahead in bringing this plan forward.

I will address the issue raised by Deputy McLoughlin. We have agreed as a result of feedback from the committee that there is a need to strengthen the wording to reflect the concerns that have been raised. The issue of what is happening north of the Dublin-Galway corridor has been raised a lot so we will strengthen our wording.

We have been trying to avoid a scattergun approach in which we name every village because that will not achieve what we are trying to achieve. It has to be regional. We are asking people to think regionally in order that everyone benefits from it. We need to strengthen the wording and we will work on doing that. We also need cities to be developed in order that they have an international
foothing and can compete at that level. There should be a trickle-down effect if it is planned in the right way. That is what we are trying to do.

It is not to limit the growth of other large towns or villages but to recognise we need to grow cities in a proper, desirable and sustainable way in order that they are more attractive places for investment and we avoid the congestion Senator Mulherin referred to. It is a reality that thousands of people go to work in Galway and they will continue to do that. In addition to providing jobs outside of Galway, there will be more jobs in Galway because Galway is a major player. We recognise that in the strategy. We want to invest more in Galway to serve the region and to help it grow. That is not to say we do not have similar growth in other towns and villages as well.

We also have to make sure our cities are managed in a sustainable way. The Senator mentioned what is happening at the moment. They are not being planned and managed in a sustainable way because we have not invested in the infrastructure needed to make them the world-class cities we want them to be. That is part of the strategy. We see Sligo, Athlone and the larger towns as large growth centres and we have to agree the wording and how we will focus on it.

Deputy McLoughlin touched on the issue of university status and Deputy Canney mentioned it too. The technical university and the link with Letterkenny, Galway, Mayo and Sligo was mentioned. We have agreed at previous meetings that to strengthen the conversation around the educational stakeholders and their significance in the strategy in the region. We will strengthen our wording.

The Atlantic corridor was mentioned. Mr. Paul Hogan and Mr. Niall Cussen are both involved in that task force. Deputy Canney is not here but he can fill them in afterwards. They are involved in that task force and they can sit in on those meetings. It is reflected in the document. We can strengthen our wording because it is something we want to build on. There are a lot of issues in Galway which we are working on. It is part of the Atlantic corridor.

The smarter growth initiative is about looking at these areas in larger towns in counties such as Mayo, Sligo, Galway or other counties such as Cavan and Monaghan. How do we drive growth in these areas? It will not happen unless we plan it. That is the conversation we are trying to have. We cannot set out the plan for every individual village and town in the national planning framework. This sets out the overall national planning framework and then we have the regional strategies and county development plans. They have to focus in and make choices and pick the areas. The idea is the resources will be put in to make it happen and not just to talk about it. It is a decision for a regional level as well as a county level. It would not be right for us to list all the towns and villages. We want a bottom-up approach as well. We will set out the overall ambition for the region and then try to focus the development as best we possibly can.

Everybody talked about the different Departments. Unlike in the past, our Department is leading this and putting it together. The various Departments and agencies have been around the table and have been part of the strategy. They are buying into it and have fed into it. They will have responsibilities to make sure it happens, whether it is the IDA, Enterprise Ireland, the HSE or the education players around the table. They are all part of this. They were not part of it in the past. They did not necessarily buy into it or follow through with the plans. The Senator was right. If we are going to target jobs growth in certain parts of Sligo or Mayo and the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and the
Department are not with us, it will not happen. It goes back to what Deputy Canney said about planning in certain places. It is about having a balance and planning it out.

Meat on the bone was mentioned by everybody. It is not for the national planning framework to put all the meat on all the bone. Its purpose is to allow for it, put it in a national context and make sure it happens at a regional and county level and for the committee to be part of that conversation.

With regard to the issue of staff in local authorities, the Department recognises there is a great difficulty with local authorities which are rebuilding their capacity to deal with housing, planning and all the other services they provide. Local authorities are central to all walks of life in their communities. We are strengthening their teams. More than 600 additional staff have been sanctioned already in the planning and housing sections. We will build up those teams even more. We are also looking at the resources for each county. The whole idea of having the national planning framework is to try to plan out the future for each local authority and what they will have in terms of being able to raise money. If there is proper growth in their area from proper job creation, they will get rates and so on. That is what this is about. We recognise they need to strengthen their teams of people. Where there are shortages of certain skills in local authorities, whether in architecture or planning, that affect bringing forward housing and development plans, we will strengthen those teams and work with them on that. They are being asked to let us know when they need additional resources. They should let us know not only that they want more staff but what they want the staff for, what they want to do and where they are short of various skills.

I engaged with a local authority recently which informed me that it had received sanction for extra staff and that it was seeking further funding for training. I asked whether it would not hire 12 people with the necessary skills. We ask that if an authority needs architects, it should employ them and not people who must be trained. We are providing the resources and ask that local authorities strengthen their teams in the various areas in order to bring the plans to fruition.

There was a reference to connectivity. That is the idea here, whereby connectivity is planned for and then the infrastructure to facilitate it - whether in the context of broadband, increased road infrastructure or high-speed rail - is put in place. Decisions must be make regarding where it is required and then provision must be supported by means of the capital investment plan. That is what we are trying to do.

Senator Michelle Mulherin: The Minister of State described various regional plans and we are looking at the national planning framework. There are 131,000 people living in Mayo. There are three towns with populations of 10,000 and the remainder of the county consists of rural areas and small towns. The county has a population of 131,000 and a functioning economy. I understand that the Minister of State has to look at large cities. I do not mean any disrespect in the context of what Deputy McLoughlin is suggesting, but the Minister of State should go into some detail in respect of counties such as Mayo and Roscommon. There are 131,000 people living in county Mayo compared with 61,000 in the whole of County Sligo, including the city. Why would the Minister of State suggest that we in Mayo should have to commute to Sligo or Galway? Why will he not provide some detail on Mayo? Take linked hubs, for example. We had a spacial strategy previously, but the problem was
that it was not implemented. The strategy identified hub towns. I do not think it is acceptable for the Minister of State to make that statement.

**Deputy Damien English:** To be clear, we are not saying that Mayo will lose out. That is not what we are saying at all. We are talking about taking a regional approach first. In that context, there are regional spacial and economic strategies which will be used to decide where the growth centres are; they will be in Mayo, Sligo and other counties because each county has major growth centres and we specify that there will be approximately 137 villages of less than 1,500 people which will also have a role. Individual plans must be worked out for each of those villages and towns and then there will be a need to start making choices. These are choices that must be made at regional level. The Government cannot dictate to every county which towns are prioritised.

**Senator Michelle Mulherin:** But the Minister of State has said that the cities are a priority. He has said that urban centres are a priority.

**Deputy Damien English:** That is a reality; it reflects what is there. There are five cities that are already cities which have a major influence in the area. For example, Galway is a medtech centre in the context of Europe and is a major player in an international context. One cannot just forget about it, one has to plan to enhance its position and provide the infrastructure. There are traffic plans for Galway that require an investment of nearly €1 billion to relieve the pressure in the city. That needs to be planned and made happen and investment is required. This does not mean that there will be no investment in Mayo but the Senator has to realise that Galway is the leading city in the region and that such cities need to be used.

We are not saying that Mayo will suffer to Sligo’s benefit or vice versa. We are just setting out the regional context in terms of what needs to be done. The Senator makes a good point about how there needs to be extra weighting in order for real change to happen. We are trying to strengthen the wording in respect of the north and the north west. We can examine the weighting. The population percentages are 50% in cities and 50% in rural areas. However, the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development general feedback is that a people want to see strengthened wording regarding the future of the north and the north west. We will do this in coming months.

**Chairman:** I thank the Minister of State. The next group of questions will be from Deputy Ó Cuív, Senator Hopkins and Deputy Penrose. Contributors have five minutes each and the Minister of State will respond after 15 minutes.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** That is agreed so long as we may keep coming back until everyone has gone home and only one or two of us are left. Five minutes is not enough time to express my concerns about the thrust of where we are going.

I will briefly mention an urban problem. The plan is to grow our cities dramatically and quickly. Let us look at our cities. The areas in this State with the highest levels of deprivation and drug abuse - this is not the fault of the people living there because they are highly segregated - are all located in our cities and were all rapidly built. We have no housing in our cities. The plan is to put 45,000 more people into Galway, for example, when there is no housing there. It would be necessary to build
20,000 houses merely to catch up. If they were to be implemented today, all the transport proposals in this plan would only deal with the current situation. However, the Minister of State wants to add a further 45,000 people to the city. There are huge swathes of our country which could be developed and in which we would not face these problems but the new religion of urbanisation, which is a 20th century concept, seems to have taken over and is driving everything. There is an idea that the only successful places are cities. That is fine. Take Ballsbridge, which is in my neck of the woods. One could say that it is a relatively successful place but I cannot think of many people in Corr na Móna who would want to live in some of the less well off parts of Limerick, Galway or Dublin. We need to look at this holistically and challenge the premise behind much of what is being said here.

I have read this plan. It is very clever. It says this and that and has a little bit in it for everybody but, ultimately, the Minister of State has clearly spelled out the position here today, for which I thank him. He said, “We are working closely with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to ensure an effective alignment between the NPF and the mid-term review of the capital plan”. The plan states that the money is to be focused on the cities. The Minister of State says that the way in which money was spent previously was too dispersed. Very cleverly, the Department is now setting up this independent planning regulator which will pick this report up and say that it was told to invest the money in the cities, despite all the fine words. It can be seen all throughout the document - it is all cities and towns and the rest of us do not count. I was really impressed by Senator Mulherin’s contribution.

The time for this round is short, so I will focus on rural areas. Chapter 4.5 of the plan refers to open countryside, which is where the vast majority of rural people live. They do so by choice because they have a fantastic quality of life. I am told that I am meant to live in the village. When I asked someone why I should live in the village, I was told that I would be near the local post office. I put my hand in my pocket and said, “Here is my bank, my travel agent and anything else I want, without leaving my sitting room.” For most people, the day of having to walk to the post office is gone. Recently, I visited an industrial concern located two miles from my house. I asked the owners if they had the new broadband and they told me they have a Gbit, but the problem is that their customers in England do not have anything equivalent. We have broadband now and the idea that we all need to be in cities is out of date.

**Deputy Damien English:** I am conscious that the Deputy missed the beginning of the meeting but I said very clearly that this is not just about cities.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I have read the plan.

**Deputy Damien English:** The Deputy must not have read it because he is going on a rant that does not reflect what is in the plan. With respect-----

**Chairman:** Hold on a second-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Is the Minister of State going to call my contribution a rant?

**Deputy Damien English:** It is unfair of the Deputy to come in late and keeps throwing this-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I read the Minister of State’s document last night after it was emailed to us.
**Deputy Damien English:** The Deputy can put on a showpiece but it will not help in the context of what we are trying to do.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** If that is the Minister of State’s attitude towards what I am saying and towards Fianna Fáil, that is fine.

**Deputy Damien English:** That is not our attitude at all but the Deputy is constantly mis-representing what is in the plan.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I will get over it.

**Deputy Damien English:** That is grand.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** When I was a Minister, I always respected the Opposition.

**Deputy Damien English:** The Deputy did so and I would have to compliment him on that. I was one of the Opposition spokespersons at the time and he was very good to me.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Is the Minister of State going to respect me?

**Deputy Damien English:** I will respect the Deputy. I did not-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** It is a fact-----

**Chairman:** The Deputy should finish his contribution and then the Minister of State-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I am not going to have someone say that this is a rant. I have read the plan.

**Deputy Damien English:** I am sorry that I used the word “rant”. The Deputy was not here for the start of the meeting when I made it very clear that the plan is very much focused on rural Ireland. We recognise-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Sorry-----

**Deputy Damien English:** Sorry, Chairman-----

**Chairman:** Can the Minister of State finish his point now?

**Deputy Damien English:** I cannot sit here and be told again and again that this is not for rural Ireland. I made it clear at the start of the meeting that this is why we are here to engage Joint Comite on Rural and Comunity Development15

with the committee. We see this plan playing a major part in saving rural Ireland. As I stated earlier, the statistics indicate that over 50% of house building over the past number years was in rural areas. That is a fact. We want to allow for this and to enable the rebuilding of villages. As I stressed earlier, not everyone wants to live in a one-off house. Some people want to live in a rural village but that choice was not available to them in the past. We want to ensure people have that choice and at the same time allow thousands of people to live in one-off houses. As I said, 50% of developments are outside cities. I ask the Deputy not to misrepresent the plan.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** From my reading of the plan, everything is focused on the cities, followed by big towns, small towns and rural Ireland. As provided for in this plan, and in light of the Flemish decree, severe restrictions are to come into effect in relation to one-off housing. The thrust of policy
is to try to control one-off housing. Nobody wants to stop people who want to live in towns and villages from doing so. There are no housing need forms to be completed by people who want to live in a town or village. When Minister, I introduced housing need because I did not want to see unrestricted housing development but this plan, in terms of the obtuse language used therein, introduces many further restrictions on rural living, including in parishes like St. Thomas’s in south Galway that have produced fantastic hurling teams, and the many other areas that are totally dispersed. There is nothing wrong with these areas. They have huge capacity for growth because the schools can take more pupils and people provide their own infrastructure and as such they do not need huge State investment.

The plan repeatedly references focusing the investment in the major cities. When it comes to roads, the focus is on major inter-urban routes. The vast majority of people using the Galway-Dublin motorway do not come from Galway city. Many of them join it at different locations along the route. The focus in the plan is on major inter-urban routes rather than major inter-regional routes. There are people who travel from Mayo to Galway to take the Galway-Dublin route. The focus in this plan is on urban infrastructure. One needs to read this plan carefully. I have not only taken the time to read it carefully, but I have made a detailed submission on it. It is cleverly written. In terms of infrastructure proposals, the largest pieces of infrastructure to be provided in rural Ireland are greenways and blueways, for which I thank the Minister of State, but we need roads and railways as well as greenways and blueways. This proposal is more leprechaun policy in regard to rural Ireland. Of course we need greenways and blueways and nice urban coastal walks from Balbriggan to Bray, but we also need the basic infrastructure that people require to enable them to do their daily business.

**Senator Maura Hopkins:** I thank the Minister of State for being here. In regard to the national planning framework and rural Ireland, one of the biggest challenges in terms of maintaining rural communities is access to employment. If we want people and families to remain in and return to rural Ireland, we need to ensure there are jobs in rural areas. Deputy Canney gave the example of Parkmore in Galway city. I will give another example. There is an IDA Ireland business park in Ballinasloe. Similar to the example outlined by Deputy Canney in relation to Tuam, it is under-utilised. We need to ensure there is positive discrimination towards towns like Ballinasloe that has very good infrastructure and can be accessed via two exits off the M6. It also has relatively good broadband and very good community and educational facilities, but there are insufficient jobs to sustain people to live and work there. There are far too many people getting up very early in the morning to travel to work when they could be working in their own local area. What we need is balance in terms of infrastructure development in relation to cities, particularly Galway city which in terms of traffic is absolutely chaotic. As I said earlier, there is excellent infrastructure in Ballinasloe but businesses are not being incentivised to locate there. Last week, I had a meeting with representatives of the IDA Ireland business park and a 16 National Planning Framework: Discussion local community group at which I raised the issue of Ballinasloe not receiving its fair share in terms of regional development despite its excellent infrastructure and so on.

I have read the national planning framework. I have also read the Western Development Commission submission. Following on from the Minister of State’s second contribution, I am satisfied
that growth in the west and north west will be a focus of the national planning framework rather than a regional spatial and economic strategy. We want our fair share in terms of development and we will contribute to that, but we need to be supported. I welcome that growth in these areas is a focus of the national planning framework. As stated by the Minister of State, the framework and the capital plan are linked. I am concerned that there are specific actions and recommendations set out in the plan in regard to the five cities but there are not detailed or specific actions in regard to rural Ireland, in particular actions around reversal of rural decline. I am not sure how it is planned to achieve it. I am practical person and I like to see practical actions to support villages, towns and cities across the country, but there are no such actions in this draft plan.

I have made a detailed submission on the draft plan. All participants today have expressed real concerns that need to be taken into account in the final document. We live in rural areas and we connect with people in rural areas on a daily basis. We have good knowledge of the issues in rural Ireland. We want greater focus on the development of rural villages and towns and better support for the west and north west in the context of the national planning framework.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I have been an unashamed advocate for rural Ireland for the past 25 years or so as I live in a very rural area. For any plan to be successful, the principal actors and stakeholders must first escape capture by the heavy hand of the supervisory Departments. Nothing will be achieved if one is constrained by a top-down Department view. However, I do not see an escape here because the plan strikes me as representing a piece for everybody in the audience without a prime objective or desire. It does not show the necessary bias to remedy infrastructure defects across rural hinterlands and landscapes. That will not be achieved. There is no sign of positive discrimination in favour of rural Ireland.

Cities by their nature are vibrant and active. That is why they will survive. One need only look at something that keeps the local authority going, the rates base. A single big industry in a city can be equivalent to the entire rates base across a rural county. That means development can take place, which is fair play. Many people are gravitating from our areas, and must travel long journeys, to get to work in the cities. They are contributing to development in the cities. That is fair enough. However, the Minister must trust local authorities to achieve some of the plans. Every action and initiative of the local authorities is circumscribed by what I consider to be vice-like departmental control. There is no real devolution of powers or responsibility to local authorities from the mother Department. That is a failing in the plan. Nothing will be achieved until that is released. I have always held that view. We must let the local authorities loose and vest them with the authority to be real local development innovators and agencies, without having to refer back to the Department.

We see that with the housing situation. It is a case of going up and down repeatedly and taking three years to build a house that could be built in six months. I encounter great frustration in Westmeath and Longford with this. One does not have any answers, so one becomes neutralised oneself as well. It is also reflected in the broadband situation. There are great broadband initiatives taking place but, as I said at the last meeting, Eir identifies particular areas. My area of Ballynacargy, nearby Ballymore, Colehill in Longford and Legan are blackspots but the first thing Eir did was to stop coming to those areas even though they were identified by the GovernJoint Comite on Rural and Comunity Development
ment and everybody else as blackspots. It is bad enough that rural people are relegated to being third-class citizens but, to add insult to injury, consider the situation in Mullingar on the N52. Bloomfield House Hotel in Mullingar is one of the finest hotels in the country and Mullingar Golf Club is one of the finest golf clubs in the country. In Belvedere, for example, the madness is that Eir delivers broadband to a person in one place, for example, where the Minister is sitting, but the person's sister next door, who has a business, cannot get it. The woman is in business and comes from a innovative family of entrepreneurs, one of the finest in the country. She is at her wits' end and cannot believe it. How can the Minister talk about grandiose plans when he cannot even deliver that simple thing? With broadband connectivity there can be cottage or remote control-type industries. That is how to give rural people a chance.

I recall speaking at an event in Kiltimagh in 1998 or 1999. It was the finest example I have seen of a little local area plan that people devised for themselves, long before anybody was given a tosser. Consider what the Ludgate Hub is doing for Skibbereen and Clonakilty in west Cork. There are plenty of people showing us how it is done. We do not need experts. I believe the game is over the minute we bring in consultants. The Minister should dump the consultants and show them the door. I have never had time for them. We achieved more in the Dáil on the carers issue by writing our own report - simple men handwriting it. We brought forward 15 recommendations and eight of them were implemented by the late Minister, Seamus Brennan, and his successors. The consultants must be cut out. As soon as I see them I know the game is over for rural Ireland. The first thing they do is start talking in haughty language that means nothing but garbage. Let us be clear about that.

With regard to the IDA and so forth, there are 22.5 ha in Mullingar available for development. The N52 road cuts through it. There is also the M6 and M4 nearby. The 22.5 ha have been sitting there for the last eight years. There is planning permission and the land is serviced, yet the IDA could not get a snipe into it. This is a town with 25,000 to 28,000 people and it has the potential to grow. It is an hour from Dublin Port and Dublin Airport, 30 minutes from Maynooth and 30 minutes from Athlone Institute of Technology. It is nonsense. It is all grandiose, gravy train ideas with not an ounce of practicality.

That is what worries me about this plan. We will have smart growth initiatives, competition and plenty of stuff between public and private enterprise, but what will happen to small local councils? Consider the planning issue. I have been a strong advocate of rural planning. I had to be. I would not be living where I am living without getting my house. Under the planning code I can write in an objection to somebody building a house in Galway, Cork or Donegal. The planning should only have an impact where one lives. Westmeath people should object in Westmeath, not chase off to write an objection to somebody living in Meath or Cork. One must be impacted by the planning application. I need a few minutes on this issue, Chairman. Rural planning permissions are very important. A son or daughter building beside his or her elderly parents means the son or daughter is available to the parents to ensure they do not end up in nursing homes or elsewhere. The son or daughter, or their partners, will be able to provide the necessary care. We can gain from that.

The first thing one hears is that there are no services. The funny thing is that rural people did not object to paying their water rates or anything else. They pay for everything. They do not mind. We do not get footpaths or lights but I could not give a sugar as long as I could live beside my late
mother and father. That was all that interested me, so I could provide some help to them. That does not come into the planning laws but it is a core issue. Those people are critical to maintaining football, hockey and soccer teams and keeping churches, schools, Garda 18 stations and anything else in rural Ireland alive.

Gas supply is also important. Places such as Kinnegad, Moate, Kilbeggan, Delvin and Castlepollard, all big towns, cannot get a gas supply from Bord Gáis.

I wish to make a final point. We do not appear to be getting much industry, but thankfully we have a number of manufacturing industries such as the Mergon Group and TEG in Mullingar. We were lucky in that regard. They are wonderful people who have done great work over the years. We are dependent on that but we need more help, more apprenticeships and so forth. We need the balanced growth my colleagues have discussed. I have been involved with the Sparkassen model since its inception. I brought its representatives to meet the credit unions at a big public meeting. The problem is that the dead hand of the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform will do everything it can to make sure it does not happen, notwithstanding that every Member of the Oireachtas wants it to happen. Bureaucrats will ensure that something that is absolutely critical to revitalising rural Ireland will not happen. There is a place in Mullingar for the midlands one ready to go and there will be seven or eight more of them around the country, but it will not happen unless somebody does something.

I will give a final example. The Royal Canal has been great. The former Minister, Deputy Ó Cuív, and the current President Higgins were involved with it. They were great Ministers who were innovative. I have been involved with the Royal Canal Amenity Group since 1979 as a volunteer. I received an answer to a parliamentary question from the Department a few days ago which illustrates the type of thing that is happening. The Minister of State is aware of this because he was fighting for things for Meath as a Deputy. There is a small spur line to Longford to finish this project from Spencer Dock to Cloondara. It is a wonderful amenity. Half the country walks the Royal Canal. Starting in Dublin, it is possible to walk the length of the canal. My home is on the banks of the canal and I see walkers passing by. That this project is not considered a priority shows the lack of joined-up thinking in Departments. This puts people over the edge. Volunteers in the Royal Canal Amenity Group cannot believe this project is not proceeding.

Chairman: Deputy Penrose has spoken well on this issue. I ask the Minister of State to respond to the three contributions.

Deputy Damien English: While I am unable to answer all the questions members asked, I will try to address their concerns. The idea is to listen to the various contributions and feed them into the overall plan. The reason I am attending today is that I understand concerns have arisen regarding the roll-out of the national planning framework. This is a 20 year plan which sets out a vision for the country. The draft does not include everything and we recognise that changes will need to be made. While I will be pleased to address any concerns raised, I must also point out when people are factually incorrect.

The document makes clear that 50% of growth will not be in the five major cities in the State. It could not be any clearer on this point. Regardless of whether people like it, cities will also experience
growth and rightly so. However, if we do not plan them better, they will not thrive although they will survive. We need the five main cities to thrive and to continue to attract investment and employment and be international players. If Galway does not continue to be an international player in the medical technology sector, the whole region will suffer. It is important, therefore, when drawing up a national plan that we provide for continued investment in the cities. They must become more sustainable and better planned to continue to win investment. We must also give people the option to live in our cities.

Deputy Ó Cuív is correct that Galway is experiencing a significant housing problem. Setting out a vision for the city includes trying to address its housing needs for the next 20 to 25 years. I have never said we will fix the housing problem in one year, nor are we planning for a 25% increase in Galway’s population in one year. The 25% population increase will take place over 25 years, and without planning, it will probably still take place in an unco-ordinated and unsustainable manner. Planning requires drawing up a business case to win investment for a region, city, town or village. The purpose of the framework is to plan for this in order that business cases can be made for investment, including by the Departments of Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform.

We are trying to strike the right balance. The national planning framework makes clear that we are planning for housing in villages, small towns and rural areas. To take Galway as an example, given that it was referred to by previous speakers, one-off houses have accounted for approximately 75% of new houses in Galway since 2011. While I am fully in favour of one-off houses, what will happen if they account for 100% of new houses? This would not be appropriate. The issue is one of striking the right balance. We have agreed to strengthen the wording on the social reasons for living in rural areas. The plan reflects economic needs and we will provide greater clarity by including social needs because, as Deputy Ó Cuív stated, this is also important.

Not everyone can live in a one-off house and not everybody wants to do so. I do not agree that people have an option of living in a village. An issue arises regarding the cost of a site or a house in a village or town. It has not always been easy to live in a village. I know people who would have liked to have lived in a small village but could not afford to buy a site in it. Others were not sure if they could build a one-off house within the boundary of a town or village. They did not want to live an estate but on a site in the village or town. We want to encourage this option and we are doing so in the national planning framework. Living in rural areas does not only involve living in one-off housing, although the plan allows for one-off housing.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Maybe.

Deputy Damien English: No, it is not a case of “maybe”. It is clearly provided for in the planning framework. I ask the Deputy to deal with facts.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We will go through the document in a moment.

Deputy Damien English: We have made a commitment to strengthen the wording to allay concerns on this issue. I ask members not to misrepresent the contents of the plan. We are here to engage with the facts.
Senator Hopkins referred to Ballinasloe and other towns. In my previous job in the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, as it was then known, we went to great lengths to engage with all the stakeholders in enterprise and try to persuade investors to invest in towns and villages as opposed to Dublin, Cork, Galway and so forth. In the past year, approximately 70% of the jobs created have been outside the Dublin and Cork regions. We want this trend to continue. In some regions, albeit not all of them, towns and villages have enjoyed considerable success in this regard. We must ask why certain locations have not been successful. The Government cannot drag a company to Ballinasloe or force it to invest in the town. However, choices can be made at regional or county level on the towns and growth centres to be made more attractive to business and on identifying what industries and businesses should locate in a town. In general, companies want access to talent, people and skills, which returns us to the 20 National Planning Framework: Discussion

issue of apprenticeships, further education and training and linkages with institutes of technologies and universities. These are all essential requirements that regions must meet if they wish to win jobs. We have agreed to strengthen the wording on this issue in the plans.

People often choose to live in cities. Companies then decide to invest in cities because it is here that the talent is to be found. We want to make towns and villages more attractive places to live because if people choose to live in them, their chances of securing investment will increase. However, these decisions cannot be made by the Government at national level. Regional and local choices must be made and every county has influence on these choices. As such, regional strategies are just as important as the national plan because it at this level that decisions are made on the “wheres” and “whens”.

I do not agree with Deputy Penrose on this issue. The Government deliberately decided not to give something to everyone in the audience because that was the mistake made in previous plans. We are providing that decisions must also be made at regional level, which will mean politicians must make decisions for their regions and counties.

Deputy Ó Cuív asked how will investment be made in towns and villages. The purpose of the smart growth funds is to target villages, towns, cities and key areas of deprivation, as well as the RAPID areas in towns. When the Deputy was a Minister he visited Navan, Ballinacree and Oldcastle which are CLÁR and RAPID areas. There are areas of decline in all towns and villages and we cannot ignore them. We are planning to address and fix them. We are trying to achieve growth. We recognise that cities are meant to benefit the wider region but parts of the regions are not benefiting from growth in the cities. Many people drive into Galway city to work but that does not have to be the case. Many of the companies which have located in Galway will locate additional facilities outside the city, as is currently the case with companies in Dublin which locate secondary phases of development outside the capital. However, one must first attract the investment.

We will work with local authorities which have a central role in deciding in which towns and villages they want to invest. If they make a case to the growth funds, we will target investments. The Deputy is correct to ask where the actions are to make this happen. The strategy sets out the where and how as well as the overall regions. A number of actions will then be needed to back this up and this will be co-ordinated by all Departments. For this reason, the strategy sets out the business case
for these actions and investments through various Government agencies and Departments. This has not always been done in a co-ordinated manner. The town and renewal village scheme and other schemes are not always co-ordinated in such a way as to make a significant impact. Decisions with real purpose must be made for a town or village and must include a plan for the next 25 or 30 years. Everybody in a local authority area needs to buy into the plan and investment should be directed into that choice through the various Departments. The town or village will then have been chosen to thrive. A county may choose four or five such locations but they must back up these choices to make this happen, which is what we are trying to do in this strategy. We want long-term thinking because the decline of a town or village cannot be addressed in a couple of years. Long-term investment is required to make it attractive.

Cities present serious challenges which we are trying to address in the strategy. That is not to say all actions will be focused on cities as that is not the case.

I was asked if the Department dictates to local authorities. Approximately 300 local area plans will be submitted to me and my officials for decision in the year ahead. We rarely have to intervene in these plans. In most cases, local authorities make decisions on local areas plans which we then check, tick a box and say “Away you go”. In some cases, we are required to intervene because the plan does not provide for sufficient housing. We try not to do this and we engage with the local authorities. We generally do not dictate to them and the local area plans are generally good. Local authority members make the decisions.

Members argue that villages and towns are being ruined by large shopping centres outside towns. In many cases, local councillors made the decisions which gave rise to these developments. I was a member of the committee with responsibility for enterprise for years and we discussed this matter many times. I recognise that bad decisions were made in this regard but they were made locally, rather than being dictated by national policy. We are trying to focus on breathing life back into the high streets of villages and towns. Let us put to use empty and vacant buildings. Only yesterday, I signed off on draft regulations to make it easier to use a vacant commercial building for housing purposes. In some towns and villages, such properties have been lying empty for 20 or 30 years. Let us focus our minds on trying to save rural areas. I am appearing before the joint committee because I genuinely want to engage with members on this matter.

The concerns of the committee have been expressed very well. While we do not agree with members on every point, we want to address their concerns. I hope we will be able to tweak the wording of the national planning framework to make it clearer.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the Minister and his officials for coming here to discuss this hugely important plan. It is to cover the period up to 2040 and that is why it is so important.

Deputy Penrose is right - the Minister said this also - that local authorities are very much at the coalface. To be honest, local authorities throughout the country are concerned about what has been published so far. If I am given the opportunity, I will outline some of my concerns in respect of my constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. There is an onus to discriminate positively in favour of the northern and western regions, particularly in the context of the Border counties. It is a necessary and explicit requirement under the national planning framework to redress the economic and
political growth imbalances that exist and ensure that all regions in the State benefit fairly from the economic upturn and increased Government investment. This will ensure that more regionally balanced development is delivered.

I have with me a map to which I always refer. It was presented to us, as local representatives, by Monaghan County Council and has been referred to in so many of the debates in the Dáil. They say that a picture paints a thousand words. The map in question explicitly shows the motorway, to which Deputy McLoughlin referred, from Galway to Dublin and everything south of that. When one looks north, there is little in the way of motorway infrastructure from Galway right up to Belfast. That is where I will begin my presentation to the Minister. I seek greater clarity on the timescale for the delivery of the N2-A5 Dublin to Derry route upgrade. This project is important in the context of connectivity with the north west and for economic growth along the corridor to which the route relates. It is important that we get explicit timescales for its development under the national planning framework. Given its strategic importance and the lack of any direct rail infrastructure serving significant urban areas in the north west along the route, the N2-A5 Dublin to Derry project should be prioritised to full motorway status. Dare I say it, I doubt that there is any further rail development proposed. Therefore, the road infrastructure is hugely important. Monaghan County Council has - continuously and forcefully - always made representations on the importance of that upgrade of the N2, not only due to the significant number of fatalities on the road but also because it is one of the main corridors through Monaghan and on to Derry. We need explicit timescales for the delivery of that project.

There is an explicit mention, as Deputy Ó Cuív stated, of greenways and blueways in the plan. I welcome the proposed delivery of the Ulster Canal greenway under this plan. However, the mention of the reopening of the Ulster Canal should be included in tandem with the development of the greenway, particularly in light of its tourism and economic potential for the northern and western regions and its potential to act as a catalyst in the regeneration of a number of towns in the central Border area. We depend on that for economic and tourism development. As stated, it is a platform for us to put ourselves forward. We do not have big cities similar to Cork, Limerick and Galway. We depend on the natural heritage and architecture of the area, which is there to be developed and tapped into. I want the reopening of the Ulster Canal along that route to be committed to in tandem with the greenway, which, as I say, is welcome. More important than the greenway is the Ulster Canal. I certainly hope the fact that the greenway has been initiated does not mean that the Ulster Canal project is dead.

The east-west link corridor proposal has been brought to design stage and is sitting on a desk gathering dust. I do not see any mention of that in the national planning framework. That would be a massive mistake. The purpose of the east-west link is to open up the region from Dundalk to Monaghan to Cavan and on over to Sligo. The Border region is totally dependent on that. There has been a great deal of work done and investment made to bring the proposal to design stage. There is more work to be done and there are routes to be decided upon. I want to see it happen, as do both of the local authorities in my constituency. It is crucial and imperative for the development of the Border region that the project be named as part of the Minister’s plans for the future.
The upgrade of that Dundalk-Cavan-Sligo east-west strategic route is important for the Border region. It is currently a heavily used poorly aligned route serving significant FDI and indigenous businesses moving goods from Dundalk to ports in Northern Ireland and right over to Sligo. Strategic economic growth in the region is stifled because of not having that upgrade. It is hugely important for the region that the project be named, given a timescale and committed to in the national planning framework.

Cavan town is named as one of the main locations that will deliver in terms of jobs, education and housing. For 25 years, Cavan Institute has provided the highest quality of education for people, both in Cavan and far beyond. As recognised in the draft planning framework, Cavan town is positioned to act as a principal location in terms of housing, jobs and education delivery. To address the low level of third-level qualifications in the sub-region and enhance the talent base, there is a clear opportunity, in the context of the national planning framework, to build on the foundations laid by Cavan Institute by establishing an institute of technology in the town to serve the region. This is something that must be addressed in the plan.

It is important to recognise the growth towns and counties, and also regional spatial and economic strategies, in the national planning framework in order to ensure that growth continues. It is also important to recognise that the previous investment imbalance in the region needs to be corrected under this national planning framework. There is also a need to provide a commitment to upgrade the N3, the N4 and the N2-A5 route and, of course, to proceed with the east-west link corridor. In County Cavan, as the Minister of State, Deputy English, knows better than anybody, the N3 comes to an abrupt stop when one reaches the Meath border. I travel that route every day on my way here. As the Minister of State will be aware, it has made a fantastic difference to County Meath. It has opened the county up. It is as if Cavan people are the second-class citizens when it comes to the delivery of national primary routes. There is no motorway leading to Cavan town, which brings one right up to the Border hinterland. It is crucially important that we see the upgrade of that route as well. As I stated, if one looks at that map, one can see how the motorway comes to an abrupt stop at the Meath-Cavan border. It would be a missed opportunity. When one considers that this plan is to cover the period up to 2040, that matter must be addressed in the context of this plan.

Finally, I reiterate the point that the third-level facility is of central importance to the Border area. Cavan Institute is strategically placed in the context of establishing an institute of technology in the town. Cavan Institute has grown rapidly in recent years to the point where it is bursting at the seams. It needs the recognition to which I refer in order to be brought that step further. Students have to leave home and we experience a brain drain. We are losing that skilled workforce. We are losing all those students who want to go on to third level and, eventually, complete their masters and PhDs. The Minister and I both know that in today’s world one is going nowhere without a degree. The institute needs that recognition. It needs that upgrade.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the Minister for coming in. I also thank Mr. Cussen and Mr. Hogan for attending.

I was in Sligo when the Minister’s predecessor, Deputy Coveney, launched the plan and invited people right across the country to make submissions. I visited seven counties. I went to Donegal, Sligo, Cavan, Mayo, Roscommon, Galway and Leitrim to listen to people outline what they need for
the future. There is a fair onus on this plan for the simple reason that it will cover the next 20 years. It is a defining time. The reality is that we either do it right now or certain parts of rural Ireland will be forgotten. This is the responsibility that is on our shoulders.

We are not happy with the framework. What we need to do is make it right. That is the only way one can solve something. We can give out about it and we can jump and down, but all one can do is make it right.

I have this to say about whoever is responsible for writing it. Deputy Penrose talked about consultants earlier. Consultants need to be removed from every room in the country because, first, they are robbing the country and, second, they do not know the nuts and bolts of this. They do not realise what is happening. These people live in a fantasy world compared with some people who live in rural parts of Ireland.

If the Minister of State looks at a copy of the map Deputy Smyth has, he will see there is not one city in the Republic north of a line drawn from Dublin to Galway. Are we going to leave the likes of Sligo and Letterkenny without city status or build that area up? These places are not in my constituency but they are important. The first thing we are doing is putting in a foundation with this plan, but if we do not build houses right and have the foundation right, we will go nowhere. The Minister knows what we need; he was party to the talks on the formation of a government. The whole western arc was taken out of the TEN-T funding in 2011. He remembers that. It was put into the programme for Government, but the Minister, Deputy Ross, is more concerned about drink-driving than ensuring TEN-T funding for that area, which would help it economically.

We need to tie up with Northern Ireland. The A5 from Derry to Aughnacloy will be completed. A spur can be built out of that to the M1 if we lay down our plans for the future. This is being done in bits but it is like draining one field when the whole farm is wet. There is no point to it. It is like hopping. Bits are being built from Mullingar, but a road needs to be brought down along the west from Mullingar to Westport and from Carrick-on-Shannon to Sligo. The new road that is being opened, the M6 to Tuam, is great. It is opening access to the area. The Minister of State was right in saying earlier that one cannot catch some business person by the neck and tell him or her to go somewhere else. However, someone stuck behind a 35X tractor for an hour driving around Longford will definitely not go there. We also need to build roads strategically in this plan. We are in trouble in Galway, and I do not blame this all on the Departments. Some county councils are asleep and need a wake-up call about what is going on but others need resources. I noticed the Minister of State talked about maintaining regional and local roads and strategic road improvement, but the councils do not get the money. They are about 40% down. We cannot maintain them.

The Minister of State talked about the CAP. The CAP needs to shift the 20% of farmers getting 80% of the money in the next three years. We are seeing land abandonment at present. The Government needs to put the full infrastructure in. I know the Government cannot do this on its own; it will need regional plans afterwards along with local plans for towns.

We all know the problems Dublin has. I question one thing I saw in the plan. We are dreaming this dream, or perhaps it is Transport Infrastructure Ireland, that we will spend €3 billion in ten or 12 years’ time on building an underground way out to the airport. I went out that way the other day. I
telephoned Iarnród Éireann and was told that for €200 million, we could build a spur from Malahide. Half a loaf is better than no bread, but we are not doing this for Dublin. Galway is losing jobs, according to the statistics that have come out, because of traffic problems. Tree huggers have been blocking developments in this regard for years and years, and we need to do something about them as well. There are people objecting. The Apple data centre in Athenry is being held up, as was the outer ring road in Galway. How many more roads will be held up? Someone who could be from the bottom end of Waterford will object to something being built in Galway. This cannot go on. It is the Minister of State’s Department that can change some of the rules in this regard. I know it cannot do everything, and I am not saying that, but we must have a vision for the next 20 years of the kind of country we want. When the plan comes out in spring, do we want a road from Dublin to Mullingar? Do we want a proper road from Mullingar to Westport? Are we going to join up with, and talk to, the Northern officials? Will a road be built out to Aughnacloy? Are we going to lengthen the road in the Minister of State’s area heading towards Monaghan? Will a road be built from, say, Donegal to Sligo? Are we going to make a city out of Sligo? Are we going to make a city out of Athlone or are we going to keep tilting everyone back to Dublin? That is the problem at present. We need the Cork-to-Mallow road completed to serve the southern part of the country. We need to know shortly whether something like the Luas will be built in the likes of Galway, Cork or Limerick. We must look 20 years ahead. Will we have a rail corridor in the west of Ireland? If such a rail corridor is not in the plan, we better cut to the chase. There is a debate going on about greenways and rail, but we need to know where we are going for the next 20 years because people will make decisions based on this plan and the Minister of State and his officials have an opportunity to get this strategically right.

This plan is an aspiration for the simple reason that the last one was published in 2002 and I still see many parts of that plan in respect of which nothing was ever delivered on. No one will ever say that everything will be delivered on, but one thing we need to see is whether the Minister of State will include these projects in the plan. If we do not do this, if we do not build the foundation of what is to be put in the plan now, we are as well just to forget about it.

Another problem I have concerns rural housing, and I ask the Minister of State’s officials to Joint Comite on Rural and Comunity Development look at this. Some of these do-gooders do not understand that if one does not have a son or a daughter building, the local national school will be in trouble down the line because one needs a chain of children to keep a small school open in rural Ireland. The shop in the local area needs to be kept open. We are not looking for anything for nothing. People in rural Ireland are paying for everything but, ultimately, all they are looking for is a little fair play. This is not to have a go at the Minister of State or anything like that. What I am saying to him is that this is an opportunity to lay the foundations now. However, if the plan comes out the same as it was the last time, we need to make concrete decisions to the effect that from now on this is what we will do for the next 20 years. If these projects are not in the plan, we may as well give up talking about rural Ireland.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I thank the Minister of State for his presentation. It was very detailed. It does, however, concern me. I know he made the point that the decimation of rural Ireland has not occurred through the recession, but it has got worse, and I know this as a Teachta Dála and someone who has always lived in a rural community. During the recession of the 1980s we had post
offices and banks. We no longer have them, so we seem to be going backwards instead of forward. That is the reality. I am not here to be negative; I am just being constructive and saying it as it is.

The Minister of State mentioned the IDA and that he is quite pleased that it is on board. That worries me because the IDA is completely urban-focused. Deputies in other parties have expressed frustration in this regard, and I totally concur with Deputy Penrose. The IDA is turning its back on communities, and a much tougher approach is needed here. The IDA should be more answerable to Government. A task force needs to be set up in order to manage it and to set targets because its track record is dismal and speaks for itself. Consider the number of visits to Laois-Offaly. It needs to improve. We talk about the rejuvenation of our rural economies. That cannot happen unless there is buy-in and co-operation from all these people. The local authorities are doing their best through the local enterprise offices, and that is certainly working well in supporting new SMEs, but the IDA also has responsibility for foreign direct investment and we cannot be left behind any longer. I just want to make the point strongly that we need a tougher approach.

Regarding businesses, I have met business people in my constituency of Offaly and the zoning of land seems to be problematic. There are people who would be quite happy to go into a small town and set up a business but there are regulations regarding the zoning of land. That needs to be looked into and addressed because these people are expressing interest. We also need to get the planning side of it right.

The plan refers to presenting rural economies with opportunities through economic development. That has to happen but it will not happen unless our services are protected. When the Ulster Bank in Ferbane in west Offaly closed, many businesses were in turmoil worrying about the closure and its detrimental effect on them. We need to protect businesses by ensuring we do not jump the gun. We are not asking for any more than what we are entitled to but we need to have common sense and services have to be protected.

I attended a meeting with Deputy Penrose in Athlone a couple of months ago at which IBEC, which has set up some businesses in the midlands, expressed concern over the lack of road infrastructure connecting the midlands and the North. There are businesspeople who are interested in setting up businesses in the midlands so we need to address the poor state of the road infrastructure in the area. I have met members of Offaly County Council, who are doing their utmost to develop jobs and create opportunities in what is a rural county that has been left behind. 26 National Planing Framework:

I mentioned the lack of road infrastructure connecting the midlands and the North. There are businesspeople who are interested in setting up businesses in the midlands so we need to address the poor state of the road infrastructure in the area. I have met members of Offaly County Council, who are doing their utmost to develop jobs and create opportunities in what is a rural county that has been left behind. 26 National Planing Framework: Discussion

They have asked for the Tullamore-Kilbeggan link road to be prioritised because that will create investment, as it will for the neighbouring county of Westmeath and the midlands as a whole. We need a pragmatic approach but we see report after report and I get nervous when I hear that the urban-focused IDA is getting involved. We need to see fewer reports and plans and more action. The Minister, as a rural Deputy, will know that people are fed up, frustrated and will not take any more. We will not take being second-class citizens any more. I am here as an advocate for my own constituency and for the wider midlands area, which has been left behind. We need action and we need it fast.
 Senator Grace O'Sullivan: I have made my own submission to the process but I want to raise a few points. The Minister talked about making the business case for investment. We are talking about societies here, more so than business. I would be nervous if the Minister was only focusing on the business case.

I wonder why we are having this discussion without the capital plan on the table beside us. If I am planning something, I have to know what is in my budget, but we are in the dark in this process without that critical piece of information.

Does the Minister have criteria for determining regional investment? I get the sense from other Deputies and Senators of a lack of parity, and my own region, the south east, feels it is losing out. Waterford, in particular, is an unemployment blackspot and we need support with regard to the technological university, which would develop the skills and talent in the region in order that we can compete. We have not had that support so we need action as soon as possible.

We have talked a lot about roads today but not enough about rail. The construction of a good road from Europort Rosslare to Waterford, Limerick, Galway and the north west and back to Dublin is now almost complete and it needs to be finished as a matter of urgency, but we also need investment in rail because it will create an option for commuters and will alleviate the congestion in Dublin, Galway and Cork.

We have a huge opportunity in respect of renewable energy systems for rural Ireland, the western corridor, the eastern corridor and, for offshore wind, the Irish Sea, and I would like this to be built into the national planning framework. What we do now will lay the foundations, and if we get it right, it will be to the benefit of our society in coming years. If we think of it simply as a business opportunity, we will miss a vital component, namely, the people of our country.

Chairman: I agree with a lot of what has been said. There is an undoubted need for the national planning framework. Previous plans have failed miserably but if this plan is totally successful, we will, unfortunately, have a slightly inflated version of what we have already, in which two thirds of the population live in the greater Dublin area. As a result, the plan is flawed. Regions are not defined properly, although cities are readily identifiable. We need to look at the country as an island and as a whole. We need to look at Belfast and the north west, though there is welcome mention of Derry collaborating with Letterkenny. Sligo and the surrounding counties also need to be included in the region, however, and one could argue there should be a Limerick-Galway region and a Cork-Waterford region as well as a Dublin region. The regions were decided in 2014, when Clare was lumped in with Wexford even though it is right beside Galway and the two counties have an economic reliance on each other, with people travelling from one to the other to work every morning. This needs to change and we need to identify proper functioning regions that can work together.

We also need to define a region. A region is something with an urban core and with transport links such as ports, rail and airports and a critical mass of people within an hour’s journey, which will provide a counterbalance to Dublin. Dublin is creaking at the seams. There is congestion and one cannot buy a house here, but this plan wants to push more people into Dublin. We need to take advantage of this opportunity to rebalance the State.
Deputy Canney hit the nail on the head when he said that although the Atlantic corridor task force, which is backed by the State, was put together in March and on which the Minister sits, does invaluable work, that work is not being taken on board. As a country, we need to re-balance what we are doing to seriously address the imbalance between Dublin and the rest of the country. There is a massive gulf. If we are to address the problems of rural Ireland, we need to create a counterbalance to Dublin. We must encourage people to stay in rural Ireland. We must ensure they can attend primary school locally and get a third level education close to home. When they are educated, we must ensure they can find jobs in their immediate area instead of having to travel to Dublin, Berlin, Amsterdam or Australia to find work. We need to have regional areas that can compete with Dublin. Serious work needs to be done on the plan to deliver in that regard.

I agree with Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice that we have an opportunity. We have a vision and an opportunity to get it right. I ask the Minister of State to listen to and take on board what members have said.

**Deputy Damien English:** I will again try to respond to the points raised. As there is a lot of commonality in the issues raised, I will not go back over absolutely everything.

The Chairman is absolutely right when he says we need to have regions that can compete with Dublin. That is what we are trying to do in striking a balance and enabling the regions to compete. That said, Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick have to compete with other places in Europe and the rest of the world. The challenge is to get the balance right. We certainly need to increased competition within Ireland and make sure investment is spread throughout the country. However, we must recognise that we need cities in Ireland to be international players. That is why we must also grow the cities; otherwise they will decline and not thrive and opportunities will be missed. The Chairman is absolutely right, therefore, that it is all about getting the balance right. Reference was made to the fact that development should not be a question of either/or, but members must understand rural Ireland also needs strong cities. There is no doubt that is the case. Ireland as a whole needs them.

Deputy Grace O’Sullivan commented on my use of the phrase “business case”. I think the Deputy knows that I am not obsessed with business. I am a community person and the plan is about developing communities, towns and villages and providing various services. Therefore, when I use the term “business case”, I am referring to the book of evidence to win investment. A youth centre needs a business case. If one wants to open a new hospital, one must make a case for such investment. That is what I mean when I use the term “business case”. I do not mean that it is all about economics and winning jobs. It is not just about that, but one must make a case. When I describe the national planning framework as the business case for investment, what I mean is that it sets out a vision for the country. Decisions will be made on all of the infrastructure that has been mentioned, but one has the evidence. National, regional and local plans are the evidence for investment. Following on from this, there will be investment in energy projects, technology, broadband infrastructure and so forth in order to make the plans happen. No one spends taxpayer’s money without making the case for such expenditure. That is what I meant. I want to make it clear that I am not obsessed with economics and business. The aim of the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, Deputy Eoghan Murphy: National Planning Framework: Discussion
The Deputy also referred to energy projects and the opportunities available in rural Ireland. I totally agree with her. Several years ago I visited the small town of Güssing on the Austrian-Hungarian border. It has a population of less than 2,000. It had turned itself around completely from a job creation point of view. It had an unemployment rate of almost 80%. Now it has an employment rate of over 130% as a result of investment in green energy projects. It is producing energy in small rather than huge plants, for which it is often very difficult to gain community acceptance. There are lots of opportunities for rural towns and villages to contribute in many ways. The Deputy is absolutely right in that regard.

It is true that a lot of the projects I mentioned are road projects, but we also envisage further investment in the rail network. Members referred to many rail projects. While we do want to see investment in both light rail and high speed rail services, we must have the critical mass of people to justify it. Reference was made to Galway and Cork, but if 75% of those building houses in Galway are not living in the city, there will never be the critical mass to justify investment in a light rail system in Galway. At the same time, if we do not invest in light rail systems and the provision of bus corridors and roads, as a city Galway will suffer. It needs that balance of investment. That is what this is about. The same applies to Cork and Dublin in the context of metro north and other projects - if we do not have sufficient people, we cannot justify the investment. I know all about this because for most of my life I have been arguing for the provision of a rail connection to Navan. It is about having enough people to justify the investment. One could argue about decisions made by previous Governments, but one must recognise that we need sufficient people to pay for such investment to make it work. That is why we refer to having 50% of growth in cities because we must build them up, but to provide any service, there must be a critical mass of people. It is easier to service villages if there are people living in them. That is what we are trying to do.

Deputy Niamh Smyth listed a range of projects, most of which I would probably support because they affect my own county too. However, I am not here to tick a box for various projects. Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice raised similar issues. The plan is about the why and the where. Why would one want to have a road running through County Monaghan? Why would one upgrade the existing road to motorway standard? What is the reason for it or the rationale behind it?

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** The Government mentions specific projects.

**Deputy Damien English:** Yes, in some case we do, rightly so. However, I cannot detail every project. The idea is that the plan will set out what we want to achieve in the regions and different areas and what we need to do to make it happen. One will then list the various projects. That is where the national investment plan comes in, as well as other strategies, including what the local authorities need to do to make it happen. That is what we are trying to do. I agree with many of the points made by the Deputy.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Most politicians and people believe that if we are to do this now, we need to lay it out in black and white-----

**Deputy Damien English:** I agree. I have not finished-----
**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** The road projects on which we are to embark need to be included in the plan in black and white. The areas that are to be cities need to be included in Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development29 black and white. We cannot just have flowery wording while saying nothing.

**Deputy Damien English:** One needs to have what the Deputy calls the flowery wording, as well as the detail. I am happy to agree with him in that regard. We need to strengthen the wording on the regions, particularly the northern regions, including the north west. We are happy to do so. We are agreed that they include counties Monaghan and Cavan. We will strengthen the wording on the regions generally to reflect the concerns expressed. As politicians, we must also accept that if we do that, we have to make it happen.

Reference was made to Sligo town being designated as a city. If one looks at what has happened in County Sligo, one will see that many of its towns and villages have grown more than Sligo town. My town of Navan is probably bigger than Sligo town now. That has happened on the back of decisions made locally by local councillors. If we want these things to happen, we must make them happen. We must buy into national, regional and local plans.

Deputy Carol Nolan mentioned County Laois. Approximately 10,000 people leave Portlaoise every day of the week. How do we win investment for it? I have seen the plans for it as a town. It is a major growth centre and there are great plans to develop the town which will win investment. The local authority has made the decision to focus on this and put the effort into it. It has put a plan together that will win investment from all Departments that will bring jobs. That is what we are trying to do. We are trying to set out the thought process to determine what we are trying to achieve in the different regions and growth centres and then make decisions that will make it happen.

Deputy Niamh Smyth made reference to green ways and blue ways and various roads, but it is all about connectivity. We must ask to what do we want to connect and what the future is for different towns and villages. There is great potential. The Deputy mentioned counties Cavan and Monaghan and several other places. They are all key growth centres that we want to see developed.

The Deputy also talked about the education system. We agreed earlier that the document probably needs to reflect more on the role of the education system. However, I disagree with the Deputy on one issue. There is an obsession with the need to have a primary or a master’s degree. It is an obsession in peoples’ heads, but it is not the reality. The career paths available and earning potential through apprenticeships and further education and training are just as important. Sir Alex Ferguson was an apprentice.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I am not disagreeing with the Minister of State in that regard.

**Deputy Damien English:** I want to make a point because it is very important, particularly in the context of the regions. One could look at Combilift in the Deputy’s region. That company’s expansion and the associated growth in jobs are down to further education and training. The company has worked with the Department to develop new educational methods locally. There are so many
opportunities in the regions to work with the ETBs, institutes of technology and universities. It is important that we strike that balance in education—

Deputy Niamh Smyth: We will not have highly skilled jobs in the area—

Deputy Damien English: May I finish my point, please? It is wrong to say one will go nowhere in this country without a degree. That is wrong and not fair. I spent a lot of time working on the skills strategy, focusing on further education and training. Cavan-Monaghan is one of the best areas when it comes to opportunities in that regard. Education is a journey, but 30 National Planing Framework: Discussion

there is so much potential in the regions, particularly the north west. There is so much on offer from the various players in education in counties Galway, Mayo and Sligo, as well as Cavan-Monaghan. That is how we will win investment and jobs. We will reflect that more clearly in the strategy as we go along.

There were a few other issues mentioned. I am not here to comment on each road project the Deputies mentioned but I understand why everyone is raising them. We know there has to be a joined-up approach here and that is what will happen with the investment plan. It is important that they are linked together. I am not going to issue pronouncements on timelines for the various projects. That is not in my gift. The capital plan is being developed and will roll out pretty much in line with this. There will be ongoing reviews to make sure we are making the right decisions on capital investment and that is it aligned with the different parts of the national planning framework. There will mid-term reviews and five-year plans. It is important that the ten-year capital plan reflects the agreed, finalised version of the national planning framework, Ireland 2040 Our Plan. We are here to make sure we strengthen it from a rural point of view. We are agreeing with the Deputy on that and are prepared to do that as well.

Deputy Fitzmaurice touched on some of the same areas and highlighted the importance of actually naming the projects and so on. It is also important that we get the thought process right. What do we want to achieve? What projects will help to achieve it? Where do we have to invest and how do we target investment? People keep mentioning IDA Ireland. Deputy Carol Nolan said she is concerned that it is at the table. I have worked with IDA Ireland and its number one target is to win jobs for the country.

Deputy Carol Nolan: It is not doing it. I have met it twice.

Deputy Damien English: I am only answering the questions I was asked. Its number one priority is to win jobs for Ireland. Governments have intervened and asked it to create a regional balance, with 50% of the jobs created outside the major cities. We do not always achieve that every year but there is some good progress being made. It also has to win jobs for the country as a whole and it is quite successful at that. Many Governments composed of different parties have been involved in that process. IDA Ireland has had some of its best years in the last couple of years. We have to work with it to make sure there is a spread of those jobs. It goes back to the question of why. Deputy Fitzmaurice said it. We cannot take someone by the lug and make them locate a business in a certain area. We have to encourage people and work with the local authorities. I have seen how different local authorities have strengthened their relationships with IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland.
and so on, and have developed economic strategies and won investment as a result. It is important to encourage local authorities, which are now leading economic development in their areas, to work with the agencies and produce plans. I have seen the plan for Portlaoise and have no doubt it will win investment and help IDA Ireland to bring jobs there. Without that plan, we will not get those jobs there. That is why we have the national planning framework.

Chairman: Will the Minister of State take another question from Deputy Nolan?

Deputy Damien English: I will, but I am conscious that everybody wants to come in.

Deputy Carol Nolan: I just want to address the point about IDA Ireland. The fact of the matter is that the local authorities are doing all they can. When I was a councillor, IDA Ireland was called in for a meeting-----Joint Comite on Rural and Comunity Development31

Deputy Damien English: I am not here to defend IDA Ireland.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The Minister of State seems to be doing so, all the same. He is talking about balanced regional development. The fact of the matter is that it is not happening. The Minister of State has a background in jobs and enterprise. Would he agree with the proposal that a task force be set up?

Deputy Damien English: There are umpteen task forces. We have regional action plans with which I was involved. I was involved in the Action Plan for Jobs. It is about having a plan, making decisions and implementing hundreds of actions every year to make it happen. That is why I believe in the national planning framework. We will not get investment and jobs in these different regions if we do not have a plan that is backed up by infrastructure which makes it possible to locate jobs in more areas. Each county, town and village has to decide what it wants. Each town and village has to have some sort of long-term aim, purpose and vision. It needs to feed into something as well. I am not here to defend IDA Ireland. I am just here to point out that it has to win jobs for the country first and then get them dispersed.

Deputy Carol Nolan: It is not balanced.

Deputy Damien English: I know from working with the people in IDA Ireland that they are not necessarily obsessed with which county gets those jobs. Many counties have their own strategies that help secure them. IDA Ireland will bring jobs to different places but it has to get them into the country first. I am critical of IDA Ireland in my own county as well at times. The Deputy should not get me wrong.

Deputy Carol Nolan: The Minister of State should set up a task force.

Chairman: We have given that issue a fair run now. Deputy Smyth has a small point.

Deputy Damien English: I want to make sure I have answered all the existing questions first. I must check my notes. I think I have covered most things. It is all about the local authorities having local area and county development plans. They are essential. People say there is difficulty with zoning of land for enterprises. They are decisions made by local councillors. My Department is very proactive in responding to that. I will cite-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: They are given the parameters of how much they can zone.
Deputy Damien English: I have recently seen a proposal in Arklow for a key bit of land to be set aside to win jobs and investment. That is something that will work, that we encourage and that can happen in many towns and villages in a planned way. We are not going to win IDA Ireland investment in every town and village. We have to make some decisions and choices. We are trying to co-ordinate it through the national plan. I want to stress that the regional plans that come out of this over the next 12 months are the key.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I have one quick question. When this plan comes out in February, are we going to know whether there will be road infrastructure put in at A, B, C, D and E? Will decisions be made about where exactly rail is going to be provided over the next 20 years? Those issues will be decided by national policy, not county councils. Will they be on the plan? If not, we do not know where we are going.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Fitzmaurice. Deputy Smyth wants to come in briefly, then Deputy Ó Cuív. Deputies Michael Collins and Danny Healy-Rae have not made contributions 32 National Planning Framework: Discussion yet. We are two hours into this.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: We will be another few hours. The Minister of State said he is not going to name projects. Maybe he did not mean that.

Deputy Damien English: I am not here to announce them today. That is not my job.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Certain projects are mentioned, however, and that is where my concern is. The Ulster Canal greenway is specifically mentioned. Far more important is the Ulster Canal being reopened. That is not just me being parochial. It is about developing the whole economic area.

Deputy Damien English: That is why we are here today; it is to hear that.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The Minister of State was talking about skill sets, degrees and all the rest. IDA Ireland will not look at towns like Cavan or Monaghan because we do not have a third level college. A skilled workforce must be coming through with primary and master’s degrees for IDA Ireland to consider bringing big companies to an area, whether we like it or not. There must be a highly skilled workforce on the ground to take up the jobs. Of course we have apprenticeships and Combilift is a wonderful addition to the area. People going into those apprenticeships are on the minimum wage. Therefore, there are young people from the constituency with degrees from other parts of the country, who will not consider going back to their homeplace because the highly skilled jobs are not there for them.

The east-west link corridor is the most obvious piece of infrastructure that we need to service the whole north-western region. That is not being parochial. It needs to be specifically named. We are highlighting projects that are obviously apt.

Deputy Damien English: I am not saying anyone is being parochial. I am not here to announce projects. I cannot do that as it is not my job. That is all I am saying. I was actually agreeing with Deputy Smyth on some of the projects.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: On this issue of infrastructure, here and there throughout the plan, specific projects are mentioned in a hodgepodge fashion. Specific roads are mentioned, the M20 and so on, and reference is made to general improvements. I would have thought a national approach would take cognisance of the fact that over half of the national primary routes are now either dual carriageway or motorway. It would have been reasonable to include in the plan a statement that the objective between now and 2040 - a period of some 23 years - would be that every national primary route would be dual carriageway or motorway. Westport to Castlebar is proposed as a narrow dual carriageway, not as a motorway. That is satisfactory. However, if we want connectivity across this island for all our people, the first thing we need is a good spinal link. In the last 20 years, we have done about half of them. We had virtually no motorway or dual carriageway 20 years ago. The remaining half is the cheaper half. Having completed that work, we will have connected places like Cavan, Monaghan, Letterkenny, Donegal town, Ballina and all the areas around them. We will have connected Killarney and Tralee to the national road network in a sensible way. It is very achievable. We will then find that there is a certain section of the country that is very far removed from national primary routes, a matter Fianna Fáil had included in Transport 21. It states the Government will focus on upgrading coastal national secondary routes, including Skibbereen, the Ring of Kerry, Dingle, west Clare, west Galway and west Mayo - the N59 - as well as the N56 in County Donegal. When that is done, nowhere in the country will be strategically far from anywhere else.

There is another thing that I do not understand about the plan. It is bitterly written and without a big vision. There are many railway lines throughout the country, some of which are utilised, some of which are half-utilised and some of which are totally unutilised. There does not seem to be a comprehensive plan to look at the existing rail infrastructure, including from Claremorris to Galway, and ask, since the Minister of State is so focused on cities, if there is a need for rapid commuter services into the cities. This is not mentioned anywhere, even though, for example, there are more railway lines around Limerick than any other city. They include the lines to and from Nenagh, the cement company and Foynes. At very little cost, one could put in place a fantastic commuter system that would enable people to live wherever they wanted and get to the centre very quickly, but this is not included in the plan. Such a service is not even mentioned for Cork and certainly not for Galway. This transport plan does not state this is our little island, that we want everywhere to be connected to everywhere else and that we will adopt a strategic approach to do it over 23 years. All of these things are achievable in that timeframe, but the plan is not in place to do so. There is a litany of bits and pieces, but there is no comprehensive plan to connect all of the country.

We often talk about cities. They are interesting places for those who have to live in them. The high-end people being talked about who live in the cities are the ones who visit the wildest parts of the country at the weekend, including west Clare, Achill and so on, for recreation, including to take part in extreme sports. They do not live in Dublin for the entire week. Many of them want to get out of it, as we saw when we had the-----

Deputy Damien English: And vice versa.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is not doubted.

On the need for critical mass, if there were another 100,000 people in County Galway, every regional service, including the train and bus services from Galway to Dublin, would have many more
passengers. A myth is perpetuated by planners that all of the people who get on intercity buses in Galway live in Galway city. If one were to carry out a survey, one would find that 50% or more do not live there. They mostly live in country areas, including Connemara, north and south Galway or elsewhere. They travel into the city to get on a bus, for example, to Dublin. The idea that the health of the transport system or a shop is dependent on the people living in a town is wrong. If the local towns in the area in which I live were dependent on the people who live in them, they would have no business. Our vision is too short. I cannot believe how limited, hodge-podge and unco-ordinated our vision is for a 23-year national transport strategy. I suggest the Minister of State start again, include "a transport vision for Ireland" and come back to us with a big vision. That does not mean having a bit of road here or there as announced by the Taoiseach.

Deputy Damien English: I said at the start and have said repeatedly that the document sets out what we want to achieve, where we want to achieve it and the ambition behind it. The ten-year capital investment plan and the further capital investment plans that will come after it will dictate the infrastructure that will be funded. We are saying what we think is needed and identifying the areas we want to develop. Decisions will have to be made on how that will happen. I am not here to list a range of proposals. If we were to do so in the draft, every Deputy would his or her own projects. We have set out what we want to achieve in the regions. There will be a natural progression to address what has to happen. We have mentioned some projects to which we are committed. They are examples. I cannot keep repeating that all of the decisions will be made in the ten-year capital investment plan which will be aligned with the document. We would all love to have them listed. I would too because I agree with many of them, but I 34 National Planing Framewor k: Discussion cannot do so today. That is not what the plan is about.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: There are five or six major projects on which decisions need to be made.

Deputy Damien English: The plan is to publish them together early in January. There is a book of evidence outlining the reasons many of the infrastructural projects mentioned by the Deputy have to happen. Under different laws there are many step-by-step procedures one has to go through. All of the projects cannot be named because that would not be the right way to do it. They will be linked. I want people to be confident that that will happen, unlike what happened in the past.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: On page 53, the Minister of State-----

Deputy Damien English: I know that there are a few more-----

Chairman: Three members have to come in. Deputies Seán Canney, Michael Collins and Danny Healy-Rae have yet to speak.

Deputy Damien English: That is fine.

Chairman: We will keep it brief. We are over time.

Deputy Damien English: We will consider all of the issues raised and submissions made and come back with a final document. I am not here to have the answer to every question for the committee. I wish I could, but we have not finished the document. This is an opportunity for members to raise issues. I am not here to talk all day and cannot do so.
Deputy Seán Canney: Having listened to those who have spoken, I have two points. Many people have spoken about the railways. That point needs to be stitched in. The other big message to which we need to come back relates to the Atlantic economic corridor.

Deputy Damien English: When he was out of the room, I answered the Deputy’s question.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the Minister of State.

Deputy Michael Collins: We are talking about the national planning framework, but we are also addressing the development of communities in rural Ireland. We have been given a brief synopsis of what we should be discussing. If there is to be any hope of turning things around in rural Ireland, the creation of employment is a huge issue. As Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív said, there has been little or no funding for secondary roads. The Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, might say to me that he has provided a sum of €30,000, but I am talking about serious funding. In my constituency very poor funding has been received for the N71 which extends from Shannon to the peninsulas, including Bere Island and Mizen Head. How can we open up west Cork? One must provide broadband - the service is extremely poor, as is mobile phone coverage in many places - and the roads must also be improved. If we could tackle issues throughout the country such as the improvement of the N71, we would start to open up rural communities to employment creation.

We talk about planning in rural areas and the granting of planning permission. That is another issue that needs to be addressed. Planning permission is being refused to many young people who perhaps are working in a city but who want to live or have great ideas to create employment in a local community. If one looks at the guidelines, one will see that they are too strict. They are against the giving of planning permission to local people, in particular, and even to someone who is willing to set up a business. There are poor planning laws that need to be looked at.

I see rural-proofing as one of the topics to be considered. The process is certainly is not working and the Government needs to give it serious consideration. The farcical Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill was not rural-proofed. The Minister said he had met various groups and that he would meet all of them again. All he is doing is saying what he will do. He needs to look for rural transport solutions to enable people to come and go from their communities freely.

There are positives. We do not always need to dwell on the negatives. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Denis Naughten, recently started a post office pilot scheme in Mullingar, Ennis and Bantry. Through an online service people will be able to purchase goods locally on a Tuesday evening and receive them in the post the next morning. That is a move in the right direction and we are starting to compete with the online world. I hope the people of Bantry and its surroundings, as well as Ennis and Mullingar, will take it up when it starts in January 2018. Hopefully, businesses will tie in with it and use the opportunities it will present.

Payment of motor tax needs to move to the post office network. There is a big opportunity with this. Motor tax collection is being moved to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. It might provide an opportunity for people to be able to tax their cars at their post office. We want to save our post office network. Community banking using the network could also assist in this regard.
On islands, there are eight islands in my constituency. Peninsulas should be included in this. I live on a peninsula myself and I know how it is difficult as they can be poorly populated with poor employment and difficult transport access. This needs to be studied.

Once, with a twinning project with Goleen Community Council, I travelled to Vihtijärvi in Finland. I noticed the Finns had a very good medical care system. I accept they pay high taxes but they get something for that. In every rural community, the children are collected from the door, taken to school, fed and brought home to the door. Their medical care is also fully covered. That is the road we need to travel. In Ireland taxes are low but families are burned out by all the payments they must make instead. The Finns have a good system, which is well worth examining.

While we talk about developing rural communities, the previous Government destroyed many rural communities and community voluntary organisations. I was a member of the voluntary forum but the previous Government disbanded it, along with town councils. We need to further develop community councils because they are the life and soul of many communities, helping to get community centres up and running and providing services such as Meals on Wheels. We need to look at the Leader programme to undo the mess made of it. Funding has not been given to communities and we are two years short of the programme ending.

I come from a community perspective. I would not have been elected to the Dáil only for the people of the community who are 100% behind me because I speak only for communities. We need to look at the struggles in communities. Some communities feel no one is listening. This week thousands of people came out in the Bantry area, pleading with the Government not to allow the proposal to harvest mechanically hundreds of acres of kelp in Bantry Bay. That is against community spirit and will be an environmental disaster. People say "No" but no one is listening.

I am fighting with CIÉ on the school transport rule that a child must go to the nearest school to the bus service. That is fine if the bus takes the natural route. However, I have some situations in west Cork where the bus takes a boreen to prove a route is 0.1 km shorter in order to take the child to one school than another. That is a disgrace. The bus should take the natural route.

There is much done against people in communities trying to go about their daily lives. I hope we can work together on this national planning framework to change that.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I object strongly to this being described as the national plan from now to 2040. It is not good enough to cover the next three or four years, not to mind the next 20 years. I am not signing my name to this or approving it as our plan because then Kerry local authority will tell us this is the plan as set out by the Government and these are the Members who backed it. I object to this being called a plan for the next 23 years.

IBEC constantly tells us that, compared with Europe, this country has the least number of infrastructure projects in train or even prepared for the go-ahead. We hear more about rolling out broadband. If it were a carpet they were rolling out, the whole of the island and the British Isles would be covered by now. Why is it not being done in a methodical fashion? Where it is rolled out, there are pockets of bad coverage within. People affected in these pockets are going mad because they think it has passed them by and they will never get broadband. I have raised this issue before with the Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten.
We do not have many rural transport services. Deputy Heydon spoke about 38 more rural link services across the country. The 38 services would not cater for Kerry alone. If Deputy Heydon thinks this will camouflage the Minister, Deputy Ross’s, drink-driving Bill and offset the anger being meted out to those parties supporting it, it will not.

It is hard enough as it is for people who have ties with a rural area to get planning permission for a single-build house. Now we are hearing that they will have to have a financial link to where they want to build. That is unfair, particularly for people who might have to travel two hours to work from their locality. This is about housing and putting a roof over one’s head. The people in question have a site, which is a large part of the cost of a house.

The Government is inclined to blame the local authorities for not zoning enough land. Over the past 12 months, we have asked the Department to allow Kerry County Council to zone extra lands in Killarney but it will not. It is the Department which is setting out the parameters for land zoning. The developer Michael O’Flynn, who knows what he is talking about, said recently that if not enough land is zoned, it will drag up the cost of houses. The Department needs to get into its head that this needs to be done. There is nothing wrong with more land being zoned, as it would create competition. If only one developer has his lands on one side of a town zoned, then he has a monopoly and can charge whatever he likes for houses on it. The Department has to recognise that. Blaming the local authorities is not correct.

Deputy Damien English: I was talking about industrial land and jobs.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: We have been waiting 36 years for the Macroom bypass. Some of it will be built next year but it will not be connected to Ballincollig when many people thought it would be.

While we are glad to have people coming to Killarney and County Kerry, the old Killarney bypass is badly congested. In 2004, we were shown grand plans in the Malton Hotel in Killarney for an improved bypass to be up and running by 2009. We are going into 2018 now and still nothing has happened. There have been fatalities on the old bypass - two people have already been killed this year - due to congestion and bad junctions.

On the review of the local community and development committees, will the Minister of State go back to what we had before? The previous system worked for 25 years. No Leader programme has been in place since 2013. The last one was initiated by the then Minister, Deputy Ó Cuív. We are going into 2018 but there is still is no programme. The previous Government messed it up. The man who went to Europe, Phil Hogan, blew it all asunder.

Chairman: Will the Deputy conclude?

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It has to be recognised that traffic volumes have increased everywhere. I do not think there is any plan to deal with this. Let us take my village of Kilgarvan, for example. The volume of traffic has increased. The volume going down through that quiet village is extraordinary. There are traffic jams now, something that never happened before in small towns and villages. That has to be recognised.

It is not about blaming the local authority. We did not get a specific improvement plan to take a turn in the road since 2009 for any road in Kerry. I am not talking about national primary or secondary
roads. This has been seriously neglected - I was told by my father in 2009 that every penny available for national secondary roads would be delivered up here in Dublin for Luas, DART and every other thing. The Government is trying to get people to Dublin but they cannot come half the time because there are traffic jams. There is no recognition of providing jobs. The Government cannot provide them because we do not have the infrastructure and because the companies will not go there. Let us consider Kerry Group, the jewel in our crown. The roads were not sufficient to get into Kerry. That is where we are. It hurts me every time I pass that massive place where 900 people are employed. It should have been in the great hub in Farranfore but we have no bypass on the road to get there.

I do not accept that this is a plan for the next 23 years. There is no way in the world that it can be. I am asking other Ministers not to do it. It might barely cover two or three years. There is nothing in it that says it is a cast-iron plan for the next 23 years.

**Chairman:** Minister of State, will you touch on issues that have not been covered already in the two contributions? Before I conclude-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I have two short specific questions. Can I ask them?

**Chairman:** I will bring you in after I make a quick point.

**Deputy Damien English:** Chairman, I have other commitments that I have to get to. I am sorry - I have been here since 11 a.m.

**Chairman:** We will bring the meeting to a conclusion. One of the key economic drivers in the mid-west region is Shannon Airport. Limerick is referred to as one city in the plan, but there is no recognition of the role of Shannon as a driver and employment provider. Some 10,000 people work in Shannon between the industrial zone and the airport. There are large numbers of spin-off jobs. People from Limerick, Clare and across the mid-west region work there. It drives employment. There should be recognition within the plan of that and further supports 38 National Planing Framework: Discussion for Shannon. National aviation policy should tie into the national planning framework as well.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I wish to ask two specific questions. Page 68 covers open countryside and refers to housing. Without going through the entire text, will the Minister of State explain two things to me? National policy objective 18b refers to rural areas under urban influence and facilitating the provision of single housing in the countryside "based on the core consideration of demonstrable economic need to live in a rural area and relevant siting criteria for rural housing in statutory guidelines and plans". Will the Minister of State tell me what "demonstrable economic need" is? It looks to be a major shift from what was in place. Up to now, nominally, it was a matter of family attachment.

**Deputy Damien English:** I will address that. I said I would address that earlier on.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** That brings me to national policy objective 19. This refers to projected need for single housing in the countryside through the local housing need demand assessment tool and county development plan core strategy processes. These phrases sound ominous to me. It seems to me this is simply another way to try to cut down on the rural house. The Minister of State
is saying it is not that way. Perhaps he could expand on that remark in the next draft or come back to the committee on the matter.

I am not saying this facetiously, but when I read this page I see references to EU treaties and functional requirements. Areas are defined by commuter catchment of at least 15% of the relevant city area workforce. It is not immediately apparent exactly to where and to whom the Department is referring. It is coded and we need to crack the code. We will crack the code before this process is over – I guarantee the Minister of State that much. It would be helpful if he started cracking the code for us today.

Chairman: Thank you, Deputy. The Minister of State might bring the meeting to a conclusion.

Deputy Damien English: I would be delighted to do so.

Chairman: Thank you very much for your time and engagement.

Deputy Damien English: The reason I am here today is not to have every answer for members but to hear their all their thoughts and to feed these through the strategy. I will touch on some of them and I have dealt with some of them repeatedly. People have been in and out but I accept that people are busy and so on. If a question from a member has not been answered, he or she can check the record to see the answer.

I will address the last two specific questions. At the start of today’s meeting and at regional assembly meetings I emphasised that we are going to change the wording around one-off housing because it affects economic need only. There is a case for putting in the social ties. We will strengthen that wording and Deputy Ó Cuív and members will see new wording to deal with the concerns raised.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What will it be?

Deputy Damien English: Can I answer the question, Chairman? I am saying the wording will be strengthened. Committee members will see the wording but it will clearly include social ties because of the issue around families and the connection to families and so on. People want to have that included and we have committed to that. I have said that repeatedly today and I will say it again in case it has not been heard.

The issue around the-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Through the Chair, I did not ask-----

Chairman: The Minister of State has answered the two points already.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I did not ask him about the next iteration. I asked him what is in the present iteration. It is a fair question.

Deputy Damien English: I am trying to explain it to Deputy Ó Cuív. We are changing the wording. It is a draft.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am not asking about the changes. What does it mean?

Chairman: Will you try to answer that, Minister of State?
Deputy Damien English: Planning was always provided for. We have referred to economic and functional need. Deputy Michael Collins referred to having a business in a rural area. Planning always allows for that. If a business needs to be on the land or has to be there, planning deals with that. There may be an economic and functional need to be in a certain place. One example is farming or using the land - whatever a person is doing. It applies once a person has proved that he is making an income off the land. That was always there because Deputy Ó Cuív put it there.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I beg your pardon, Chairman.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: A person cannot live off the land alone. Many have part-time jobs somewhere else. A person cannot live on the land alone.

Deputy Damien English: I am not finished, Chairman.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: He is coming out with it now.

Deputy Damien English: I am trying to explain.

Chairman: Let us have some order now. The Minister of State is clarifying the position.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: He wants to punish the small farmer. Is that what he wants?

Chairman: We will have one speaker now. Hold on a second, Deputy.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I actually wrote initial restrictive housing guidelines in the Galway plan in 1997. I personally wrote them and we put them in. Subsequently, I was involved in two spatial strategies in government. We wrote guidelines. They did not set out what the Minister of State has said just now. I want the Minister of State to explain to me what “demonstrable economic need” means. What does it mean? I am not asking how the Minister of State is going to change it.

Chairman: We will park the question there and the Minister of State will answer it.

Deputy Damien English: I am saying that what we have committed to doing is to change the wording and I will reflect the social need as well. That will address the concerns of Deputy Healy-Rae and many others. That is what will be in it.

I explained to Deputy Michael Collins the issue relating to people supporting local employment in an area. Planning allows for that. It applies to this plan and other plans. Let us suppose a person is not from an area but wants to build in the area. If he shows that the proposal is related to a need to be on that land for business, then it is allowed. In most cases, that is what happens. As I said at the start - Deputy Healy-Rae was not here at the time – for the past three or four years, and probably for longer, more than 50% of the houses in the country have been one-off rural houses.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: What is wrong with that?

Deputy Damien English: Chairman, can I finish? There is a notion being given here that no one gets a one-off house. I accept that not everyone who wants one gets one. The reality is that we have built 6,000 or 7,000 rural houses every year in recent years. We have not stopped rural one-off houses and we have no intention of doing so.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It looks like that is what the Government is doing.
Deputy Damien English: That is why I have said to the committee repeatedly that we will strengthen the wording.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Minister of State should try to carry on giving an answer.

Deputy Damien English: Chairman, there has to be some order because of what I am trying to do here. We have been here all day. I am trying to answer questions fairly and honestly.

Another question was asked in respect of core strategy. We are saying that core strategies have to reflect that there will be one-off housing, as well as housing in towns and villages. We want to have it. We have asked local authorities. No extra forms are required if a person is applying for a house. In terms of the core strategies, we are asking local authorities and councillors to estimate what houses will be built in urban and rural areas of their counties in the years ahead. That is all that is being asked for in this framework. No extra forms will required.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: In the case of a rural demand exceeding the core strategy demand-----

Deputy Damien English: The reason we have this is to help us plan for the services that will be required. If members are going to argue for the provision of increased rural transport services or other services for particular areas, we must have an idea of for whom they will be needed. They will be required for the people in an area and to meet the demand on foot of additional housing that will be required in the future. That constitutes planning for the future and building up the services that will be required.

Deputy Michael Collins and Danny Healy-Rae raised the issue of broadband connectivity and other services in rural areas. The funding for every service throughout this country has suffered cuts during the past seven or eight years. No one has ever denied that. The country did not have the required funding. The spend by Government was cut by more than €20 billion per year, which had a knock-on effect on every service in all our towns and villages. We are now trying to build that back up. This plan looks ahead 20 to 25 years and its focus is on where we need to invest the resources and, when we get increases towards the back end of the years, where such taxpayers’ money should be spent. I advise Deputy Michael Collins that this plan will support rural living. I recognise, as he said, that this means post offices and the services that are needed in villages. The Deputy was correct in what he said. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Deputy Naughten, announced changes to provide opportunities for people and I hope that those opportunities will be taken up. That is also what this is about. We are putting in place initiatives with respect to both strategies for towns and villages but people have to avail of the opportunities presented. We are trying to plan in a co-ordinated way to achieve this as best as we can.

I believe we all agree on the issue of broadband connectivity. I also represent a rural area that is not served well in terms of broadband connectivity. Access to broadband services is part of people’s future in terms of their connectivity, business and security. We all agree that the roll-out of the national broadband plan has been delayed for far too long. When it gets through this final stage in the months ahead and the contract is awarded, I believe it will be rolled out quite quickly. No one can excuse the delays in its being rolled out. I agree with Deputy Danny Healy-Rae on that. With the
opportunities it will bring when it is finally implemented, we will be leading the way in this area in Europe, and rightly so. As a small island nation, we need broadband connectivity in order to thrive. We are committed to that and a decision has to be made in the months ahead on who will be awarded the contract, which has been delayed for too long.

The rural proofing of policies is part of this. This plan is about rural and urban Ireland and the balance, partnership and linkages, bearing in mind that one affects the other and that one will not be sustained without the other. It touches on rail services and different projects but I will not list all those projects because it falls within the gift of other Departments to make announcements on them in other plans.

Regarding bus services, including those in rural areas, Deputy Heydon is not a Minister yet but he hopes to be. He will be glad that Deputy Danny Healy-Rae gave him that promotion. Deputy Heydon has put forward suggestions in respect of increasing the number of routes and some of them relate to Deputy Danny Healy Rae’s area. He is not saying that is the be all and end all. There are simply suggestions and we all agree on that. There have been some great rural transport services. I see them operating in my own area. I refer to the Flexibus and LocalLink operators which are providing great services. Operators of services in Cork and Kerry are also providing great connections. We need more of that but we must plan for it and work out where there are population groups and whom and what we need to connect to each other. That is what we are trying to do in this plan. There are prime examples of such services operating in Cork. I would point to Clonakilty, a town in the Deputy’s constituency, Westport and Trim in my area. People have got together in many towns and made the provision of such services happen in rural areas. It is about making it happen. That is what we are trying to do here. There are some great examples of that in the counties that we all represent but we want more of that and to get in behind those initiatives. That requires everybody to be on the same page, working together in a planned and co-ordinated way and targeting resources to make an impact, not just to suit some people on certain days but to make an impact in a town or village in the long run.

Deputy Michael Collins raised a local issue concerning the harvesting of kelp. It does not relating to the framework but we have a marine strategy and we will be dealing with that. The decision on that issue was made many years ago by a former Green Party Minister who was very concerned about the environment. He made an environmentally aware decision. I had to make an announcement about the conditions attaching to that in the past week to make sure that we had proper monitoring of that development. I am very clear on this. If a project such as this receives planning permission, if such permission was secured many years ago and if the development is not carried out in the proper manner we envisaged with respect to the conditions attached to the permission, then we deal with that. In the context of the conditions I announced, I have to benchmark those that are in place and try to track and monitor those to protect the marine environment in the area. We are very clear on that. However, this is not the time to deal with that issue because we are discussing another matter.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Tens of thousands of people have come out about this issue and Bantry Bay is being treated as something of a guinea pig. An environmental disaster has been set in train.
Chairman: We have had a very good exchange here. We as a committee can certainly discuss that afterwards.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the Minister of State for attending and for his engagement with the members. I propose that the joint committee publish the opening statement and submissions received in regard to this meeting. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What opening statement is that?

Chairman: The one the Minister of State made.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It will be on the record later

Chairman: We will be publishing those on the website.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: No, I do not agree with that.

Chairman: Why not?

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Why publish that opening statement and not publish everybody’s contribution?

Chairman: We will do that. The proceedings of this meeting will be put up on the website.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is what I am saying, so we should leave it that way.

Chairman: I propose that we go into private session-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: A major part of the meeting is taking place now.

Chairman: -----for a few minutes.

The joint committee went into private session at 1.55 p.m. and adjourned at 2.05 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Wednesday, 17 January 2018.
Committee Debate 28 March 2018: Rural Transport Policy: National Transport Authority

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBHAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 28 Márta 2018

Wednesday, 28 March 2018

The Joint Committee met at 12 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Seán Canney, Senator Paudie Coffey,
Deputy Michael Collins, Senator Maura Hopkins,
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice, Senator Grace O’Sullivan.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,

In attendance: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

DEPUTY JOE CAREY IN THE CHAIR.

Rural Transport Policy: National Transport Authority

Chairman: I remind members, staff and delegates to ensure their mobile phones are switched off as they cause interference with the broadcasting and web-streaming of the meeting which makes it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the proceedings.

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss rural transport policy with representatives of the National Transport Authority. On behalf of the joint committee, I welcome Ms Anne Graham, chief executive officer, and Ms Margaret Malone, manager of the rural transport programme. I thank them for attending at short notice. It is appreciated by the committee.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. The opening statement was circulated to members and will be published on the committee’s website after the meeting.
I call on Ms Graham to make her opening statement. If she so wishes, she may introduce her other colleague.

Ms Anne Graham: I thank the Chairman and members for the invitation to attend. I understand the joint committee wishes me to address the topic of rural transport policy. In my statement I will focus, in particular, on public transport. To assist me in dealing with subsequent questions, I am joined by Ms Margaret Malone who manages the rural transport programme within the National Transport Authority.

Before dealing with the specific area that will be the focus of my presentation, I would like to set in context by providing a brief overview of the remit of the National Transport Authority. Its remit is to regulate and develop the provision of integrated public transport services - bus, rail, light rail and taxi - by public and private operators in the State, to secure the development and implementation of an integrated transport system within the greater Dublin area and to contribute to the effective integration of transport and land use planning across the State. I have included in Appendix 1 of my statement more detail on our role and remit. In addition to its statutory responsibilities, the authority has various arrangements in place with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to discharge functions on its behalf. They include the assignment of responsibility to the authority for integrated local and rural transport, including the provision of the rural transport programme.

I will address the authority’s responsibilities in relation to regional and economic strategies of regional assemblies. Under legislation, the NTA is required to provide for a regional assembly a report on “the issues, which, in its opinion, should be considered by the regional assembly in making a regional spatial and economic strategy”. This function is set out in section 31FF of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The authority has recently made such submissions, as required.

On the provision of public transport services, public transport in rural areas is provided in the following ways. Iarnród Éireann provides rail services under contract with the National Transport Authority. Changes to rail services require the approval of the authority. Bus Éireann provides a variety of services through its commercial Expressway services that are licensed by the NTA and through a network of subsidised public bus services under a direct award contract with the authority. Both services serve many rural towns, with frequencies varying from several times a day to a weekly service. Changes to the subsidised services require the approval of the authority. Other commercial operators provide a number of town-to-town services and intercity services across the State without a State subsidy. If Bus Éireann or any commercial operator is required to withdraw any of its commercial services, the authority will work to ensure communities are not left behind. Bus services are also provided under the rural transport programme. These services are contracted by the NTA and managed by 17 Local Link offices throughout the State. The services are primarily demand-responsive, which includes approximately 80% of all services. However, regular scheduled services between and in towns are also provided under the programme.

I will address the rural transport programme or, as it is now known, Local Link. The objective of the programme is to provide a good quality, nationwide, community-based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs. Typical services provided under the programme include demand-responsive transport services. The services do not operate on a fixed route but respond to requests for services by intending passengers and operate by making specific trips to...
pick up and drop off passengers at the door. They can be operated by large public service vehicles, hackneys or community cars. Scheduled fixed transport services comprise services with a regular route, stopping places and timetable. Key features of the public transport system include completing 1.9 million passenger journeys per annum, of which 900,000 are provided for free travel passengers. The figures include 200,000 passengers who require assistance. The system provides for an average of 150,000 service trips annually, travelling over 11.8 million kms annually. Over 400 private operators provide the services, using the services of almost 900 drivers. The programme also funds the provision of once-off trips for individuals and community and voluntary groups to help to address the lack of transport as a factor in social exclusion. Some 62% of service trips are defined as either fully or partially accessible.

On passenger journeys and revenues, the number of passenger journeys grew from 1.7 million in 2015 to 1.89 million in 2017, a significant change, particularly between 2016 and 2017 when we saw growth of 5.6%. In the past two years the authority has supported the expansion of rural transport services to include regular commuter bus services. Operating at least five times a day on a five, six or seven day a week schedule, the services are specifically designed to ensure connectivity with other public transport services. This connectivity facilitates passengers to make onward journeys, typically to access education, employment, health, recreational and other opportunities. I have included in Appendix 2 a national listing of these regular services.

I will address the funding of the rural transport programme. Prior to its restructuring, a myriad of funding streams supported the provision of rural transport services. Post-restructuring, there are two main funding streams from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, with the free travel pass scheme. As in other areas, funding for the programme reduced significantly during the economic downturn. In recent years the funding allocation has continued to increase, thereby enabling further improvement and expansion of services. In 2015 the funding from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport was just over €10 million which has grown to an allocation of €14.3 million in 2018. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection provides an annual funding allocation of €1.5 million under the free travel scheme towards the cost of the programme. Other sources of income for the rural transport programme include fare income and the provision of transport services for other organisations such as the Health Service Executive which are funded separately by the relevant organisations.

The authority has recently produced its rural transport programme strategic plan for the period 2018 to 2022. We have copies of the plan for committee members. It sets out key objectives both for the delivery and development of the rural transport programme in the five year period to the end of 2022. The key priorities of the programme continue to include addressing rural social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services. Nine key priority areas have been identified. They include sustaining the rural transport programme; route development and expansion; integration with other statutory services; the accessibility of services; access for all; ensuring the rural transport programme delivers an optimum customer experience; children and young people; encouraging innovation in rural transport service provision; and monitoring the progress of the rural transport programme.
The authority works continually with Bus Éireann, as it provides services in rural areas, to provide for improvements on its contracted services and is looking at the expansion of these services now that the budget for public service obligation services has increased since 2016. The authority also promoted improvements in the regional cities which have seen phenomenal growth in passenger numbers. These improvements cannot be sustained unless significant improvement works are carried out by the city authorities in providing for bus priority measures, particularly now as car traffic congestion is growing rapidly. Improved town services have been delivered in Athlone following the success of the Sligo bus services enhancements. The work in enhancing the services provided by Bus Éireann has recently been delayed significantly as it has had to prioritise the changes required as part of its business recovery plan. The work in enhancing the services provided by Bus Éireann has been delayed significantly in recent times as the company has had to prioritise the changes required as part of its business recovery plan. It is expected that Bus Éireann will complete that work shortly and that we can recommence the service enhancement work.

The authority recognises that there are many gaps in our service provision and there is a need for new services. We have focused on the lack of services in our main towns and we are prioritising the provision of new town services in Kilkenny, Carlow and Mullingar. These centres all have populations between 19,000 and 26,000 and all have minimal levels of service.

In exercising its functions the authority seeks to co-ordinate services to achieve the provision of an integrated public transport system of services and networks for all users. Wherever appropriate, we seek to integrate and co-ordinate services to provide for seamless travel options where change of bus or mode is required. This is relevant for the operation of the Local Link services, which can facilitate connection to mainline inter-urban services irrespective of the provider of those services. In fact, the NTA is the only body that can bring modes and operators together in an integrated service pattern to provide the best service for rural communities.

A number of key infrastructural items support public transport and are required to increase the attractiveness of public transport, especially in rural Ireland. These include bus shelters, accessible bus stops and information at stops. The provision of additional shelters has been greatly constrained in recent year by lack of funding. The contract for the provision and maintenance of bus shelters rests with the NTA rather than each operator. Therefore, we are now well placed to deliver a comprehensive shelter programme.

Information provision has improved. New bus stop poles and information have been rolled out on a pilot basis in Cork city. Real-time information, while not available on signs at every bus stop, is available on the Transport for Ireland website and app, as well as through an SMS text messaging service. However, our ambition to deliver in these areas has been constrained due to lack of funding. It is expected that funding will improve from 2019. However, the authority needs to be in a position to put in place the resources that can deliver on our ambitious programme of improvements. That concludes my presentation. I trust that we can answer any queries that arise.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the witnesses for the presentation and for their attendance.

I have come across many private bus operators who are operating services on a commercial basis with no subvention from the State. They are successful in doing that but one issue they have
raised with me from time to time relates to putting in place new services or enhancing the existing services by creating more bus stops. This involves applying for licences and the process has become highly protracted. In the past, they would get the approval of the Garda and then the licence would be approved by the Department. Now, the local authorities are involved and there is what we call a sign-off, which is a process that brings responsibility, caution and delay in getting these bus stops in place. It is prevalent in rural areas. Those involved are willing to provide a service at no cost to the State. Will the NTA look at this and realign the application process to make it simpler? It would allow us to get the bus stops in place.

I accept that bus stops, especially in rural areas, are set up in places where the necessary space may not be available. The bus may have to pull up on the road and take off again. That is the simple fact of it and we are not going to change it. I believe we should take that into account and allow the operators to operate that way. The associated paperwork should be streamlined. If the Garda approves a licence, then the NTA should take on the responsibility of approving it rather than bringing in the local authorities and having engineers involved. The engineers are reluctant to sign off on something because they believe they are taking on responsibility.

I have held discussions locally with the Local Link companies. Several issues arise. While services have improved, I understand that there may be a re-tendering of the Local Link service. It is probably unnecessary at this time to be looking to re-tender as it only creates more uncertainty. It also creates a sense that people do not know whether they will be providing the service by the end of this year. I am keen to hear the comments of Ms Graham on that point.

Another simple issue has been raised with me. I was looking for maps of bus routes for Local Link. The operators do not have maps or the capacity to create the maps because those operating the services are one-man or one-woman bands. Three companies, comprising three people, operate in Galway.

Another point is that the NTA has data relating to the total integrated system of transport provision. These operators do not have access to the data. In some cases, it could take three months for them to do the work to ensure the service is integrated across the board. However, if they had the data at their fingertips, they could get access to the information at the disposal of the NTA. There is no real cost involved in such sharing of information.

The other issue they raised with me is the idea of related services. While we have the Local Link and we operate an integrated service, we also have local on-call services. The fear is that we might forget about these or that they might get lost when we are developing other rural links. We need to ensure the continuance of the bus going out to Headford and environs to collect 12 or 14 people on Friday. The bus brings them in to collect their pension, go to the pharmacy or the doctor, have a cup of tea in the local resource centre and get back home in the afternoon. It allows them to get a bus to Galway if they want. It is important that this service remains in place and is supported. The resources of Local Link companies need to be enhanced. They need to be given a little more help with administration staff to ensure that they are in a position to deliver as they expand services. The associated money should be ring-fenced for three or five years in order that they know with certainty how they can plan for the coming three to five years.
My last question relates to the lack of railway services in rural areas, especially along the western rail corridor. Phase 1 has been completed from Ennis to Athenry. It has been proven in recent years that the numbers are increasing. Under the national development plan it is intended to look at extending the service from Athenry to Claremorris in order to have a link between Galway and Mayo by rail. What is the attitude of the NTA? Is the authority supportive of it? Does the authority perceive that as being something for rural Ireland that will make a difference in creating the Atlantic economic corridor? I understand that the NTA may have made submissions suggesting that we put a greenway on this line. What is the NTA’s attitude in this regard?

I believe that if we are to progress development in rural Ireland, we definitely need to extend the western rail corridor for the future of development and to create connectivity for freight, tourism and commuter services. As the NTA representatives may know, Galway city is chock-a-block and people cannot get into it. The main clear artery from north Galway comes through the railway service into Eyre Square. We could create a commuter service from Claremorris, Westport and Ballina all the way into Galway and have return services to these places. Such a development would enhance tourism and all the various possible economic derivatives. What is the attitude of the NTA representatives on that point?

Chairman: Thank you, Deputy. As we are under time pressure today, I am going to club three members’ questions together. The next member indicating is Deputy Ó Cuív. He will be followed by Senator Coffey. I will then invite Ms Graham to address the questions.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We are all under time pressure because some of us are on two committees that are meeting one after the other.

I welcome the witnesses. Ms Graham said the remit of the authority is to regulate – we understand that – and develop. What precise role does the authority have in development outside the greater Dublin area? Has the NTA sought to amend the legislation to give it the same powers and responsibilities outside the greater Dublin area, GDA, as it has within it to make it a truly national transport authority?

It was explained that Iarnród Éireann provides rail services under a contract with the National Transport Authority and that any changes to rail services require the approval of the authority. Who initiates proposed changes in rail services? Who is the person who says we recognise that we have a totally inadequate commuter rail service into Galway, for example, or into Cork or Limerick, and we need a much more comprehensive, integrated rail service that serves the real needs of people who want to travel to work by train? Is it the NTA or Iarnród Éireann that initiates the process? Is the NTA the disposer or the proposer of rail policy in terms of the services? We need to get a handle on this issue. It is similar with bus services. For example, in many parts of the country where urban areas service rural areas, starting in the third level cities, as I call them, and towns and going out to the rural areas, there are no buses after 6 p.m. Ultimately, whose responsibility is it to propose that we move into the 21st century and change all of that? Is it the responsibility of the bus companies or the NTA? In other words, does the NTA just dispose of proposals or does it make them and say this is the service that a national transport body should provide and this is what we want?
My next question relates to fares. It is a bugbear of mine. I think I raised it with the NTA previously. Fares per kilometre are strangely way more expensive in the non-urban areas. In Galway, for example, the designated urban area goes out to Barna, or in the Dublin area it has been extended to Sallins, but beyond that one is in the sticks and one’s fare doubles for going one mile. Whose responsibility is it to drive change in that regard? I refer to equity, fairness and equality, all the terms that are the buzzwords of modern society. Who drives change - the NTA or the bus companies? As with the fare issue, is the NTA the proposer or the disposer?

My understanding is that a submission was made by the NTA to the greenways policy, proposing to use the railway line from Athenry northwards as a greenway, even though the programme for Government says that the Government will investigate reopening that railway line. Will the witnesses explain the NTA’s role in that and in making proposals for the western rail corridor? Does the NTA have a view on the need to develop commuter rail into the major cities from the surrounding areas of Galway, Waterford, Limerick and Cork? We do not have commuter rail in any of those cities other than Cork. How does it sit to propose the demise of a railway corridor?

In 1959 the Harcourt Street railway line was closed in Dublin. It is now the green Luas line which goes out to Sandyford. The line used to go out to Bray. It was all sold up fairly fast. By 1989, 30 years later, everybody realised that was a fundamental mistake and that what seemed impossible in 1959 - that there would be massive populations around Dundrum - actually happened. It is proposed that there will be 1 million extra in population and they will not live where the national plan wants them to live. They will live where they want to live. The western rail corridor and maintaining its availability for a railway line is key to the future. The Chairman has a particular interest in the southern end of that railway line and getting decent services on it. I commend you on that because it has enormous potential that we are not exploiting. Limerick has endless railway lines around it that could be used for commuter transport for up to 30 miles around the city. We need to get a clear NTA position on the railway lines.

**Senator Paudie Coffey:** I thank the witnesses for their presentation and for attending the committee today. This is a very important engagement. As our remit is rural and community affairs, and as representatives of rural areas, it is obligatory on all of us to emphasise the significance and importance of transport to living in rural areas. I wish to re-emphasise that at the very outset.

I acknowledge the important role and function of the NTA in directing policy nationally in terms of planning and integration of public transport and transport provision. While we recognise that infrastructure is so critical for urban transport, it is also critical for rural dwellers as well in terms of how they integrate and interact with society. I note the NTA’s role in providing direction and reporting to the regional assemblies which will have a critical role in devising strategies for long-term planning under the new planning framework. My question to the NTA is whether it rural-proofs the planning reporting to such bodies as the regional assemblies. Do they look at the demographics to see how rural communities, towns and villages are integrated with the larger towns that I would see as the service centres for those regional areas? The assemblies have a critical role in this area. The regional assemblies have the responsibility for devising planning strategy for their regions for the next ten to 20 years, but the NTA has a critical role to play in providing information that serves
the entire community, both urban and rural. I would be interested to hear the perspectives from the representatives in that regard.

The co-ordination of existing services is critical. The NTA has a crucial role in terms of filling any voids or deficits that are not serviced by private operators in the transport area. We have successful transport initiatives in various areas. In my area in Waterford a subsidised service operates in Portlaw, for example, a town 12 miles from Waterford city. Suirway services runs a very sustainable bus service, supported by the State through the NTA, to keep that service alive. Local Link provides feeder services throughout rural County Waterford with much success. That needs to be acknowledged. However, I feel there is more potential to link rural towns and villages to other feeder services. I would like to hear if the NTA has future plans on how it hopes to influence future planning and how it engages with the various transport providers to provide a better integrated and co-ordinated service.

In terms of co-ordination, I have been made aware by students, for example, who travel by train or bus, that there is often a lack of continuity of service when people are using public transport in Ireland. For example, if they are travelling between cities, a train might arrive at one station at a particular time and the train to the next city might have left ten or 15 minutes prior to the arrival of that train. I can provide such examples to the witnesses from the NTA. I am just giving a broad sample of some concerns I have heard expressed. I would like to hear how the NTA can influence all of our public transport providers, both private and public, to try to co-ordinate services so that we have consistency and continuity in services.

One mode of transport that we should recognise more is the two-wheeled variety, namely, cycling. It is such a beautiful country but we do not have enough infrastructure to encourage people to use bicycles more. That is especially important given the climate change challenges we face. I would like to hear the NTA’s vision for cycling in this country to assist people who want to cycle more in both rural and urban areas. The NTA has an important function in that regard.

My final point also relates to climate change challenges. We heard the Government announcement recently on the prohibition of new diesel engines after 2040. Does that apply to public transport fleets in the country? If so, what is the NTA doing now to ensure we have a sustainable transport fleet in both the public and private sectors in respect of its operation, its impact on climate change and how energy is used in this country?

Ms Anne Graham: I will start with Deputy Canney’s questions, one of which concerned the protracted nature of getting approval for bus stops. Unfortunately, the policy changed from being a Garda approval to a local authority approval. As it is set out, the only legislative body that can approve the location of bus stops under the Roads Act is a local authority. We do not have a role in approving the location of bus stops. We have provided guidance to local authorities about how and where they should locate bus stops, particularly those associated with rural services. We engage with local authorities to try to encourage them to ensure they approve bus stops in a timely manner but we acknowledge more work needs to be done in that area because some operators get through our part of the licensing system quite quickly and then get held up on bus stop approvals. We are aware of that. Unfortunately, we do not have the powers to approve bus stops. It is the local authority that approves them. Ms Malone might cover Local Link re-tendering.
Ms Margaret Malone: A few questions were asked about Local Link, some of which I will now address. The first issue was the re-tendering of the programme. The current four-year programme has been in existence since 2014 and expires at the end of December 2018 and consequently, we will be looking at the next stage from 2019 to 2022. In 2013-14, there was a closed call for applications. It was not an open procurement process for a variety of reasons. A number of groups tendered for the call and 17 transport co-ordination units, TCUs are now in existence with the brand name of Local Link. We have been getting legal and procurement advice this time around and it looks as if we must go through a formal tendering process this time around to comply with both EU and Irish procurement legislation. I accept there is a degree of anxiety and nervousness about what the process might be, who will come through the process and how it will reflect and take on board the amount of good work undertaken by the existing Local Link groups for the past number of years. As we are still working on what that process will look like, we have not yet gone out to the groups to formally advise them what the procurement process will be. We aim to be in a position to do that probably by the end of April. We will then make sure there are any number of meetings, sessions and briefings to address concerns and will have a number of question-and-answer sessions around the country in order that everybody is very clear about what the procurement process will be. In terms of complying with the legislation, we are looking at a request for tender process - an open procurement process.

Regarding the question on maps and whether access to mapping is not of as high a standard as it should be, I accept that. We have had issues with our system for the rural transport programme, which is called the integrated transport management system, ITMS. It has had some issues over the past number of years but I am happy to say it is in a much better place now than it has been. Much investment, time and resources has gone into trying to resolve some of the outstanding issues. As of this morning, before I left the office, I checked and the mapping functionality is up and running again. There has been a delay there that has hindered the ability of some groups to design their routes and services. In a more long-term way, we intend to integrate the ITMS more formally with the authority’s other systems in order that ultimately, the Local Link groups will be able to access the same mapping information and the same layering of information the authority uses to inform all of its other planning processes. Consequently, we are working in that direction.

As for addressing social exclusion and making sure the programme does not lose sight of where it started from, the rural transport programme was initiated back in the 2000s. It formed out of a need to address rural social exclusion and that has been a basic tenet of the programme all the way through. We are moving into an era where we are taking on board more regular high-frequency commuter-type services and running them through the rural transport programme but there is no avoiding or walking away from the needs and responsibilities that arise from a rural social exclusion point of view. Members will see that a large number of actions throughout the strategy we will circulate shortly are designed around addressing rural social exclusion in particular.

Ms Anne Graham: I will pick up on the rest of Deputy Canney’s questions. He asked about the budget and a three or five-year budget that gives some kind of certainty. We would also like that certainty because as we only get our operational budget on a yearly basis, it is difficult for us to plan, which also makes it difficult for the Local Link offices to plan ahead.
In terms of the western rail corridor, our role with regard to rail infrastructure is very specific. We have a contract related to the provision of services and the only place where we influence the provision of infrastructure is in the greater Dublin area where we fund the capital investment in infrastructure. The overall policy relating to the provision of rail infrastructure outside the greater Dublin area is a matter for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. It manages the infrastructure through a contract with Irish Rail for the improvements on and maintenance of the infrastructure. As an authority, we have views from a transport planning point of view about rail infrastructure because it is costly infrastructure to provide and maintain. We obviously feel it is important for high-quality commuter services into cities. This does not just include Dublin but the regional cities as well. It is important for moving people on an inter-urban basis. We need high volumes to be able to cover the cost of providing the infrastructure to make a business case stand up for providing the infrastructure but also for keeping it maintained and the value for money associated with that.

We respect what was set out in the national development plan regarding the western rail corridor. In terms of the submission we made, there is a bit of a misunderstanding when we refer to abandoned railway lines and their potential for use as greenways. This did not refer to the western rail corridor. That was not what we intended and we will clarify that with the particular regional assembly. We were talking about railways other than the western rail corridor, of which there are a number around the State. It is for those to be used as greenways. We were not referring to the western rail corridor. If there is a business case to support the development of rail because it is important from a public transport point of view, we will support it if it stands up economically.

As for Deputy Ó Cuív’s questions about who develops bus and rail services, it is a combination. In some cases, we develop the plans because we have our own transport planners and service planners. We put forward proposals whether they are for the bus company or the rail company to see whether it can provide those services with the resources it has or what the cost associated with providing those would be. In some cases, we instigate the changes but in other cases, the operators instigate the changes. When we were set up initially, we did not have the resources to be doing the transport planning. We are developing that service planning role far more as we have been in a position to increase our resources in that area. Ultimately, we must approve whatever changes are mooted. Where we instigate such changes, we obviously wish to approve them but we must check whether the operator is in a position to deliver them. We also are open to the operator having its own ideas and innovating in services. We would approve those services if the funding is there and if we feel it is the right service to provide. We have been pushing for services like evening services, off-peak services and services that probably do not provide the same return in terms of fares but which we still think there is an obligation to provide. It is the policy of the NTA to develop and improve services at off-peak times, evenings and weekends. I acknowledge Deputy Ó Cuív has made a particular request and has met us to discuss a certain service. We are waiting for our operator to furnish us with the timetable and an outline of the cost. The formal approval process will then begin. We are very open to any suggestions for improvement, particularly where off-peak and weekend services are concerned.
In regard to fares, the NTA tends to be the proposer of fare structure. Trying to rectify and simplify the fare structure that we inherited six or seven years ago has been a difficult process. We have focused on simplifying the number of rail fares and fare stages, particularly in the short-hop zones in city areas. It took about five years to get some form of distance-based fare system in the commuter zone, but a lot more work needs to be done on that. We will be doing a similar exercise on the intercity fare. Similarly, Bus Éireann has a hugely complicated fare structure and we are working with it to simplify those fares. We are simplifying the relationship between an standard adult single ticket and the deductions for child or student fare in order that it is much simpler for people to understand what fares are being offered.

The argument the Deputy has made to us is there should be the same fare structure in the cities as there is in the rural areas. We do not agree with that. In order to function, a city requires a lot more people to use public transport than does a rural area in respect of congestion. We therefore must encourage as many people as possible to use public transport in the cities. Moreover, there is a greater cost associated with providing transport in rural areas than in city areas. As such, a simplified fare structure and lower city fares allow us to provide more services to meet the congestion in those areas. We feel there should be a different fare structure in the cities than applies in rural areas. However, we subvent our fares in rural areas to a higher level per passenger journey than we do-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The subvention is higher per passenger journey, but not per head of population.

Ms Anne Graham: We have had this-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The NTA does not subsidise the people where I live at all, because there is no service there. The subsidy per passenger journey is infinite because there is no service.

Ms Anne Graham: We have said that we are trying to address the gaps in services. We have not said that all gaps have been filled.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The measure of spending per passenger journey is totally inequitable. It would be much better to start on the basis that there are a half a million people in Connacht and a million people in Dublin. Is the subsidy for public transport in Connacht half of that in Dublin? It is not. It is about a tenth. Of course the NTA is always going to win by measuring per passenger journey, because the people who do not have the service cannot use it and therefore are never subsidised. It is a crazy measure.

Ms Anne Graham: I refer the Deputy to our investment priorities. We have increased the subsidy to services provided by Bus Éireann very significantly, by 50%. The subsidy for the service provided by Dublin Bus has been reduced. Investment in rural services has increased compared with investment in Dublin-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is still the case that 1.1 million people get €60 million for Dublin Bus. When rural transport and Bus Éireann are included, the figure is about €53 million for 3 million people. As such, €3 is spent on a Dublin person for every €1 spent on a rural person. That just includes buses, never mind trains.
Ms Anne Graham: We have had this argument before. We do not agree with that way of analysing how public transport is delivered. We believe it should be considered on the basis of passenger journeys. We examine the gaps where services are needed and consider the costs of providing them, rather than what each member of population is getting. We try to improve services where there are gaps. The NTA or the operators identify the gaps and we fill them, where we have the funding to do so.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Does the witness not represent a National Transport Authority? Should that body not provide a national integrated transport service? That would not be a service based on economics, but a public service for all the people who live and pay taxes in this State.

Ms Anne Graham: We do not disagree with the Deputy. I have been outlining how we go about doing that. We have all said that there are gaps in services. We are trying to address those gaps and provide as much service as we can with the funding that we have. We have had quite a bit of success in filling those gaps in recent years. I am not saying that it is a perfect service by any means. We have a long way to go to address the type of issues Deputy Ó Cuív has previously raised with us, including evening and weekend services. That is a work in progress.

I will move on to Senator Coffey’s questions. The NTA does engage in demographic projection and the rural-proofing of our proposals to the regional assemblies. We are careful to ensure that what we put forward has due regard for demographics but also meets the needs of rural towns and villages and improves public transport in those areas. Outside of the greater Dublin area, GDA, our role in support of assemblies arises from our statutory duty to assist and co-operate in the preparation of the regional spatial and economic strategies, RSESs. We are required to prepare a report setting out the issues which, in our opinion, should be considered by the regional assemblies in making a regional spatial and economic strategy. The eastern regional assembly is slightly different because we have special functions concerning the GDA, but for the others we set out what we believe are the transport issues that the regional assembly should address.

In regard to the co-ordination of existing services, we recognise that there is potential to link rural towns and services more. We engage with transport operators continually. If they identify gaps, we work with the operators to see if they can fill them. If the operator is a licensed service, we see if they are willing to meet the needs without a subsidy. Alternatively, we sometimes have to subsidise a service in order to make those links. Our Local Link services have really been fantastic at making those links, particularly in rural areas, and we want to develop that a lot further. If there are specific instances of a lack of transport links, I ask members to bring them to our attention because we rely on people highlighting these needs. We will then see if there is anything we can do in that area.

We recognise that we do not have enough cycling infrastructure. Our function in this regard is focused on the cities, because that is our arrangement with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

The national development plan now requires that no 100% diesel-fuelled fleet is purchased for public transport after July 2019, so we have to move. We were already considering moving to a low-
emission fleet. Starting this year, we hope to begin the procurement of a low-emission diesel fleet for our bus services.

**Ms Margaret Malone:** On the connectivity issue, we have recently issued a request through the rural transport programme for applications for evening and night-time services, particularly for Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings. This is partly aimed at promoting social inclusion, but it is also intended to connect with existing services in the area, including commuter services. It is intended that people will be able to stay out or travel into a town in the evening and get home at a certain time. That connectivity issue is very much on our radar.

**Deputy Seán Canney:** I would just like clarification on what Ms Malone mentioned about the software, the maps and that kind of thing. She said that she hopes to be able to bring forward something which the rural link companies can use. Is there a timeframe for that? That would make life an awful lot easier for them and it would make them more efficient in their work. It would also give them a greater picture of what they can do to link into every other service. It is a small thing but I would appreciate if it could be done sooner rather than later. I thank both the witnesses for their responses.

**Senator Maura Hopkins:** Many of the questions I had have been raised. Ms Graham has outlined the sense that there are still gaps. Obviously the NTA is working to improve them. With that, I want to start off on a positive note and say that the NTA has listened to concerns about the extension of the 440 bus route, the Westport to Athlone route, which is obviously very important for County Roscommon. It serves many towns and villages and it provides for return services daily. We need the Local Link services to interface with that as much as possible.

My question is on the tendering process. I recently met the manager of our Local Link service and I believe there is anxiety around the retendering process. The sense I got from the discussion is that there will be a wait before further Local Link services are introduced. Am I correct in that? Are we waiting for the tendering process to take place before further services are introduced or can new services be introduced at the present time?

**Ms Margaret Malone:** We are accepting applications all of the time.

**Senator Maura Hopkins:** Okay. I would also like to emphasise the important work which Local Link services do. For example, there is a service in Tulsk which supports a day centre and a rural school. It also integrates locals with towns. We obviously need to see more of that, but it is a very good example of trying to be efficient and trying to link as many people as possible to the places to which they need to go. That was my one concern around that tendering process. I had a sense that people were waiting to see how the tendering process progresses before further routes were introduced. I really just wanted clarification on that.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I was interested to hear about bus shelters. There are many small towns in rural parts of Ireland in which there is not even a sign for the bus stop, never mind a bus shelter. When will that be addressed? How much of a roll-out of bus shelters will there be? I welcome the extra carriages which I believe are being put on Iarnród Éireann’s Sligo route. That is welcome. We have overcrowding on the Westport route. It does not seem to be being addressed at certain times. There has there been talk over recent months
that the Dublin to Belfast route will be going down the road towards going electric. Why is there no talk at all about electrifying the route out as far as Maynooth and then reverting to diesel out to the west? It does not seem that investment will be put into that.

On rural transport, there are some very good examples, for example, in Ballinamore. There is a great woman, Camilla Kelly, who works on the Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon areas. Some great projects have been rolled out which suit both people who are working and people who want to go shopping. Why is there such a discrepancy in different parts of the country? There can be a good system which brings people to work on a return train journey in some counties, but in other counties the system only works for the bingo run. I mean no disrespect by that. It needs to be done, but the system only works for the bingo run and the shopping on Friday. Other than that there is nothing. The system does not cater for workers or anything. Why is that the situation in some counties? To be honest about it, there are many places where one would not see a bus within a five or six mile radius from one end of the year to the other. What can be done to address that?

On rail, I listened with interest to what was said when the western rail corridor was brought up. Ms Graham has seen the rail review. The document states that three different routes are for the chop. We need to nail this down. I am in full support of rail, but there is no good in having formulas of words and in bringing out documents which say that we will have a review and this, that and the other. At the end of the day, the time has come for straight answers on the western rail corridor and on the line in Tipperary. We need a straight answer as to whether investment will be given or not. Wording in documents is not what we want. We want either to get pounds, shillings and pence to deliver something or to move on. Where is Ms Graham on this? Does she agree with what I am saying? Is she saying that this committee needs to bring in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to nail this down once and for all? This sort of nod and wink approach has been going on almost since I was a young fella, and that is a while ago. Either rail projects are being done or they are not. We need to nail it down one way or the other.

Ms Graham touched on Dublin Bus. The information I have is that, while rural people are being told that they will not be able to buy a diesel car in the next ten, 15 or 20 years even if they are travelling long distances, Dublin Bus is currently buying diesel buses and was buying diesel buses last year. If I was trying to show the way in something, I would be damn sure that public transport should be the first to lead the way. Why is this continuing? Perhaps it is down to money. That is fully understandable. To put it simply, there would be nine buses where there were ten if we were to change over to the gas system. Is this the reason? Is it down to money? Who is going to make the decisions on the way forward in respect of buses? I note that Ms Graham said 2019 or 2020. If we are bringing out documents about climate change and all this craic, which I see plenty of within the Dáil, why is the State not leading the way rather than putting the onus onto the person who may have no bus, who may have to travel a distance to work in a rural part of Ireland, and who may not have the money to be changing over all this stuff? Why is the State not showing the way first? At least we could then point to what we have done. That is not happening. Will Ms Graham give me her opinion on that?

On the Luas or tram-type systems, I know that Dublin Airport is being touted. State land could be had for something like €200 million, rather than €4 billion, which would allow the DART to shoot
out to Malahide and then across, bringing in the Swords area and out towards the airport. Why was that not looked at? It would be simpler and quicker. In Galway there does not seem to be a system. I am sure the NTA is aware of the transport problems in Parkmore. We do not seem to have a bus or a park-and-ride system set up that would help alleviate the problem. Galway is losing jobs because of the transport situation. When do the witnesses envisage a Luas-type system in that city, or are we living in fairyland world whereby we will say it will happen in 2030 or 2040 and we will not be here when it will happen?

Chairman: We are under a tight time constraint as we must vacate the room by 1.15 p.m. because another committee is coming in to use the room. I have a couple of questions, Deputy Collins indicated to me earlier and we also have Deputy Healy Rae. I will take everyone but we need to be short. Perhaps the witnesses will answer our questions in writing if possible.

I want to come back to the rural transport programme and the one I know best is in County Clare. Clarebus has 170 services a week and had 54,500 passenger trips last year alone. It has 11 low-floored easily accessible buses, which are wonderful. It operates out of Feakle in rural east Clare. It is a wonderful organisation and I pay tribute to it. Its fleet of 11 buses is under huge pressure from wear and tear over many years. It bought those buses using funding. Local Link is a national movement and it is funded throughout the country. The organisations involved need backup to keep improving their fleets. I ask the NTA to look at this.

With regard to routes, a timely turnaround is needed when a new route is proposed. A route was proposed by Clarebus from Kilkee to Kilrush and back to Ennis. It has been lodged for months and nothing has been heard back. It is needed. Will the NTA look at this? Coincidently, another route has been proposed in north Clare, from Ballyvaughan to Lisdoonvarna to Ennistymon, Corofin, Ruan and back to Ennis. Again it is a wonderful route, but I ask for timely turnaround on these issues.

I ask Deputy Collins to be mindful of the time----

Deputy Michael Collins: I will.

Chairman: -----and then we will have Deputy Healy-Rae.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will keep it strictly to a few minutes. I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee. I have a few issues to raise and I will start with Local Link Cork because time is of the essence. I am involved in Local Link Cork and I have seen the incredible delivery it has given to the people throughout west Cork. In fairness, the NTA deserves praise for giving sufficient funding to Local Link Cork, but I have to say the manager, David O’Brien, and the chairman of the company, Neale O’Leary, have delivered meticulously. I can be very critical at times on certain things that happen in rural Ireland, but I cannot say anything about this because I never hear anybody complain. Cork is a huge sprawling county with people from Bere Island into Kilcrohane, Ballydehob, Lisheen and Skibbereen. A new service from Clonakilty to Kinsale was funded recently by the NTA. It has increased many services into Timoleague, Kilbrittain, Barryroe and Courtmacsherry. On the other side we have Bantry, Drimoleague and Dunmanway. The service is second to none. I concur with the Chairman, in that we have our own fleet of buses and they are ageing to a point, and this may be an area where stronger funds need to be directed going down the road, but the delivery on the ground is second to none.
There is one issue that-----

**Chairman:** I am sorry Deputy Collins, but we are under massive time constraints because the next meeting will begin and the room needs to be set up for it. Unfortunately, we just do not have the time.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Give me a minute and a half and I will finish.

**Chairman:** We just do not have the time.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** Give me as minute and a half and I will finish on this.

**Chairman:** Just finish on this.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** The cost of bus and rail tickets is a serious issue, for many young people in particular. I would appreciate the NTA looking into this because in rural Ireland young people totally depend on a bus service, particularly with car insurance being so expensive. It is nearly an impossibility for people to get on the road. They are totally dependent on bus and rail. Recently, I raised in the Dáil the issue of a lack of rail. We had rail going to Schull and Mizen Head and throughout west Cork in the 1850s. I am looking to see whether we can have rail coming as far as Bandon, which would open up west Cork. We also need to deliver a transport service for people with disabilities over 18 years of age. They are entitled to a free service when they are aged 17 years and 364 days, but once they reach their 18th birthday they are given an automatic ticket on a bus. Most of these people cannot go on a bus on their own. No service is available for elderly people who are unable to travel throughout west Cork for four hours a day. This is an area for which I would like funding to be provided to Local Link Cork.

**Chairman:** I thank the Deputy for being brief. Unfortunately, I cannot bring in Deputy Healy-Rae.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** I could take half a minute, instead of the Chairman speaking.

**Chairman:** Half a minute, go on.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** What provision is being made for rural bus providers to cater for disabled people wishing to access transport? How can it be fair that a company in Kerry, which I will not name and that has State money, can tender against private contractors for bus runs and community runs? This has been raised in the Chamber and I want to raise it again because it is absolutely unfair on private contractors. I am a contractor but I am not raising this for myself. It is for others.

**Chairman:** I thank the Deputies for their co-operation. Ms Graham will come back in writing on the questions.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** We do not have a meeting every week and the fact we have to pack up at 1.15 p.m. must be addressed. We have not received answers. We deserve to be able to challenge points at the meeting. Writing a letter back to someone is like me writing a letter to Santa, as people can write whatever they want.

**Chairman:** We can have another meeting if that is what people want, but unfortunately today---
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Other committee meetings continue.

Chairman: Unfortunately, today we are under time constraints. We can see the clerk coming in for the next meeting.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am not saying anything about the clerk coming in, and I am not criticising the clerk.

Chairman: That is just the situation.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What I am saying is that if a meeting goes on for four hours, it goes on for four hours. We should not be turfed out after an hour and three quarters.

Chairman: I would much rather if we had longer, absolutely.

Deputy Michael Collins: It has been good to have the NTA here today but we need more time, in fairness.

Chairman: We could possibly invite the NTA back.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Will we have the answers back from the NTA for the next meeting?

Chairman: We would like to get answers to the questions we have asked. I have proposed that the NTA answer in writing and the witnesses have agreed to do this. We can possibly discuss in private session whether we will bring the NTA before us again. I thank the witnesses for their contribution today and for answering the questions. Unfortunately, we had a time constraint today. It is something we will revisit.

I propose that the committee publishes the opening statements and documentation supplied by the NTA. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.20 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Wednesday, 25 April 2018.
MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Michael Collins, 
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice, 
Deputy Willie Penrose,

Senator Paudie Coffey, 
Senator Maura Hopkins, 
Senator Grace O’Sullivan.

In attendance: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

DEPUTY JOE CAREY IN THE CHAIR.

Flooding at Ballycar on the Galway-Limerick Railway and Investment in Heavy Rail: Discussion

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Canney. I remind members, staff and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones because they interfere with the sound system.

We have two related topics on our agenda: opportunities for investment in heavy rail and flooding at Ballycar on the Galway-Limerick railway. I propose that we discuss both together. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I will call on representatives from each organisation to make an opening statement. I will then invite members to put their questions to the various organisations. I suggest that members should limit their questioning to between three and five minutes, but I will allow them to contribute twice if appropriate. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I will now read some formal notices for the information of the witnesses. I draw their attention to the fact that, by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the Chair to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with
the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Any submission, opening statement or other document they have supplied to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome the director of the Geological Survey of Ireland, Mr. Koen Verbruggen, and his colleagues from the groundwater flood programme, Dr. Ted McCormack and Dr. Owen Naughton. From the National Parks and Wildlife Service, I welcome Mr. John Fitzgerald, principal officer with responsibility for legislation, licensing and property management. From the Office of Public Works, I welcome Mr. John Sydenham, commissioner, Mr. Cian Ó Dónaill, regional engineer, and Mr. Liam Basquille, principal officer in engineering services. From Clare County Council, I welcome Mr. Tom Tiernan and Mr. John Leahy, who is the incoming senior engineer. From Iarnród Éireann, I welcome Mr. Jim Meade, chief executive, and Mr. Colin Hedderly, senior track and structures engineer.

I would like to provide a little of the background to this discussion. Since 1834, when the first commuter railway in the world was opened in Ireland, railways have helped us to conquer space and time by bringing cities, towns and villages closer together. They have always been very important to rural Ireland. The committee decided to make consideration of rural transport and connectivity a priority in its 2018 work programme. We have met representatives of the National Transport Authority. A great deal of progress has been made in Dublin with light rail and there are plans for a metro. We should not forget that there are many opportunities for investment in heavy rail throughout the island of Ireland, including some low hanging fruit. Funding may also be available from the European Union. I suggest we need to improve connectivity by designing intermodal nodes such as heavy rail connections at ports and airports.

One of the most important heavy rail projects in recent years was the restoration of the railway line between Galway, Ennis and Limerick as the first phase of the western rail corridor. The line has increasingly frequently been closed for long periods as a result of groundwater flooding at Ballycar, probably due to climate change. Groundwater flooding is not as well understood as other types of flooding such as river flooding, rainfall-related flooding or coastal flooding. It seems to be particularly common in rural Ireland, especially in several western counties, including Clare, Galway, Longford,
Mayo and Roscommon. The committee has asked Geological Survey Ireland which recently took over as the lead agency dealing with groundwater flooding for its advice on the causes of such flooding and how the risk of such flooding could be mitigated. I understand there have been some successes in County Galway. It is possible that these lessons could be learned in Ballycar.

I ask the director of Geological Survey Ireland, Mr. Verbruggen, to make his opening statement.

**Mr. Koen Verbruggen:** For the benefit of the joint committee, I will provide a little of the background to Geological Survey Ireland, GSI. GSI, Ireland’s national geoscience organisation, is a division of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment. It has just under 100 staff, most of whom are geoscientists and technical specialists who operate from offices in the Beggars Bush area of Ballsbridge. It carries out its role as a key knowledge centre and data repository with a library, archives and extensive digital data holdings. It provides an extensive advisory service, particularly for local authorities. It has a statutory role as a national archive and a consultee on planning in areas such as wind farm development, county development plans and foreshore licences. In addition to supporting the Government and the local authorities, it provides data and advice for industry and researchers and acts as a project partner in all aspects of Irish geoscience, especially in European projects.

GSI carries out a number of major initiatives, in addition to the geological mapping of Ireland’s bedrock and subsoil. INFOMAR, Ireland’s national seabed survey and marine mapping programme, is on schedule to complete the mapping of all Irish waters by 2026. It is funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, managed by GSI and delivered jointly with the Irish Marine Institute. GSI operates five inshore survey vessels. The data collected are used to update national charting and support maritime policy and Ireland’s marine plan, Harnessing our Ocean Wealth. INFOMAR is globally acknowledged as a world class endeavour. It has trained over 100 people in modern, high-tech seabed surveying methods.

Tellus is the national geological and environmental baseline programme which will complete its coverage of the entire island of Ireland by 2028. There are two components to the acquisition of data through Tellus: airborne plane mounted geophysics mapping which records magnetics, electromagnetics and radiometric properties; and ground geochemical sampling of soils, stream sediments and surface waters. The data generated improve our mapping and inform the agriculture sector in areas such as animal and plant health. It underpins radon mapping which is conducted in conjunction with the Environmental Protection Agency, as well as peat mapping and environmental assessments. As the programme involves flying at the low altitude of 60 m and aerial surveying, an extensive communications and outreach programme is carried out in advance. All householders are leafleted and there is extensive direct consultation with owners of sensitive livestock.
Groundwater 3D is a major groundwater resources and protection characterisation project. It is targeting high priority regional complex groundwater systems, including those where there have been pollution incidents or boil notices have been imposed on public or private drinking water supplies. The programme builds on a long history of work in this area. GSI has been instrumental in developing the groundwater protection schemes risk assessment methodology and providing national maps to enable planning and licensing authorities to carry out their functions with respect to groundwater protection. The groundwater programme collaborates with Irish Water, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Federation of Group Water Schemes, the local authorities, the Office of Public Works and other State and non-governmental organisations. It supports the implementation of the water framework directive, the drinking water regulations and the nitrates directive through the provision of data and expertise.

In addition to the specific programme areas I have mentioned, GSI holds databases and carries out work across a range of geoscience areas, including minerals, aggregates and metals. It is involved in geoheritage, for example, by supporting geoparks. Its work on geohazards includes mapping of landslide susceptibility and ground motion. It provides advice on tsunamis and volcanic ash. It is also involved in geotechnical and urban geology. Its extensive data holdings and maps are made available online for free via a suite of websites and digital platforms. It also supports job creation through a dedicated business cluster programme, Geoscience Ireland, with assistance from Enterprise Ireland and the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade and Business, Enterprise and Innovation. GSI also supports research through data, partnership and funding and regularly provides co-funding with Science Foundation Ireland, the Irish Research Council and EU programmes. It helped to set up and is now supporting the Irish Centre for Research in Applied Geoscience which was established recently with support from Science Foundation Ireland and industry.

On groundwater flooding, GSI has developed particular expertise in understanding complex karst systems, including turloughs, which can be important conduits for pollution. The climate change and flooding section of the 2016 programme for Government, under the heading of Turlough Systems, promises to “provide resources to the OPW to commission studies into individual problematic (prone to flooding) Turlough systems, if requested by a local authority or another relevant State agency”. GSI has been tasked with gathering historical and new information to deliver on this objective. It has initiated a new dedicated groundwater flooding project in response to it. It is working with and supporting researchers at Trinity College Dublin in the specific area of modelling the behaviour of complex turlough systems such as those in the Gort lowlands, building on previous studies. The primary objectives of the project are to liaise with key stakeholders to provide technical input into proposed flood protection schemes; to install a temporary exploratory network to maximise data
collection, with over 60 monitors having been installed to date; to establish permanent monitoring networks to provide long-term quantitative flooding data; to develop a methodology for improving groundwater flood hazard maps and real-time monitoring of groundwater flooding; to develop modelling and analysis methodology for estimating groundwater flood frequency, or the likelihood of flood events; and to assess the likely impact of climate change on groundwater flooding. In 2018 GSI will deliver new groundwater flood maps to the OPW, as required, in the second implementation cycle of the floods directive.

The area of Ballycar affected by flooding is not listed as a turlough and is not one of the areas selected for monitoring by the programme in consultation with the local authorities. GSI was not consulted on the railway development plans. It received reports on the issue from the committee at the end of last week, followed by further updates yesterday. Unfortunately, therefore, we have not had an opportunity to carry out a review of the information. After GSI was contacted for information by the committee last month, it was able to download satellite data from the European Space Agency and create a visualisation of flood extents in the area in the time period of interest to the committee. It has been provided. My colleagues have put together a short presentation which provides some more details of our work in the areas of turlough flooding and the Ballycar visualisation. They will go through it briefly.

**Dr. Owen Naughton:** I will give an introduction to the nature and characteristics of groundwater flooding. I will speak about how it differs from other forms of flooding and the influence it has on the flooding at Ballycar. Historically, groundwater flooding has been relatively poorly understood and overlooked. The standard of data on this form of flooding is very poor, especially by comparison with that on river flooding. There are no established methods for risk management or frequency analysis of this kind of flooding.

Groundwater flooding in Ireland is strongly linked with geology. It occurs mainly in the west in areas of pure well bedded limestone that are susceptible to a process known as karstification which occurs when limestone dissolves to form caves and conduits. Such areas tend to have discontinuous or absent surface water drainage. This means that it does not tend to be the case that there are continuous rivers draining rainfall out to sea. Instead, the groundwater system plays an important role in drainage. The movement of water through the landscape occurs mainly through the groundwater system, rather than through the surface water system. Groundwater flooding tends to require sustained rainfall of relatively long duration. Fluvial flooding tends to occur after hours, days or, in some cases, weeks of rainfall, whereas groundwater flooding tends to be caused by weeks or months
of rainfall. The documentation I have furnished to the joint committee provides some examples of this. It includes three representative hydrographs for groundwater flooding. As members can see, there is quite a range. The red dot on the hydrograph shows where the annual peak takes place. In terms of flood management, it is the highest level reached in any given flood season. The top turlough responds quite quickly so the annual maxima is quite early in the season. That is responding to rainfall in the order of two to three weeks. We get a range of those from weeks, to two to three months, all the way to maybe six months.

The second and third graphs show that the flood peak happens later in the season. The flood extent in any given year is a function of the amount of rainfall that fell in the previous three to six months. Ballycar appears to be in this range. Flooding tends to occur due to sustained rainfall over months. This also gives rise to the longer durations as it takes quite a while for flood waters to build up and it also takes quite a while for them to recede.

The other element of complexity with groundwater flooding is that there tends to be a range of flood mechanisms. This is the way in which a flood manifests. Groundwater flooding is more related to volume than discharge. In rivers, the flood is the peak discharge so it is the peak flow. In groundwater it is more an accumulation of water. It tends not to be flowing water; it is more hydrostatic water. It is just a build-up of volume within the landscape. We have developed some conceptual models for this. The most common form of groundwater flooding in Ireland is the turlough. These are topographic depressions in the landscape. They tend to dry out during summer but during winter, because there is a discontinuous surface drainage system, there is not enough storage in the landscape. What happens is excessive recharge is stored in these depressions so there is a build-up of flood water over the winter period which is then discharged back into the ground water system when the capacity becomes available. In most years this would not present a flood risk but in some cases, in periods of extreme sustained rainfall events, it can pose a flood risk to surrounding areas.

Another flood mechanism of particular relevance to Ballycar is backwater flooding. This is where there is point recharge, where a stream or river is discharging into the groundwater system. Under normal conditions, the capacity of the groundwater system to drain this water away is sufficient not to cause an excessive build-up of floodwaters so there would not be a flood risk. Under extreme circumstances, such as in the example in the second graph, there can be a large build-up of floodwater that can pose a flood risk. What causes this is the balance between the rate at which water enters the sink and the rate at which it exits. The rate at which it exits is a function of the size of the conduit draining it. It can be a function of downstream hydrological conditions. That is the most relevant groundwater flood mechanism with regard to Ballycar.
That is the background. I will now hand over to my colleague, Dr. Ted McCormack. The purpose of our programme is mainly to address the lack of historic data and provide more relevant information on how, why and when groundwater floods occur.

**Dr. Ted McCormack:** As Dr. Naughton said, our primary focus is on data collection and identifying the lack of historic data in turloughs as opposed to rivers and coastal flooding and to improve the understanding of groundwater flow systems as a result of the new data. The project is a collaboration between Geological Survey Ireland and Trinity College Dublin.

One of the primary things we did early on was set out our monitoring network. We have 60 monitoring stations in various flood-prone turloughs around the country. These sites were chosen primarily if they were brought to our attention by a local authority or the OPW. I should have said that 20 of these sites will be upgraded to telemetric status so they can be accessed online. It is a work in progress. Aside from those 60 stations, there are about 400 turloughs in Ireland. We cannot put physical monitoring in all of them so we came up with a strategy for monitoring the turloughs that we do not have equipment at. These ungauged catchments are important if we want to implement the second cycle of the EU Floods Directive. To create our groundwater flood map of Ireland, we need the data from all these sites, both current data and historic data. This is accessible by the Sentinel-1 satellite as part of the European Space Agency programme. It offers good spatial coverage. It is an all-weather day and night system. It is systematic data collection so we get an image over Ireland four days out of every six. It is good resolution which is useful for turloughs. These satellites were operational during the 2015-2016 floods so we have good images of the worst flooding that occurred.

I will show members an example of normal aerial imagery of Ballycar. I will hopefully move to a video that works. I will show the committee what Ballycar looks like during a summer from a synthetic-aperture radar image. It is pretty blurry and that is due to the nature of the radar but it is still useful. The video shows the 2015 floods as well as the most recent floods, both of which closed the railway line. The ultimate output of the timed series of satellite images combined with topographic mapping is to pull out elevations of the flood in the image. This image is our synthetic hydrograph of Ballycar flooding. It is preliminary. We are still working on it so the numbers are not perfect. It gives us a good idea of how bad the floods were in 2015 and more recently.

The reason we are collecting this data for everywhere is that we can apply hydrological models to them to start building long-term hydrological data. If we have three years of synthetic satellite generated hydrographs, we can apply models to them using rainfall. For as long as there is a rainfall record, we can go back and estimate 70 years of flooding in the turlough and how it operated and that
gives us a grip on coming up with a one-in-100-year flood at the turlough. That is useful for flood risk, climate change and conservation objectives.

**Mr. John Fitzgerald:** I thank the committee for its invitation and for the opportunity to make this presentation on behalf of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. Our Department has not had any central involvement in the various issues surrounding the flooding in the Ballycar area or the various engineering solutions being considered over the years to alleviate this problem. While the Department does not have a decision-making role in the technical, funding, planning consents or environmental issues on any project that may emerge, should the committee wish, I am happy to outline, in so far as it may be helpful or relevant, how certain sites of nature conservation value are protected, the role of our Minister in nature conservation, as a prescribed body and also in environmental assessments.

As the committee will be aware, like all member states, Ireland is bound by the requirements of the EU nature directives. The Habitats Directive and the Birds Directive are the cornerstone of the EU’s nature conservation policy and establish the EU-wide Natura 2000 ecological network of protected areas. These directives aim to ensure the protection of habitats and species which have been selected for conservation within special areas of conservation and special protection areas. These directives have in turn been transposed into national law under the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011, the Planning and Development Acts and the Wildlife Acts. In Ireland, there are some 439 sites selected for protection as special areas of conservation including Lough Gash turlough at Ballycar. There are 154 special protection areas and 148 areas designated as natural heritage areas.

The Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht is the statutory authority for nature conservation in Ireland and also has a number of statutory functions, including that of a prescribed body or consultation body under various statutes, including the Planning and Development Acts. As such, the Minister may provide observations and advice to relevant public authorities on the implications of the activities they are regulating, which may have an impact on the built or natural heritage. In this capacity, the Minister’s role is not a decision-making one but rather to provide observations that may assist a consent authority in its consideration of the implications of a proposal for the environment and in its own statutory decision making role. The Minister may also provide observations on the implications for the natural and built heritage of plans and programmes that public authorities may wish to undertake.

All public authorities, including the Minister, whose functions may affect nature conservation must exercise those functions in compliance with the habitats directive and the birds directive. In that...
regard, public authorities are obliged to ensure that they do not undertake or adopt, or give consent to any party for, any plan or project that may adversely affect the integrity of a European site. This is achieved through the appropriate assessment provisions set out in Article 6 of the habitats directive. These provisions require that a screening for appropriate assessment of a plan or project for which an application for consent is received, or which a public authority wishes to undertake or adopt, must be carried out by the public authority. The purpose of this screening exercise is to assess, in view of best scientific knowledge, if that plan or project is likely to have a significant effect on the conservation objectives of a European site. If, following an appropriate assessment screening exercise, it cannot be excluded that the plan or project will not have a significant effect on a European site, this does not mean that the project or plan cannot go ahead. Instead, the public authority concerned then undertakes an appropriate assessment before deciding if consent may be granted for the plan or project. Having carried out an appropriate assessment, a public authority can grant consent for a plan or project where it determines that it will not adversely affect the integrity of a European site.

As regards Ballycar Lough catchment, the Department understands that Iarnród Éireann commissioned RPS Group in 2010 to carry out a flood risk assessment of the Ballycar catchment and to undertake an assessment of flood alleviation options for Ballycar Lough. RPS Group issued its report in 2011. At the time, RPS Group consulted various bodies and stakeholders, including our Department. Following this assessment and a review of the potential implications of the various options identified, the consultants put forward a preferred option for a variety of reasons. RPS Group then carried out an appropriate assessment screening on that preferred option, identified in its report as Option 1C. This option involved the construction of a pipe culvert along the underground section of the Ballycar Lough outflow channel.

The appropriate assessment screening report examined the impacts of the preferred option in terms of its potential impacts on the Natura 2000 sites in the area. Lough Gash turlough special area of conservation lies within the study area and some other European sites also lie adjacent to or within a 5 km distance of the study area, and these Natura 2000 sites are the focus of the consultants’ appropriate assessment screening report. The report concluded that as the full scale and magnitude of potential impacts on Lough Gash turlough special area of conservation were, at the time, still to be determined and due to the sensitivity and importance of this Natura 2000 site, an appropriate assessment should be carried out regarding the preferred flood alleviation works.

We note that in its 2011 main report for Iarnród Éireann RPS Group had outlined what it saw as the next steps to progress the project. These steps included consultations with stakeholders, including the NPWS of our Department, public consultation and an information day, preliminary design of works, carrying out of an appropriate assessment and obtaining the necessary consents and planning.
approvals. We in the NPWS are not aware of any initiatives or steps taken since the 2011 report was published; certainly, we have not been contacted since on the project and are not aware of any planning approvals being sought. In the last couple of days, in the context of documents being made available for the meeting of this committee, it became apparent to us that the 2011 RPS Group report has been followed by a 2015 report. The Department had not received or previously been made aware of this report but on request yesterday it was made available to us yesterday evening.

The Department fully appreciates the importance of this issue in this part of rural Ireland, as it appreciates the need to deal with flooding more generally around the country. The Department, including through the NPWS, is more than willing to work with the proponents of any project in a constructive fashion on this matter, for example, with regard to the scope of any further assessments that may be required for any flood alleviation works that may be pursued.

I thank the members of the committee for their attention and I will try to answer any questions that may arise.

Chairman: Thank you. I invite Mr. John Sydenham, commissioner for flood risk management from the Office of Public Works, to make his statement.

Mr. John Sydenham: I thank the committee for inviting the OPW to the meeting to discuss the problem of flooding at Ballycar on the Limerick-Galway railway. The OPW engaged constructively with both Clare County Council and Iarnród Éireann over recent years in considering the flooding problem at Ballycar and participated in a working group on the matter convened by the council in 2014.

In 2011, Iarnród Éireann commissioned a leading international firm in the area of flood risk assessment, RPS Group, to undertake a study of Ballycar Lough and its associated flooding. However, the OPW had concerns about the solutions proposed in the 2011 RPS Group report, specifically that what was being proposed by way of drainage of the lough would involve discharging the flood waters downstream to an embanked area that experiences flooding occasionally, contains some critical low lying air traffic control infrastructure, was in part the subject of significant environmental designation and where discharges to the sea were subject to the tidal cycle. The OPW identified that the proposals in the report would require some further mitigating measures not taken into account at the time.

The RPS Group report also did not include a cost-benefit analysis of the proposed flood relief works. Proposed works on this scale could only proceed on the basis of an appraisal which indicated clear economic justification for spending in the order of €10 million. The estimated cost of raising the railway line was only marginally more than the cost of the flood relief works that were proposed. However, when account was taken of the additional cost of further mitigating measures that would be required but were not covered in the report, the economic argument clearly tilted in favour of raising
the railway line. The OPW has been clear in its position that as Iarnród Éireann is the primary stakeholder and beneficiary from any proposals to resolve the flooding problem at Ballycar, it is for that body to take the lead in resolving the matter.

At a meeting of the working group in September 2014, Iarnród Éireann confirmed its acceptance that it had the lead role in resolving the railway line flooding problem. Following the meeting of the working group in 2014, RPS Group was requested by Iarnród Éireann to review its 2011 report.

Chairman: I am sorry to interrupt but a mobile telephone is interfering with the sound system. Perhaps it can be turned off.

Mr. John Sydenham: Okay. The 2015 updated RPS Group report acknowledges the concerns raised by the OPW and, following an assessment of five flood alleviation options, proposes as its preferred option raising the existing railway embankment in the vicinity of Ballycar Lough. RPS Group states that this preferred option has been chosen because it provides the least ecological impact on the special area of conservation, SAC, and other protected sites in the area, it does not increase flood risk elsewhere in the catchment, especially at the internationally important air control communications infrastructure, and it has the least negative effect on geology and hydrology in the area.

The OPW supports the finding and recommendations of the updated RPS Group report. It is a matter for Iarnród Éireann to progress the proposed preferred solution of raising the railway line and to pursue the associated funding requirement through its normal channels for investment in its infrastructure. It is to be noted that the estimated capital cost of the proposed solution is just under €10 million and the benefit to cost ratio is calculated by the consultants at just €400,000. The proposed works, therefore, are not economically feasible. I also note that as a result of the road raising works carried out by Clare County Council in 2015, all residential properties in the area now have access to their properties even in extreme flood events.

The OPW will continue to co-operate with Clare County Council and Iarnród Éireann in whatever way it can in this matter. I thank the members for their attention and I am happy to take any questions they may have.

Chairman: Thank you. I invite Mr. Tom Tiernan, senior engineer from Clare County Council, to make his opening statement.

Mr. Tom Tiernan: I thank the committee for inviting us to address it on this issue. I confirm that the Newmarket-on-Fergus-Ballycar area is within the jurisdiction of Clare County Council, hence the rationale for the council having a particular interest in this issue. The Newmarket-on-Fergus drainage district is one of the drainage districts within County Clare for which Clare County Council has a
responsibility in a maintenance context. This drainage district is part of the issue surrounding Ballycar but, as I said, we have a maintenance responsibility in respect of that drainage system. We have had serious concerns over the years about the fact that the extent of flooding which occurs in this area goes above and beyond what normal maintenance requirements can facilitate. Our concerns about the importance of finding a resolution to this problem have been repeatedly aired. We have a flood alleviation role as a local authority in dealing with various flood alleviation issues as they arise here and there around the county, but this is generally in the context in which residential properties, business premises and so on are impacted, as distinct from this case, in which flooding has not been a major issue from a domestic flooding point of view.

We are available at all times, and always have been, to support the development and maintenance of key infrastructure such as the railway line which facilitates strategic access between Ennis and Limerick, the western rail corridor, etc. We see ourselves as having a facilitation role and have always made ourselves available to facilitate the resolution of this issue in whatever way we can. We have liaised in recent years with both the OPW and Iarnród Éireann in a bid to facilitate an appropriate strategy to deal with this problem. The key meeting in this regard, which Clare County Council, Iarnród Éireann and the OPW attended, was held in September 2014. There was a clear understanding at that meeting that Iarnród Éireann saw itself as the lead agency in the pursuit of a resolution to this problem, it being the key stakeholder. Clare County Council’s concerns until that time had related not just to the railway line, but also the fact that local roads in the area became inundated from time to time through flooding events which have evolved repeatedly over the years, with the result that access to a number of homes was cut off. Clare County Council dealt with this issue in 2015 by the reconstruction of a local road to an elevated level in order that the homes in respect of which access was affected in those extreme flood events were facilitated in all circumstances.

As I indicated earlier, Clare County Council sees itself as a facilitator in whatever way possible to move this issue forward. We remain available to facilitate in whatever way we can, whatever solution, whatever options, may be put forward in this regard.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Tiernan. I know he retired from Clare County Council last Friday. I have worked closely with him down through the years and I thank him for that and wish him well in his retirement. He has an able replacement in Mr. Leahy, whom I also wish well.

**Mr. Tom Tiernan:** I thank the Chairman.

**Chairman:** Lastly, I call Mr. Jim Meade, chief executive of Iarnród Éireann, to make his opening statement.
Mr. Jim Meade: Along with my colleague, Mr. Colin Hedderly, I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for their invitation to attend to discuss the topics of flooding at Ballycar and opportunities for heavy rail investment. Before I directly address the two issues, I will give the committee a brief snapshot of Iarnród Éireann today - our services and service outlook for the future. Our team of more than 3,800 colleagues maintains a network of just over 2,200 km of rail; operates 4,300 services each week; carries just over 900,000 customers per week, with numbers growing; operates 144 stations across the network; transports 100 million tonne-kilometres of freight by rail; and brings 2.3 million tonnes of freight and 900,000 passengers through Rosslare Europort annually, for which we are the port authority. After an extraordinarily challenging decade, in 2017 we equalled our previous record number of customers at 45.5 million passenger journeys for the year, and 2018 will undoubtedly see a new record high. Our funding shortfall, while not fully resolved, and while the accumulated impact remains, has been reduced significantly, and the commitment in the national development plan to bridge the shortfall completely by 2021 is very welcome as it will give us the foundation on which to play the fullest role possible in the future. We are ambitious for our rail service and for how it can deliver solutions to congestion and environmental sustainability for Ireland. I will address this further as we look at opportunities for heavy rail.

As chief executive of Iarnród Éireann, as a former district manager in Limerick whose area of responsibility covered the Limerick-to-Ennis line and as a Clareman who lives close to Ballycar, I am acutely aware of the impact of recurring flooding at Ballycar on our customers and services. We are all aware of the unique hydraulic constraints which have been identified in the Ballycar Lough catchment. The underground section of the Ballycar Lough outlet channel is the main hydraulic constraint on the Ballycar Lough drainage system. This restricts outflow and thus causes flow backup and flooding in the vicinity of the lough. The Ballycar Lough catchment is a very slow response type catchment owing to the mild nature of the topography. Diversion of the Rosroe Lough catchment flow to the Ballycar Lough catchment increased the flows in channels within the Ballycar Lough system. The stream channels do not have adequate capacity to deal with the increased flow, and the inadequate capacity of the existing bridges and culverts located at various locations on the drainage system also restrict flow.

Without delving too much into history, it should be noted that while the railway line has been in existence and operational since 1859, no flooding was recorded prior to 1930, the year after the Rosroe Lough catchment diversion was undertaken by the Office of Public Works. The 1930 flooding was the first of 17 flooding closures to have occurred since. That five of these closures have taken place in the past decade illustrates how climatic factors are increasing both the frequency and severity of flooding, particularly as the line was raised by 0.7 m, or approximately 2 ft 6 in. in old money, in
three separate works programmes between 1984 and 2000. The most prolonged flooding event occurred from December 2015 to May 2016, with a peak flood level of 1.4 m over the rail, while the most severe in 2013 saw flooding peak at 1.9 m over the rail. The flooding event earlier this year saw the line close for seven weeks from late January.

In 2011, following engagement with the Department of Transport, the OPW and Clare County Council, Iarnród Éireann commissioned a study by RPS to examine potential flooding alleviation options. The consultants and Iarnród Éireann worked closely with the OPW in particular in undertaking the study. The study, which has been provided to the committee, identified five potential flood alleviation options, numbered 1 to 5, with three flood flow discharge routes, A to C. The optimum solution which, as well as alleviating flooding impacting on the railway line, ensures that flooding risks in other areas such as Newmarket-on-Fergus are not worsened was option 1C, namely a 1.5 m diameter piped culvert, with inflow to and outflow from Lough Gash via the existing inflow and outflow stream channels. It is Iarnród Éireann’s position that this approach should be pursued jointly with the OPW and Clare County Council, and that just as the railway is not the cause of the flooding, the solution is one that requires a more holistic approach than a focus on the railway line alone, given the potential impact on the wider catchment and the expertise of the agencies involved.

In the absence of progress on the optimum solution, Iarnród Éireann has identified an option of track raising which will reduce the probability of line closures. The cost of this solution is in the order of €10 million and involves raising the track by 1.2 m. The proposal will not resolve the issue, however, and would merely reduce the frequency of flooding events to approximately a quarter of the current level and reduce the length of individual closures. Therefore, the option is not as attractive as the optimal solution I have outlined, not to mention the potential worsening of flood levels as the impacts of climate change continue.

I will now discuss investment in the rail network. Both the National Development Plan 2018-2027 and the national planning framework, Project Ireland 2040, provide for significant rail investment and the expansion of our role in meeting the transport needs of Ireland over the coming decades. While the NDP explicitly details funding of €2 billion over a decade for what has been referred to as the DART expansion programme, this refers to the physical location of these works. The benefits of this programme are national and network wide. Put simply, it will allow us to operate more trains with more capacity on all radial routes on the national network. It includes meeting the steady state maintenance and renewal requirements of the network by 2021; delivery of the national train control centre to maximise the capacity and performance of the existing network; non-tunnel elements of the DART expansion, including increasing the capacity of key rail corridors such as Cherry Orchard to Heuston station, which will benefit all Heuston intercity routes, and Maynooth, which will benefit the
Sligo line; the targeting of improved inner-city journey times on the Dublin to Belfast, Dublin to Cork and the Limerick and Galway routes, with knock-on benefits for Kerry, Westport and Waterford; enlargement of the rail fleet by 300 carriages to give network-wide benefit; further appraisals of projects such as the western rail corridor phases 2 and 3, Cork commuter rail and a high-speed Belfast to Cork, M3 Parkway and Navan line; and investment in park-and-ride facilities, rail station improvements, passenger information and accessibility enhancements. These elements are all part of the plan.

The national planning framework is supportive of all that I have outlined and of further investment. While it is silent on some aspects of the roll-out of rail, we must stress that we in Iarnród Éireann view the strategy as very positive. Railways, more than any other form of public transport, rely on critical mass and higher density population centres to provide the economic case for investment and societal benefits. By developing strong cities as a counterbalance to Dublin, we will ensure that the development of railways in Ireland in the future is beyond Dublin-centric commuting, as critical as that requirement is. As things stand, the existing network is underfunded, and we in Iarnród Éireann must see the funding issue resolved before further network expansion can be considered where increases in the public service obligation, PSO, funding are likely to be required. While previous studies have shown a weak business case for further regional rail lines to be opened, the renewal studies conducted as part of the NDP will definitively establish the position under the current Department of Finance investment guidelines. In the meantime, nothing will occur that will prevent the development of railway lines should a business case support it.

I will now discuss greenways, which have generated considerable debate in many parts of the country. Our position is that where there is no realistic medium-term likelihood of a rail line being reopened, greenways help to protect the rail alignment from encroachment and adverse possession by providing a public amenity on otherwise unused alignments. In every case where we, along with CIE property, issue a licence for the operation of greenways on disused alignments, it is with the explicit provision that the alignment would revert to us should a decision be made to invest in the reinstatement of the railway.

I have outlined our position to the committee in terms of the agenda and welcome any questions on the issue.

Chairman: I thank the chief executive. I will call members to speak in the order that they have indicated and the first to speak is Senator Coffey.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome all of the officials from the various agencies to the meeting. It is important that we discuss and debate the issues of concern to committee members and, indeed, the wider public. When we consider our national transport routes, whether they are motorways or rail
networks, it is important that we acknowledge and identify where problems arise. That is why we are
discussing the issue of flooding at Ballycar in County Clare and how flooding has a negative impact on
the Galway to Limerick railway line. I am from Waterford which is in the south east, so this issue does
not impact on me personally, but I have an overall interest in sustaining the national rail networks. I
supported Deputies and Senators when they sought this debate and asked the committee to invite the
representatives that are here before us today. I have no problem supporting them again. I want to put
it on the record that I am disappointed that some of the Deputies who promoted this issue are not
present today for a debate, a fact that should be noted on the minutes of this meeting.

With regard to flooding on the Galway to Limerick railway line, I found the various submissions
interesting. I note that Iarnród Éireann commissioned RPS Consultants to carry out flood risk
assessments and to bring forward recommendations of which there were five in total. As somebody
who lives outside of the region but is an observer who is interested in sustaining the national rail lines,
it seems to me that when State agencies are not directly responsible, while they will say they will
facilitate, that they are available to assist and that they acknowledge the problem, unfortunately,
when it comes to putting their hands in their pockets and dealing with the problem, they run a mile. I
am being blunt when I say that but that is what this looks like. It is not in the national interest for the
State agencies to do so. I also say that directly to the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Clare County
Council and to the Office of Public Works, OPW. Iarnród Éireann is experiencing a very real issue with a
significant piece of our national transport infrastructure. I am disappointed with the representatives of
our State agencies, who represent our citizens who depend on them to act in their best interests. The
answers and submissions are now on the public record and sound like these people have washed their
hands of the problem.

Five recommendations have been made and the optimal solution was put forward by Iarnród Éireann.
I am disappointed by the silo mentality that has become apparent straight away, and we have seen
this happen with many issues of public concern. The attitude adopted is one where if it is not my
problem, it is someone else’s problem, I will give it lip service, I will talk about it, I will offer my help, I
will offer to facilitate, but when it comes to dealing with it and putting my money where my mouth is,
it is not my problem. Essentially, there is no solution.

Iarnród Éireann wants to invest €10 million in raising the railway line but I believe that is not a good
way to spend taxpayers’ money. I am sure the company could find a lot better ways to invest that €10
million such as promoting more use of rail services. Iarnród Éireann depends on the assistance of
other agencies and the assistance of the State. I am disappointed with the replies that I have heard
from the various agencies. They will walk away, which is their right from today, as it is not their direct
responsibility, but the problem will remain. Until the next flood arises and citizens kick up again and
flooding becomes an issue of public awareness, the agencies will make statements and repeat the cycle but the problem will remain unresolved. It is important that we have had this debate because we have been afforded an opportunity to hear the witnesses’ replies and put them on the record. There is no point in beating around the bush. The problem is not resolved.

I will take the opportunity to deal with some other issues. I mentioned the National Parks and Wildlife Service. It is important that the delegation is here. I wish to acknowledge the organisation’s important statutory role in the protection of our natural heritage and conservation.

During flooding events in the area that I represent in the south east, and I refer to where the River Suir and its catchment area experienced serious flooding, I detected poor co-operation from the National Parks and Wildlife Service. I saw farmland flooded and people being put out of their homes due to flooding. When attempts were made to repair the riverbanks, however, all that the National Parks and Wildlife Service meted out was bureaucracy, licensing and planning issues. These issues are not a primary concern when somebody is on their knees, and I mean farmers who had their land and property flooded and who were forced out of their homes. The National Parks and Wildlife Service can rightly point to EU directives, national policy and all the rest, but I am talking about a time when citizens have had to leave their homes and land due to flooding. All those citizens want to do is repair a breach in a riverbank, yet they are read the riot act about bureaucracy.

Rather than trying to gain stakeholders’ support for conservation and the protection of habitats etc., which we all should try to achieve, all I know from being a public representative for the past 20 years is that the National Parks and Wildlife Service has gone the wrong way about things. If we want to garner support for conservation and protection, we need to engage with stakeholders in a proactive way, identify their problems and show empathy when people experience problems. When a family have been forced out of their home due to flooding, they do not want to hear about bureaucracy, directives and rules. All they want to hear are solutions.

This is not the way that national agencies should work towards solutions. Rather than bureaucracy and orders, we should consider engagement, solutions and protocols in times of an emergency. I mean instances where directives and orders may be circumvented in the event of an emergency so that a breach on a riverbank can be repaired, thus getting people back into their homes. If that is done, then State agencies will receive great support from local communities. I would like the witnesses to respond to my comments. We are here to talk about solutions to flooding problems, but there is not a solution in every case. We all know and have to accept that there are flood plains, but there are practical solutions to difficulties where citizens are impacted on, whether on a railway line, a farm or in a house, and we should all work towards them.
One of the best ways to travel is by rail. It is peaceful and a person can work or engage in good conversation while travelling. It is also very safe. I do not believe, however, that we are doing enough to promote rail travel. I see the odd advertisement on television, but the benefits are not being sold to the younger generations. Older people have used rail services far more than young people. One could point to the motorway network and the increased use of cars. Every young person now has a car. Every family possibly has two or three cars, especially in rural Ireland, but if Iarnród Éireann sold the benefits of rail travel better, there would be increased use, even during a trial period. It needs to do more in that regard.

Does Iarnród Éireann have plans under the new national planning framework, Ireland 2040, to invest more? Mr. Meade spoke about enhancing routes from Dublin to various cities. He said “improved inter-city journey times will be targeted on the Dublin to Belfast, Dublin to Cork and the Limerick and Galway routes.” As somebody who comes from the city, I am very disappointed that Waterford is only mentioned as an afterthought, with County Kerry and Westport. According to Ireland 2040, the population of the city is expected to double from almost 50,000 to 100,000. I would not, therefore, have expected Waterford to be an afterthought. As one of the five cities identified in the national planning framework, I expect it to be a priority. I, therefore, urge Iarnród Éireann to upgrade what I have just read from the submission to ensure Waterford will be a high priority. There are huge plans for the redevelopment and regeneration of the entire north quays and Plunkett Station. CIE and Iarnród Éireann are co-operating with the various stakeholders in moving the plans forward.

Waterford has to be a priority. As it is just 20 years away, we need to plan now for the priorities identified in Ireland 2040. Iarnród Éireann has huge responsibilities in that regard. I would like to hear responses to my questions.

Rosslare Europort has been mentioned. I understand Waterford Port is one of the only ports in the country where the railway line passes directly through the port, next to where ships berth. It is essential that there be investment to take some of the heavy freight off the roads and use the rail infrastructure which I believe is an asset to deliver freight from elsewhere in the European Union and around the world to Waterford Port and Rosslare Europort, if necessary, and redistribute it throughout the country through the rail network. I would be interested in hearing a response on this point.

I welcome the co-operation of CIE and Iarnród Éireann on greenway development. It is a huge area of growth. In County Waterford we have seen the advent of the Waterford city to Dungarvan greenway, one of the biggest tourism success stories we have had. There were challenges in and barriers to getting back land that had originally been part of the railway line and which had been taken over by landowners. By way of the proactive approach taken by Waterford City and County Council and
Iarnród Éireann solutions were found. They did not just walk away as we are doing today. It took almost ten years to find solutions, but they were found and the council made it happen. The citizens who reside in the area are very grateful; the landowners who were engaged with are happy, while the many thousands of tourists who come from all over Ireland and beyond are also very happy. I encourage continued engagement in that respect and a positive perspective. Does Iarnród Éireann have a formal protocol in dealing with greenways, learned from other experiences, that it can adopt and adapt for use in other areas?

I am sorry for going on a little, but it was important to outline many of my views and there was an opportunity to do so this morning. We all have a responsibility to deal with flooding. Politicians are often left to carry the baby when the crises happen. We look to the State agencies for help. We do not expect them to look the other way just because it is not their direct responsibility. We expect them to come to the table to find solutions and work with all stakeholders in finding them.

**Mr. Jim Meade:** I fully take on board the Senator’s comment on Waterford being a city. In rail terminology we think of the radial routes. Westport is not on a secondary route; it is off the Galway route. That is the layout. I am glad that the Senator mentioned the Plunkett Station development which we see as very exciting. We are very involved in and supportive of it. We have recently done some major work in Kilkenny in resignalling. It is on the Waterford line. We treat all lines equally and want to continue to grow services and achieve journey time improvements on all routes. There is no question of Waterford not being on a par with other cities. It absolutely is.

Rosslare Europort is under our direct control, whereas Waterford Port is not. Our general manager responsible for freight is in constant communication with Waterford Port and, with Brexit on the horizon, considering how the two ports can contribute in the long term. It is on our agenda with our commercial people and freight manager.

We have a protocol for greenways and are actively engaging with any group that wants to discuss or consider the provision of greenways because they are a way of protecting our alignment and protecting us from encroachment or adverse possession which we have had going back decades. Reference was made recently in a different conversation, outside this building, to the Harcourt Street line having been in State ownership and going out of it and how it had taken a lot of work to bring it back into it. We recognise that mistake from the past and will not be relinquishing ownership of any route. They will all be protected and if greenways are the way to protect them, that is what we will do. If in time there is a business case to go back to providing rail services, we will be building this into the greenway licence.
Mr. John Fitzgerald: I am not aware of particular circumstances on the River Suir or what happened there. The Department is not responsible for planning or whatever licences are involved. Throughout the country many of our regional management staff were first on the ground with the other agencies to try to help people find solutions. Our aim on those occasions was to put people first. There may sometimes be sense in assessing emergency works. It is possible that they could have effects on other communities downstream and it is often worthwhile carrying out some assessment of what is proposed to ensure they will not. The Department has been working very closely with other agencies in the meantime, for example, the Office of Public Works on its catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme. We have been as proactive, helpful and co-operative as possible.

We will continue to work within our statutory functions. On emergency works to relieve flooding, we have put the details of liaison officers in each area in the country on our website. People or agencies that have concerns can contact the regional staff who will be available to deal with them and co-operate in whatever way they can. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government co-ordinated an emergency response protocol between various agencies and the National Parks and Wildlife Service will work with them. It has been a question of people first. As I said, I am not aware of what happened on the River Suir or that we have to any extent put barriers in the way of emergency flood relief works. In Ballycar we will work within our statutory remit to do what we can. We do not have funding to carry out these infrastructural works. However, we will do what we can to help in such situations.

Mr. John Sydenham: As Mr. Fitzgerald mentioned, the OPW has undertaken a comprehensive assessment of the flood risk countrywide, culminating in the recent launch of the catchment flood risk assessment and management, CFRAM, programme, which is a ten-year, complex programme involving the development of approximately 150 projects, incorporating 118 new projects as well as existing projects in the pipeline. When complete, it will have protected approximately 95% of the properties in the country that are at risk. We are working hard on the problem of flooding nationally.

The Ballycar problem is a slightly unusual one insofar as it relates to a particular aspect of the catchment, that is, the rail line. While it sounds harsh, that is not cost effective in an economic sense. I accept that there are broader issues and I appreciate the concerns in that regard and the importance of rail. In developing CFRAM, we had to examine quite a number of areas countrywide where there were properties at risk. After assessing the pros and cons of possible solutions, any project that did not pass a certain threshold in terms of economic viability - the benefit-to-cost ratio, BCR - was not one that we could progress. There is an economic reality to which we must adhere.
That said, we work extensively with bodies countrywide. It is in everyone’s interest to work collaboratively in attending to flooding problems. Even though there are many matters that are Joint Comite on Rural and Community Development effectively not our job, we will do everything we possibly can to work with local authorities and other agencies on attending to serious problems. Everyone working in the field of flood relief and flood risk management sees the devastating impact on communities, which is problematic and recurring, so it behoves everyone to work together.

There has been an emphasis on the 2011 RPS report. After assessing the five possible solutions, the revised report that was published by the same consultants in 2015 recommended raising the rail line. That is an important consideration. When they are looked at, there is a solution to most problems. Senator Coffey asked who would pay for this if it came down to a simple issue of funding. There is more work to be done collectively to find a solution, as there are differing views in the room this morning. We need to be clear on what can be done to fix this, what is the best approach and from where the funding will come. It is a piece of infrastructure and there are well-tried methodologies for obtaining funding to invest in infrastructure, which is an important criterion.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. The year 2011 was mentioned. I am not from the area in question, but I am well aware of the problems experienced by people who have travelled on that line in recent years. I am looking across at the witnesses, where one side of the State is telling the other side what it cannot do. Were they in the private sector, they would not have jobs. If one cannot deliver, one will not have a job. Senator Coffey pointed out how one crowd will write to the other telling it that doing something is not “cost effective”, which I have just heard from the OPW. The west does not deserve a train line because it is not cost effective. The OPW is considering how many houses there are in an area. I know how it analyses cost effectiveness. The number has increased slightly in some areas. However, we are talking about the bigger picture. This is about the tourism on which Clare, Galway and Limerick are relying. This is about the west. Do we just want to shut the train track down? It looks like that will happen.

We have been looking at the same problem for seven, eight or ten years. No one else would still be looking at a problem after so long. Nothing is being done because, given what has been said, no money will be forthcoming from the OPW. Five different solutions have been examined.

Mr. Fitzgerald referred to the NPWS helping. Given the loughs and turloughs in the area, any farmer, council or State body undertaking work must adhere to 34 types of permit. This even affects private property, which is a burden the State has placed on owners because of EU regulations. The 5 km up the road and the environment were mentioned, but we should be discussing the people in the area
and those who travel on the train line. They come first in my book regardless of the EU or statutory obligations. The term “statutory obligations” is used time and again. The first thing we are elected to do is represent the people of an area and solve problems.

It will cost €10 million to raise the track, but Iarnród Éireann does not have that money and there is no point in saying it does. Debt has been taken on in respect of Lough Funshinagh and elsewhere in County Roscommon, but we want solutions. Four or five years ago, two of us went to a field with diggers and dug through the night. Fair play to the council in Galway. We opened a drain all the way down to a river. From that day on, 10 km of flooding was solved. We did that work voluntarily because it would not have been done quickly enough otherwise. It was piped and done. Why can the NPWS not install a pipe that would take the overflow? It could then worry about the environment while ensuring that enough water was held.

Due to the hen harrier, many parts of the country are drowned because we cannot clean drains and alleviate flooding. Mr. Fitzgerald referred to the NPWS being helpful, but he should go to Connemara in County Galway and see the problems being caused on its roads. The NPWS objected to them being widened. When the council opened a drain on a road that was flooded, the NPWS rang up to tell the council to close it again because it was a suck-all SAC. Am I correct in saying that there is not an individual statutory instrument in respect of every SAC? I followed the situation in question tightly. It was a site of community importance. My understanding is that at least half of our SACs are not actually SACs.

I wish Mr. Tiernan from Clare well in his retirement. He said that he and the council would help in any way and that Iarnród Éireann was the main stakeholder. Of course it is - it has the train line. However, does that benefit Clare, Limerick, Galway and elsewhere in the west? Do we want to shut the line and, as per usual, say it was causing problems and that the people can either go to Dublin or jump on a plane at Shannon and leave the country? From what I have read and heard, we have been dealing with a bit of a flood for eight years. When there was flooding in Athleague, we voluntarily used our own diggers to solve problems. There were no papers, meeting after meeting, environmental impact assessments, appropriate assessment screening reports and so on, as we would have been told by the NPWS to go through the imperative reasons of overriding public interest, IROP process, which would have taken four more years and seen the can being kicked down the road.

This is about solutions and someone making a decision quickly. There are five options. If the recommended one cannot be afforded, then it is gone. It is as simple as that. Will the Government provide €10 million to raise this track? Would it be good value for money? Culverts in various areas were mentioned. Could a pipe be placed along the line? Would that help a larger catchment area? The
pipe could be laid at a height that would not damage the environment because a trapdoor can be placed on any pipe to let out as much water as desired. However, no one will make a decision. Everyone will say that we cannot do that but there is no solution as to what we can do. At the end of the day, we will keep reading in the newspapers or hearing on the “Nine O’Clock News” that the line is blocked. We are trying to get balanced regional development, to get people to live and work in Clare and the west of Ireland and to get businesses to set up there so that people can go to work. Government after Government and the great EU, that devised all these regulations, talk about public transport. From what I have listened to today, the flora and fauna, birds or whatever else is more important than a person. If that is the way things have gone, by God our country has gone wrong. This happening countrywide.

Business people around the country are afraid to go near certain areas because of the amount of designation. They are closed off. A circular - it is not even a law - has been sent to every council from the NPWS to set a 15 km buffer zone around an SAC. I can be contradicted on this if I am wrong but I have been met officials from Galway County Council, Roscommon County Council and so on. The 15 km buffer zone is in case the integrity of a site might be damaged. If we want to go by the book then every part of the west of Ireland will be caught in that.

I address my next comment to Mr. Meade who talked about greenways. I am fully in favour of greenways and rail services but he mentioned a greenway or a rail line not being upgraded or opened in the “medium” term. What does he mean by “medium” term? I would like a straight answer because I spoke to him earlier on and I found him a straight talking person. I do not want anyone saying it is the NTA’s problem. It is and it will give the money. Having read the rail review, etc., does Mr. Meade believe the Galway-Athenry-Tuam section will open the medium term? There is wording in Government documents, and everyone is saying everything at the moment and dancing around in circles but no one is cutting to the chase to say one way or the other. It is a good to know if a person is going to be told today or tomorrow. We need to be told directly if this will be opened in the medium term or will it go beyond that?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** Deputy Fitzmaurice asked a straight question and he deserves a straight answer. The medium term is five plus years. We have a plan to which I referred in my opening statement. We will do the study but there is no funding and no proposal in that plan to open any further sections of that line.

**Chairman:** There were a number of questions for the NPWS as well. I call Mr. Fitzgerald.
Mr. John Fitzgerald: On the SACs, I understand that not all of them have gone through the statutory instrument process but they were notified to Europe many years ago and enjoy statutory protection as they stand.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Do they?

Mr. John Fitzgerald: Yes, they do. That is my understanding.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: If there is a site of community importance, the deal signed up to is for a six year period for the member state or sooner if possible. What is it then?

Mr. John Fitzgerald: My understanding is that all candidate SACs that were notified to the Commission enjoy protection from the date they were notified.

Returning to the Ballycar, the Deputy mentioned the various options and the SACs within 5 km. It is relevant that when RPS Group carried out the work, it identified one option as being the most likely to enjoy success. It was suggested, as I mentioned earlier, that an appropriate assessment should be carried out on the Lough Gash SAC. However, there were five other SACs in the area and the company concluded that it would have no affect on those areas. Not every SAC within 5 km, therefore, is affecting every single project. I can understand sometimes that there may be frustration around the country with the various existing laws. I cannot apologise for the NPWS following its statutory role. That is the role the Government has given us.

I do not know if there is a narrative suggesting that the NPWS is against everything. That is an unfair portrayal of what happens on the ground. For example, the service is a statutory consultee under the planning process. More than 3,500 applications were referred to us last year by planning authorities for comments and observations. In those cases, the Department did not lodge any appeals on nature conservation grounds against any of the decisions of the local authorities in those cases. Of all of the applications received in the Department through natural and built heritage last year, recommendations were given to the planning authority that permission not be granted in seven cases out of the 3,500 referred. None of those cases related to the NPWS. They related to the built heritage. In 2018, to date, approximately 1,800 projects have been referred to us for our observations and we have not recommended a refusal in any case. I just wanted to put those statistics on the table as well.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Fitzgerald. There were some questions for Mr. Sydenham-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What about the 15 km buffer zones? Why do the councils have to consider this even though it is not law?

Mr. John Fitzgerald: I am not aware of the 15 km issue in respect of various types of projects.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It came from Mr. Fitzgerald's organisation.
Mr. John Fitzgerald: It may be a guideline; it is not law.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: It is a guideline.

Mr. John Fitzgerald: Each project must be assessed on its merits. Some projects may have implications farther down the line than 15 km, for example, such as a development that is upstream of an SAC. That could well have implications for the SAC regardless of the distance. Each case has to be examined on its own merits.

Chairman: I call Mr. Sydenham to address some of the points made by Deputy Fitzmaurice.

Mr. John Sydenham: My previous comments cover that. There is a general appreciation that something needs to be done. It can appear frustrating for people at times with multiple agencies involved. There is a fundamental issue with Ballycar. We have had conversations around various options and what the solution might be. Some have challenges relating to the railway line and others do not. There needs to be clarity on what is being recommended, on how that gets delivered and what is involved in doing that. We then come to the issue of who funds that. There is further work to be done. We discussed reports from 2011 and 2015. People will wonder what has been happening since then, where are we with this, what happens next and what is the solution. We need to look at that in more detail.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I welcome the officials and thank them for their presentations. However, I broadly concur with some of the comments made by my colleagues, Senator Coffey and Deputy Fitzmaurice. We all experience frustration dealing with bureaucratic bodies. That is the perception of the witnesses’ organisations. Rather than engage with stakeholders or affected persons in a practical way, much of the time agency personnel clothe themselves in the armour of bureaucracy. I could give a multitude of examples after 35 years as an elected representative.

I do not know anything about the flooding in County Clare, but listening to the discussion about it brings to mind the flooding of Westmeath from the Shannon, which was heartbreaking. In 2000, I brought forward legislation which sought to get all of the organisations talking to each other. All of the agencies are working in silo, like cocks crowing on their own dunghill.

The CFRAM report is an excellent document, in respect of which I salute the OPW. It is well drafted. It is an iconic document on which the OPW is to be commended. In my experience, getting a practical response from some of the agencies is as rare as a white blackbird. When I was a member of Westmeath County Council, Jim Hearn, the county engineer, was always trying to come up with solutions, but when it came to getting a response from Iarnród Éireann, one had a better chance of winning the lottery. When it came to proposing solutions to road issues, for example, taking a piece of
land from Iarnród Éireann, the process was mind-boggling. The agencies need to buck themselves up and accept that they are public servants working on behalf of the public. They need to treat the public as their paymasters. We have had enough of them passing the buck.

As I said, I know nothing about the problem being discussed today but this has all the hallmarks of passing the buck. We were told earlier by the witness from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, that he only received most of the documentation required for this meeting late last night, which is desperate. The 2011 RPS Consulting Engineers report included no cost-benefit analysis. A first-year student would know that such analysis is vital.

In regard to the work done by Clare County Council, county councils can be a little obstructive at times but generally they can be brought around because local authority members require to be elected every five years so they can be held to account. The local authority executives know they have to run a show but they generally come around to practical solutions. I have no doubt that Clare County Council will rise to the occasion.

In September 2014, the OPW, Iarnród Éireann and Clare County Council came together on the issue. In 2015, they had another run at it, yet in 2018 the issue has still not been resolved. As stated by Deputy Fitzmaurice, this is unacceptable to those who are being flooded and cannot access their homes and so on. There are all sorts of emergencies, which we are hearing about constantly on “Liveline” and “Morning Ireland”. The agencies need to get their act together. The Ballycar problem tallies with what I have experienced. Many ordinary Joes and elected members have been dealing with flooding issues for many years and they have good ideas on how to address them. Many years ago, we had small stone drains. There was many a good job done by people who did not have expertise or a list of letters behind their names. We sometimes need to listen to ordinary people because they often have the solution to the most complex problem. I am flabbergasted but not surprised that eight years on this problem has not been resolved.

I would like to deal now with rail issues. I note Mr. Meade is new to his position and I wish him well. I am an advocate for public transport provision. I know that, as in the case of hospitals, it is not possible to have light rail at every corner. People travelling to Dublin from Mullingar, however, benefit indirectly from light rail transport. It is to be hoped the issue around Luas provision at Maynooth will be sorted out soon. I would like to be able to leave my car at home and travel to Dáil Éireann via light rail transport. The Dublin local authority wants a ban on cars in the city centre, but that is a nonsense without proper connectivity. At what point will I be able to connect to the Luas to get to Dáil Éireann? Theory must complemented with practical solutions.
When it comes to heavy rail infrastructure, what is proposed in the national development plan, Project Ireland 2040, and the national planning framework sounds great. The Sligo-Edgeworthstown-Mullingar-Enfield-Maynooth to Connolly Station route is one of Iarnród Éireann’s busiest. I travelled on this line many times 35 years ago when I was studying law in Dublin and I regularly took part in the so-called guess the breakdown station competition. Every winter I could be certain that the train would break down at the Hill of Down. My wife also travelled on this line when she was going to the health centre in the Croke Park area. It was horrendous. From November to March each year this service was a disaster and it left a sour taste in people’s mouths. In fairness, the service has improved but more needs to be done.

We need more carriages. I note it was mentioned that 300 carriages will come on stream over the next number of years. A good share of them is required for the Sligo-Longford-Mullingar-Maynooth to Connolly service. As the Chairman will be aware, people do not mind standing an odd time but in general people paying a weekly or monthly fee want to sit down. Some people do some work on the journey to Dublin. We have a huge migration from west to east, unfortunately. If IDA Ireland did more work for the west, people would not have to travel east for jobs. People need to be properly accommodated in terms of seating and I appeal to the witnesses to ensure it is provided.

I am a supporter of greenway development. I was one of the first people to get involved in the restoration of the Royal Canal from Spencer Dock to the Shannon. I am delighted with the Athlone-Mullingar greenway. It is being well used. However, there is a huge lack of common sense when it comes to the rail structure between Mullingar and Athlone. Mullingar is akin to the capital of Westmeath and Athlone is a huge industrial belt in Westmeath. There has been mass migration of students to Athlone Institute of Technology. People from Athlone come to Mullingar to attend the Midland Regional Hospital and for various other reasons. The railway structure from Mullingar via Castletown and Streamstown to Athlone is in pristine condition. There is a rail connection between Athlone and Galway and Athlone and Tullamore. There is also a rail connection from Athlone to Dublin, yet there is no connection between Mullingar and Athlone. Every time it is suggested it is rejected. It is included in the Westmeath County Council county development plan. The greenway has been developed. It runs alongside the railway line and would not interfere with a rail service.

I will give another example. I am sure Deputy Fitzmaurice will go mad when he hears it. The area of east Westmeath has exploded. Kinnegad, Killucan, Raharney, Milltownpass, Rochfortbridge and The Downs have exploded in population. A huge number of people could access the train at Thomastown. There is an area at this location where the train could pull up. Currently, every train that passes it has to pull up to allow the train coming in the other direction to pass. A local businessman, Mr. Shay Murtagh of Riverdale, was prepared to put in money to help as Iarnród Éireann, like everybody, was
down in the dumps during the recession. Mr. Meade knows who I am talking about. We acknowledge that. Mr. Franks knew about this and he was positive and kind of saw the benefit. It would cost approximately €500,000. The company would have had to run more trains but it would have been environmentally friendly and people would have had to park their cars. There are people willing to deal with the company over bits of land to make sure parking would be available. It is common sense. With a gobdaw like me suggesting this solution, one might say, “He is half loony, he knows nothing.” That is fair enough but many other people far smarter than me are also looking for this.

My colleague, Mr. Denis Leonard, was a councillor out there. He is a guy with an interest in the environment and he was absolutely on fire about this. The Minister, Deputy Ross, promised on floor of the Dáil in December 2016 to come down but I have never had sight or light of him. It was a solemn commitment given on the floor of the Dáil to come down to see it. Mr. Meade knows about it and somebody has tipped him off about it. It is an example of the type of frustration felt by people. The company could make a major contribution to getting more people to use its service by advertising the rail links. I agree with Deputy Fitzmaurice and although it is not my bailiwick, I go to Westport and its environs. There is a large tourism element in this and people love travelling by train. If they get to Westport, they can go on the bike trail for as long as they like, as some of my relations do. It would all contribute to the economy. Despite being “culchies”, as many people call us, we should not be put on the back burner. We are entitled to respect and we pay our taxes. We contribute a fair bit to the economy. We might not have the population levels of cities but we might if we got the same level of infrastructure development and accommodation that everybody else gets.

I am concentrating on Iarnród Éireann this morning and I thank the Chairman for allowing me to do so. I heard good things about Mr. Meade and I was delighted he got the job. The company had a few issues and dealt with them. As a Labour Party representative, I ask him to always look after the working people on the railways and on buses. If he does, it will pay him well. The Minister must have bitten his tongue while saying he would be prepared to have a share option with workers. Hear, hear. The entire matter has somersaulted. The workers play a positive role in ensuring transport in Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann. They have taken many cuts over the years and they made a contribution to sustaining services. The company should play a positive role and explore every option to ensure they see decent standards as well.

Mr. Jim Meade: I take all of the Deputy’s comments on board. There is some good news for him and as part of the development plan we are starting with the Maynooth line on the Sligo road. As the Deputy rightly points out, it is an area that has seen much growth even in the past decade, during the recession. There are big numbers coming on to it. Our priority for electrification is to develop that route. I can confirm we have already started the process for a new fleet and we recognise that fleet
capacity on the network is a key matter. We have started the process for the 300 new carriages I referred to in my opening statement and it will take a couple of years for the wheels to start turning and earning their keep on the ground. The service certainly needs to grow. To be upfront and honest, there is still no plan to reopen the line between Mullingar and Athlone. It may be looked at in future but certainly in the current national development plan-----

**Deputy Willie Penrose:** Mr. Meade could make a name for himself by putting it into the plan. It is there for him.

**Mr. Jim Meade:** With the Deputy’s backing I might take that on board.

**Deputy Willie Penrose:** If he is innovative, Mr. Meade will not get anybody saying anything negative about him.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** What about Thomastown station?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** I will have a look at it and I was not aware of the issue. The message was not conveyed to me. We will have a look.

**Deputy Willie Penrose:** I appreciate that the Chairman has given me much latitude. Thomastown station is ready and trains just have to pull up there. I would appeal for a bit of investment. The company will get €2 billion over the next number of years so it could spend €500,000 there. It would mean Mr. Meade would make a great start to his tenure as chief executive.

**Chairman:** For the information of Deputy Penrose, the President, Mr. Michael D. Higgins, lived in Ballycar and was raised there. He lived very close to the rail line we are discussing. It is the next parish to me, Newmarket-on-Fergus. It is a long-standing issue and as I understand it, over the past ten years, the railway line has been flooded six times. I have raised this, as have many other public representatives in Clare, and absolute frustration has been expressed today by all the members here. Standing back to look at this, nobody wants to grasp the nettle or take responsibility.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I propose we bring everybody back in three or six months and we want a solution by then. Once the witnesses go out the door today, it is goodbye.

**Chairman:** I was about to propose something along those lines. There is a willingness to try to deal with this and everyone feels every agency could have an input. In fairness to the Office of Public Works, there is frustration and we want clarity on what solution should be put in place. There must be an agreement between all agencies and a decision on who will pay for this. Could each agency make a contribution towards a solution? Why does it have to be one agency above another? This is about County Clare, the west of Ireland and the attractiveness of the mid west. It is about commuters,
whether they are working or going to college or school, and tourists. This really takes from County Clare. Every year the railway line is closed for an extended period, which is just not good enough.

The pass the parcel approach that has gone on for the past ten years must stop. Through the former county manager in Clare I proposed some years ago that a working group be set up. When that happened, there was a bit of engagement but it has now been parked. I agree with Deputy Fitzmaurice on calling in the agencies again in six months. They could then have some solution worked out with a recommendation on how it would be funded. I ask each agency to reflect on these deliberations and recognise that a solution must be found. This infrastructure is important and it is just not good enough for it to lie idle for months on end, as occurs far too frequently now.

There is a section of rail line with a speed restriction from Ballybrophy. Is there an intention to try to address that? I advocate the need for a spur from the Limerick-Ennis line to Shannon Airport. I know some work has been done on a proposal for that. It would complement the infrastructure that we have at Shannon. An alternative to that would be a regular commuter bus to bring passengers from the airport to Sixmilebridge station. Frequency needs to be improved. Adding another service to improve the frequency on the Limerick-Ennis line was also discussed earlier.

Mr. Jim Meade: I will address those questions. Currently, all we are doing with the Ballybrophy rail line is maintaining it as is until we get a definitive decision from the Department and the NTA on its future. It is part of the rail review that was done and we are just awaiting a decision on that.

The Chairman is correct that the airport study was done. I was involved in it in a former life and a former role and a route was identified for that. Clare County Council is preserving that route. That was the decision at the time. It was costly because of the terrain it goes through. It has not been advanced in more than a decade since it was looked at.

With regard to the commuter bus, I respectfully suggest that we need to sustain the Ennis-Limerick line by understanding how we prevent the flooding. We will then talk about expanding the service on it but there are opportunities to do so and I fully support that.

Chairman: Coming back to that point, all of the agencies are willing to work together.

Mr. Jim Meade: Yes. Absolutely.

Chairman: Iarnród Éireann commissioned RPS Group and it has presented five solutions. Will Iarnród Éireann commit to working with the other agencies and to come back to the committee with a solution in six months?

Mr. Jim Meade: Absolutely, 100%.

Chairman: Could we also have this commitment from the OPW and Clare County Council?
Mr. John Sydenham: Yes. Absolutely.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I ask that each agency nominate a representative to a working group in the interim period to see what the avenues are. If money is the problem, let them identify it as such and let us look for the funding under the national development plan or whatever. This is a national asset. It is a national primary route in the rail network and it needs to be supported. If there is a problem, we need to deal with it and grasp the nettle, as the Chairman said. A working group should be established in the next couple of months and it can make recommendations to the committee. We can then add our voices to try to support them. We need to find solutions.

Deputy Willie Penrose: I agree with that.

Chairman: Mr. Tom Tiernan was on the former working group. Should the chief executive officer of Clare County Council or Mr. John Leahy be on the working group? Who would he suggest as representative of the council? Should the council chair the working group and push it forward in the interests of the county?

Mr. Tom Tiernan: Previously, the county manager and I facilitated that meeting in 2014. At the time there appeared to have been an impasse that needed to be overcome. We felt that it was overcome by virtue of the fact that Iarnród Éireann took on the report that had been prepared by RPS Group in 2011. Iarnród Éireann ran with it and reviewed it based on comments and observations that had been made on the report, in particular by the OPW. The points were taken on board and the revamped report emerged in August 2015 with the recommendation in favour of the raising of the railway line, as distinct from a drainage solution, which had been proposed in the previous report. I can understand why it was not the most palatable solution in the world, due to the cost-benefit ratio when it was isolated from everything else, and because of all the various points that the members have made. It is understandable when the cost-benefit ratio of 0.4 or thereabouts. A little persuasion or cajoling is needed in those circumstances. Clare County Council will not be found wanting in terms of whatever way that can be facilitated. The chief executive officer is not present but I am sure I can speak on his behalf with regard to a willingness to re-engage and to up the ante to move this issue forward. Mr. Leahy and I will give a commitment to try to reinitiate that approach.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Tiernan. Does any member wish to make a final comment?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: With the rail review in hiding, and with no decisions being made, can Iarnród Éireann confirm that three or four rail lines, including the line under discussion, have been recommended for closure? What is the view on that? I understand it is up to the NTA but Iarnród Éireann has an input into that. Does Mr. Meade believe it to be an unwise decision? Would it be fair to
say that Iarnród Éireann is more in favour of rail lines in parts of the State than other forms of public transport?

Mr. Jim Meade: The rail review conducted a cost benefit analysis of the entire rail network. It outlined the cost of operating each part of the network on a segment-by-segment basis. As railway people, we do not want to close any line. If there were no issues, we would like to open and run more railways. The decision is not ours to make; it is with the Department and the NTA. We fed all the information into it and they developed the document. The decision is with them and we are not making a recommendation one way or the other.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I am conscious of the review and I am aware there are question marks regarding the Waterford to Limerick railway also. I refer back to Project Ireland 2040. If the population projections for the five regional cities of the State and the increased populations in their hinterlands are not taken into account in the review, then the review is not bona fide. Project Ireland 2040 is an ambitious plan that, for the first time, provides for capital expenditure in tandem with the growth strategies for the State. If we are planning for population growth, it is important that we also plan for the infrastructure associated with that growth such as housing, broadband and especially public transport. Any review that does not take Project Ireland 2040 into account needs to be reviewed again because that is the plan for the next 20 years. When the ten-year capital plan is announced, there will be funding to support that. We should certainly take account of that plan, especially with regard to rail infrastructure, and support it where possible.

I reiterate my earlier point on the promotion of the benefits of rail travel among our younger generations. Many younger people have not experienced it because most of them have cars and are using motorways. It is a diminishing return. Students will use it for college if it is on their doorstep but additional benefits to rail travel could be promoted. If a promotion was run to attract younger people to use the railway, we would see the benefits of that. There is a future in rail travel and I am certainly supportive of it. I would support Iarnród Éireann in any way to try to promote rail travel.

Chairman: On behalf of the joint committee I thank all the witnesses who attended. The committee recommends that a working group be convened and we will be in touch with each of the representatives on this group to get an update and progress report with a view to having a further meeting, if needed, in six months in order that the group can present a solution to the long-standing problem with the flooding at Ballycar.

*The joint committee went into private session at 12.40 p.m. and adjourned at 12.50 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 20 June 2018.*
AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHOIBAIRT TUAILTE AGUS POBAIL
JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
Dé Céadaoin, 20 Meitheamh 2018
Wednesday, 20 June 2018
The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:
Deputy Peter Burke,
Senator Grace O’Sullivan.
Deputy Seán Canney,
Deputy Michael Collins,
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice,
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,
Deputy Willie Penrose,
Deputy Niamh Smyth,

Rural Transport Policy: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputies Éamon Ó Cuív and Martin Kenny. I remind members, witnesses and the people in the Gallery to turn off their mobile phones because they interfere gravely with the sound system. I ask everyone to take a moment to check their phones.

The committee has included road connectivity and, in particular, rural transport among its priority policy issues for 2018. This is our third meeting on rural transport. We met officials from the National Transport Authority, NTA, on 28 March last and we met officials from Irish Rail on 23 May last. We also met officials from various agencies on 23 May to discuss the flooding problems at Ballycar on the railway line between Galway and Limerick. We will return to this topic in November 2018 to consider the progress that will have been made by that date. The programme for Government, the rural development action plan and the national planning framework address the need for quality rural transportation, including bus services within regions and connectivity with long-distance rail and bus services. Such forms of transport benefit rural communities and make them more sustainable and help to address social exclusion. In addition, increased use of public transport helps to reduce the effects of climate change through reduced carbon emissions.
Today we are joined by representatives of the NTA and Bus Éireann, both of which are heavily involved in the implementation of rural transport policy. After they have made their opening statements, I will invite the members of the committee to put questions to them. I suggest that members should limit their questioning to between three and five minutes. They may come in more than once.

I will now read some formal notices for the information of witnesses. I draw their attention to the fact that, by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the Chair to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given. They are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I advise the witnesses that any submissions, opening statements or other documents they have supplied to the committee will be published on its website after this meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome Ms Anne Graham, who is the chief executive officer of the NTA, Mr. Tim Gaston, who is the NTA’s director of public transport services, and Ms Margaret Malone, who is the NTA’s rural transport manager. I also welcome Mr. Ray Hernan, who is the chief executive of Bus Éireann, Mr. John Sheridan, who is Bus Éireann’s operations manager, and Mr. Robert O’Mahony, who is Bus Éireann’s public service obligation network works manager. I ask Ms Graham to make an opening statement on behalf of the NTA. She was here at the end of March and she is very welcome back to the committee today.

Ms Anne Graham: I thank the committee for inviting me to attend today’s meeting. I understand it wants me to address the topic of rural transport. To assist me in dealing with subsequent questions, I am joined by Mr. Tim Gaston, who is our director of public transport services, and Ms Margaret Malone, who is our rural transport manager.

Before I deal with the specific areas of focus, I would like to set the context by providing a brief overview of the NTA’s remit in respect of rural transport services. Public transport in rural areas is provided in various ways. Iarnród Éireann provides rail services under contract with the NTA. Any changes in rail services require the approval of the NTA. Bus Éireann provides a variety of services through its commercial Expressway services, which are licensed by the NTA, and through a network of subsidised public bus services under a direct award contract with the NTA. Both services serve many rural towns with frequencies varying from weekly to several times a day. Any changes in subsidised services require the approval of the NTA. Other commercial operators provide a number of town-to-town services and intercity services across the State without any State subsidy. If Bus Éireann or any commercial operator is required to withdraw any of its commercial services, the NTA works to ensure communities are not left behind.
The bus services that are provided under the rural transport programme are contracted by the NTA and are managed by 17 Local Link offices throughout the State. Although some 80% of these services are demand responsive, regular scheduled services between towns are also provided under this programme.

The rural transport programme is now known as Local Link. Its objective is to provide a good quality nationwide community-based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs. Key features of the rural transport programme include the completion of 1.9 million passenger journeys per annum, with 900,000 of those journeys provided for free travel passengers. These figures include 200,000 million passengers who required assistance. We also provided an average of 150,000 service trips annually. Local Link services travel over 11.8 million kilometres annually. More than 400 private operators provide the services, using the services of almost 900 drivers. The programme funds the provision of once-off trips for individuals and community and voluntary groups to help address lack of transport as a factor in social exclusion. Some 62% of service trips are defined as either fully or partially accessible.

Over the past two years, the authority has supported the expansion of rural transport services to include regular commuter bus services. Operating at least five times per day over a five, six or seven days per week schedule, these services are specifically designed to ensure connectivity with other public transport services. This connectivity facilitates passengers to make onward journeys typically to access education, employment, health, recreational and other opportunities.

The authority recently produced its Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018-2022 which sets out nine key objectives for delivery over the lifetime of the plan. The key priorities of the programme continue to include addressing rural social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services. The authority is implementing one of the listed actions in the strategy under objective area eight - encouraging innovation in rural transport service provision - regarding the provision of evening and night services to address unmet transport needs in rural areas. Twelve of the 17 Local Link groups applied for funding and proposals were assessed by the authority, having regard to evidence of need, previous experience in delivering evening and night-time services, value for money, geographical spread on a national basis, range and mix of proposed modes of transport, connectivity and integration with existing transport options while not representing a displacement risk to existing services, and potential for the mainstreaming of pilot projects.

The outcome of the assessment process was that a total of 53 additional services were approved for funding. The details of those services can be found in the appendix attached. The key characteristics of these new services include the fact that 19 of these services are extensions to existing regular public transport services. There are 34 demand-responsive services. The services will be provided nationally across 19 counties, and will run on average from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m., typically on Friday and Saturday evenings. All 53 initially approved services will be operational by late June or early July 2018 and will run until December 2018 on a pilot basis. In terms of reviewing the usage and patronage levels on these pilot services, the authority will closely monitor usage patterns and trends over the six-month period and advise the Department accordingly.
As five Local Link groups did not make an initial application, the authority advised in mid-May that it would consider any further proposed services from these groups should a need or demand exist in the transport co-ordination unit, TCU, area. A revised closing date of Friday, 1 June was set for receipt of applications, and all five Local Link groups subsequently submitted applications. These applications are being assessed by the transport planning team within the authority and a decision regarding funding is due shortly.

The authority is continually working with Bus Éireann to provide improvements on its contracted services and is looking at expansion of those services given that the budget for public service obligations has increased since 2016. The authority also promoted the improvements in regional cities, which have seen phenomenal growth in passenger numbers. These improvements cannot be sustained unless significant improvement work is carried out by the city authorities in providing bus priority measures, particularly now as car traffic congestion is growing rapidly. The work in enhancing the services provided by Bus Éireann has been delayed significantly as it has had to prioritise the changes required as part of its business recovery plan. It is expected that Bus Éireann will complete that work shortly and that we can recommence the service enhancement work.

The authority recognises that there are many gaps in our services provision. We have focused on the lack of service in our main towns and are prioritising the provision of new town services in Kilkenny, Carlow and Mullingar, all of which have a population in the 19,000 to 26,000 range.

In exercising its functions, the authority seeks to achieve the provision of an integrated public transport system of services and networks for all users. Wherever appropriate, we seek to integrate and co-ordinate services to provide for seamless travel options where change of bus and-or mode is required. This includes the operation of rural transport services - Local Link - which can facilitate connecting to mainline interurban services, irrespective of the provider of those services. In fact, the National Transport Authority, NTA, is the only body that can bring modes and operators together in an integrated service pattern that provides the best service for rural communities.

There are a number of key infrastructural items that support public transport which are required to increase the attractiveness of public transport, especially in rural Ireland. These include bus shelters, accessible bus stops and information at stops. The provision of additional shelters has been very constrained in recent years due to a lack of funding. The contract for the provision and maintenance of bus shelters now rests with the NTA rather than with each individual operator. We are well placed to deliver a comprehensive shelter programme.

Our ambition is to deliver high-quality public transport in rural areas. It is expected that Joint Comite on Rural and Community Development funding will improve from 2019. The authority needs to be in a position to put in place the staff resources that can deliver on our ambitious programme of improvements. I trust that we can answer any queries that arise.

Mr. Ray Hernan: I thank the committee for inviting my colleagues, Mr. Robert O'Mahony and Mr. John Sheridan, and me to discuss the topic of rural-based public transport, rural connectivity, and the role that Bus Éireann plays in providing those services. As the largest operator of public
transport services, we recognise the key role we have and will continue to have in providing a range of public transport services outside Dublin in close partnership with key stakeholders.

Bus Éireann operates a fleet of approximately 650 buses, providing 6,500 services on more than 220 routes every day to people in towns and villages throughout Ireland. Within our road passenger network we have more than 1.2 million different origin and destination combinations, and more than 10,000 bus stops are serviced in both urban and rural settings. We provide city services in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, but we also provide town services in Sligo, Athlone, Dundalk, Drogheda, Navan and Balbriggan. We provide urban and rural services that link practically every town in Ireland, which is particularly important in locations where there is no rail link. Last year, Bus Éireann transported almost 38 million passengers on our scheduled services, while our school transport services carried in excess of 115,000 students every school day on almost 6,800 routes to more than 3,000 schools.

As a person from a rural background, I am well aware of the challenges faced every day by rural communities throughout the country and the ever-increasing level of commuting to work, college and other locations. The fundamental principles of our approach to delivering public transport is to provide a reliable and punctual service that provides value for money to our customers. Bus Éireann is not just the largest public transport provider but also a significant employer, providing direct employment to more than 2,500 employees across 17 locations. Bus Éireann works closely with its large base of suppliers in communities throughout Ireland. We contract in more than €110 million from small, locally based private transport service providers, mainly for school transport services, meaning that Bus Éireann is the largest customer of the indigenous private sector in Ireland. This school transport scheme is a very good example of rural mobility and rural modal shift, providing sustainable employment in both urban and rural settings.

We believe that there are some basic building blocks that are fundamental to the integrated backbone network of services that we provide. Each journey that begins from village to town to provincial city and possibly on to Dublin and beyond is important to us, and it is the network of services provided within available funding and resources that makes mobility possible for all our rural or urban-based passengers.

Bus Éireann services connect with a significant number of Local Link services nationwide, and I believe that the provision of improved and enhanced services will further the opportunity for greater connectivity throughout Ireland.

In the past year, Bus Éireann, with the financial support of the NTA, implemented a completely revised and enhanced town service in Athlone. Service enhancements like this have resulted in a 91% increase in passenger numbers within the first 12 months and will continue to facilitate and drive modal shift. Significant service enhancements were also implemented along the M3 corridor in quarter 3 of 2017. This year further investment will see further service enhancements in the cities of Galway, Limerick and Waterford, the towns of Drogheda and Sligo and local services in Mayo, west Cork and west Clare. The enhancements outlined, which total approximately 50 changes to frequency or entail new services, will provide new services in the next three months, will provide greater access to local educational, employment and health facilities within the wider region.
In appreciating the value of connectivity, Bus Éireann is supportive of a proposal to facilitate a "town hub and spoke" approach where Local Link would interchange into the backbone network provided by Bus Éireann. This would make best use of the NTA investment in Bus Éireann services in recent years and would be focused on increasing efficiency and effectiveness in the overall public transport offering outside Dublin. While 86% of the Bus Éireann fleet is wheelchair accessible, I acknowledge that to facilitate the further roll-out of accessible services to our passengers, further investment is required at bus stops nationwide.

Again, with the assistance of the NTA, a significant investment in fleet will result in more than 135 new vehicles entering the Bus Éireann fleet over the next 12 months. These new vehicles encompass a variety of fleet types, all of which are low floor and wheelchair accessible and will be distributed across our nationwide network, including the improvements I referenced earlier. In order to service this ongoing expansion of the national network, Bus Éireann is now at an advanced stage in a recruitment campaign that seeks to recruit an additional 190 employees, made up primarily of drivers and mechanics. These new positions will be required in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Mayo, Waterford and many other locations across the country.

Building on the steady growth of public transport usage outside the Dublin metropolitan area that has occurred in the past two to three years, Bus Éireann welcomes all initiatives that will increase public transport usage across Ireland, including the recently launched BusConnects and looks forward to its roll-out outside of the greater Dublin area, GDA, at the earliest possible opportunity.

Congestion is no longer a Dublin city issue as many regional cities and towns are experiencing longer journey times, most acutely in the morning and evening peaks. In recent years, congestion has had a significant impact on the average speed of Bus Éireann services and subsequent journey times. In order to ensure efficient journey times, timetable adherence and subsequent modal shift, it is critical that large-scale bus priority measures are put in place. That will ensure the most efficient use of our fleet while ensuring reliable journey times for our customers.

I wish to re-emphasise to the committee that Bus Éireann remains committed to providing as many inter-regional services connecting rural communities to the main population centres. This applies also to our Expressway commercial services. It will be appreciated by the members here today that we do not receive any public subsidy for providing these inter-regional and intercity services.

In summary, Bus Éireann is steadfastly committed to providing a safe and sustainable public transport service to all communities outside Dublin in partnership with the NTA and our other stakeholders. Most of these services could not operate without public subvention. In this context I welcome the increased subvention provided by the NTA in recent years and its commitment to provide further funding this year and going forward. We are aware of our responsibility, as Ireland’s largest operator of public transport services, to ensure our operations are provided to the highest quality in terms of reliability, punctuality and value for money.

Chairman: As a number of members are indicating, I will call them in groups of two. I will call on Deputy Michael Collins and then Deputy Penrose.

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank the witnesses for attending this morning and affording us this opportunity to raise some issues - some of which are positive and others which are not. I will start
with the night time rural transport service the Minister announced recently. Initially, the sum of €200,000 was mentioned but that was never going to cover all rural areas. However, it was a start in the right direction.

Ms Graham stated:

As five Local Link groups did not make an initial application, the authority advised in mid-May that it would consider any further proposed services from these groups should a need or demand exist in the transport co-ordination unit, TCU, area. A revised closing date of Friday, 1 June was set [by the Minister].

Were any other groups entitled to apply for the extra money or was it just the five specific groups? I would appreciate it if Ms Graham could clarify that for me.

I will start with Local Link but I prefer to call it rural transport. I acknowledge the great work the rural transport service is giving to the people I represent in Cork South-West. It is a phenomenal service and it is managed very efficiently throughout the entire county of Cork, which is a massive undertaking. The service has worked very well. If it is not broken, why fix it? The service is funded at the moment through the NTA but local boards run the transport service. Is it intended that it will continue that way or are changes contemplated?

Is it possible for Bus Éireann and Local Link to interact more closely? It is not always clear that it happens. It is most important that a relationship would be built between the two services and that it could be further enhanced. In future could Local Link consider the provision of public transport services for people with disabilities aged over 18? If one has a severe disability and one is 17 years and 364 days old, one will get a transport service from the door to whatever institution one needs to access on a daily basis, but once one reaches the age of 18, one is given a free bus pass. It is possible that 50% of people with disabilities can use the bus pass but the other 50% are not and there is no service for them in west Cork. Such people are left stranded in their homes. Elderly parents are driving them for up to five hours a day when there are up to three buses in the area providing a service to young people up to the age of 18 yet those who are 18 will not be picked up by the bus. There is a breakdown in that regard which must be addressed because it is a very serious issue in the constituency I represent. I cannot speak for other constituencies.

School transport is a big issue in rural communities, in particular the catchment area. One shoe does not fit all. It can happen that a brother or a sister has gone to a school of the family’s choice at an earlier stage but when the youngest sibling is starting school, CIÉ may state it will not take the child to the school in question but will take him or her to the nearest school. I could argue about this until the cows come home and I might not get anywhere with it but in some cases there is very little difference between both sides of the argument. When CIÉ measures distances, it operates on the basis of the nearest way one can get to the nearest school but that is not the route the bus takes. When measuring the longest route the distance is based on the bus route. CIÉ is taking every short cut it can to prove the point that the mileage is shorter. The basis for its calculations is totally incorrect and I know it is happening. It should quite simply be the bus route from the house to the nearest school or the bus route from the house to the school that is furthest away. That is the fairest way. They cannot be taking big buses up boreens. That is not the way it works. Measurements can
be very tight in some situations. Parents want their children to go to the nearest school rather than to the one that is furthest away. That issue needs to be looked at.

The cost of transport for young people, under-18s and students, is an issue that comes up on a regular basis. The cost of transport from my parish of Goleen to Cork is frightening. It turns young people off. They are looking for some alternative to the excellent service in Goleen, which I commend. It is at 7.30 a.m. every morning. It is great to have a service that goes to Cork but quite a lot of young people who would like to use the service cannot afford to do so. They are students. I am not sure of the exact charge but I think it is over €30. It is a lot of money for a young person who might want to commute a couple of times a week. It is not feasible for them.

The other issue is rail. I have been fighting for rail to west Cork. They are all laughing at me. They were able to bring it to west Cork in the 1850s but we cannot bring it in 2018. Obviously things are not getting any better but have moved back a good bit. The one thing we could be looking at is providing a bus service to link with the rail service in Cork. Bus Éireann needs to look at that more closely. As we are not going to get rail to west Cork, we need to have a bus service that leaves west Cork every morning and links to the train service. While we may not have rail in west Cork, at least we would have a linking transport service to rail. It is very important. We need to look at it in more detail, if possible.

**Deputy Willie Penrose:** I thank the witnesses for their excellent and very informative presentations. The provision of public transport services is extremely important in the context of the environment and the reduction of our carbon footprint. The more public transport services we have, the less dependence we have on cars to get to work or various services and appointments. Fitting that in is the important thing. I come from a very rural area and the rural transport programme is one of the most important programmes operated by the NTA. I urge that additional resources are provided to ensure that the expansion of a sustainable rural transport programme across rural towns and villages is achievable. I acknowledge we cannot have it in every corner and every place we would wish but it is extremely important. I and my colleagues support the provision of important financial resources by way of subvention to enable Bus Éireann to provide a maximum level of coverage across rural areas. It is an essential service. The big drawback is when people have a service and only a small number of people use it, it is withdrawn fairly sharply. I understand the economic situation and valuation that has to be done on that but it has a significant impact on people.

School transport is extremely important. It is an issue Ms Graham or Mr. Hernan might not want to talk about. Eligibility criteria have to be reviewed and re-evaluated in the context of current demand and the current situation. It is outmoded. Deputy Michael Collins is correct. When we talk about the nearest point, it seems to be the nearest point as the crow flies, which is an awfully silly method of evaluation. Unless a young lad or young girl gets wings, he or she cannot go the way the crow flies. I have had huge battles over the years on this issue. I am in a rural area and know it very well. There would be 0.2 km in the difference but they almost want people to go across the hedges, ditches and the walls to get there. People are used to going to a place but are deprived of the opportunity of getting to the school because the other school is in the catchment area. It has to be reviewed taking a common-sense approach. The Minister of State, Deputy Halligan, was probably
looking at that but I hope the NTA is too. Bus Éireann will come back and say it will do whatever it is
directed to do, which is grand and dandy, but does not butter any parsnips for people who have
been deprived of the service as a result of rigorous bureaucratic evaluations of things. It has to be
looked at.

The expansion of the local night services, which I welcome, is extremely important in combatting
rural isolation. The significance of rural isolation has been referred to in recent reports. Very often,
people can live close to other people but still feel isolated because they cannot get into the local
village to meet people and talk about the various issues of the day. Have there been applications
from the Longford and Westmeath areas as part of the extended application deadline? A very good
service is being provided there by Noel McCormack and I expect that that service has reapplied.

Mullingar is a town of 24,000 people. I come from close to it. A town service is absolutely vital and I
am glad to see it included as part of the expansion programme for the current year. I appreciate
resources are always a constraining factor, I do not live in an ivory tower, but it is an important
strategic town at the centre of the country. It should not have been put on the long finger for so
long. We are delighted to see Athlone getting an enhanced service in the past 12 months or so but
we want to see that service put in place for Mullingar. They are of similar size and as Mullingar is the
administrative capital of Westmeath, it is important that it is put in place. I want to emphasise and
promote that and ask that it would be done as quickly as possible. It is very important.

The bus service is excellent. Buses are becoming more comfortable and I note Bus Éireann intends
to upgrade is fleet. That is great. I hope the NTA continues with that because it is important. A lot of
people who use buses to go to work use their laptops to do work and they want Wi-Fi. We have to
modernise to meet the demands of the consumer who is always right. As that is important,
continuing that operation will be important.

In the past, trying to get bus shelters in place was one of the greatest curses. I am sure my
colleagues share that opinion. I remember trying to get a bus shelter for the Downs outside
Mullingar on the N4 for people travelling to Dublin. If the IDA and Enterprise Ireland paid more
attention to Mullingar, we would not have so many people migrating on the bus services or trains.
We are where we are, as they say. Hopefully the IDA will redouble its efforts in Mullingar industrial
park and get industry in. Trying to get a bus shelter was an issue in areas such as Ballinalack and
Rathowen where people would travel either west or east, depending on where they were going. The
National Transport Authority will probably be able to deal with that now as there is more integration.
A few years ago, people would win the lottery more quickly than they would get a bus shelter. Bus
shelters are important because people like convenience and accommodation. The last thing one
wants to do is step onto a bus to go to work or school having been drowned by heavy showers.

Wheelchair accessibility is important. I acknowledge what Mr. Hernan just said about 85% of the
fleet. I am sure all the new fleet will accommodate wheelchairs. It is extremely important. We must
be inclusive and ensure there is maximum availability for all people. I support Bus Éireann very
strongly. It was an easy target for many years but it provided a lifeline to many rural areas.
Unfortunately when the financial recession hit, it was impacted heavily and withdrew a number of
services probably because the services were not paying. One cannot speak out of both sides of one’s
mouth. I do not mind paying extra tax to provide the necessary subvention for Bus Éireann and
public transport services in order that they can provide services in rural areas and other places like that. We cannot have our loaf and eat it. We must provide the money, and that comes from taxation or borrowing, although probably less from borrowing. If we have to do that, then that is what we have to do but we cannot be roaring and looking for services. There is a lot of duplication around. A person looks for additional services and then 10 Rural Transport Policy: Discussion (Resumed) says that additional money will not be provided. Some want additional services and lower taxation. It does not work like that.

I thank the witnesses for their presentations and look forward to their replies.

**Chairman:** I will call the witnesses to address the various questions posed.

**Ms Anne Graham:** Ms Malone will address the LocalLink services and I will pick up the rest.

**Ms Margaret Malone:** In relation to Deputy Collins’s questions on the additional call for the evening services to the LocalLink groups, this was a restricted call to the five groups that did not submit initially. We subsequently received applications from all five and there is a total of 12 proposals or services being considered at the moment. We would hope to have a decision on that probably by the end of the month at this stage.

As to the management structure and the structure of the LocalLink groups operating to voluntary boards nationally, we are very happy with the arrangement that is currently in place and we work very closely with the LocalLink groups.

There is a national procurement process due to start shortly. The rural transport programme will be up for re-tendering and the committee may be aware that we are having a meeting with the managers and chairs of the boards of the LocalLink groups tomorrow in Portlaoise. Several members of the authority will discuss what that procurement programme might look like. It has not been finalised but we will be giving a high-level view of what the procurement programme will be like. The request for tenders will probably commence by the end of this summer.

The interaction of LocalLink services with Bus Éireann’s services is a key consideration in relation to any proposal that comes in from a LocalLink group. We have a transport planning team which will closely assess that. We would also be very aware that a lot of the LocalLink team managers and support team have built up good relationships with their equivalents in Bus Éireann around the country. We rely on those working relationships to inform the development of a route, before it comes in to us as a proposal. We look at it in terms of how it scores from an integration point of view when it does come in to us.

**Ms Anne Graham:** The issue of no services for people over 18 years of age was raised where they have had a service. We try to deal with that with the LocalLink managers on a case-by-case basis. If there is an individual who requires a service, he or she should contact the LocalLink manager and see if we are in a position to provide a service.

On west Cork having a bus service to link with the rail service, that is something that we can look at, and perhaps Bus Éireann might respond on that issue.
On Deputy Penrose’s question, unfortunately the NTA has no role in school transport. We are specifically precluded statutorily from having any role in relation to school transport. On the expansion of the local night time services, we got proposals from Longford and Westmeath and we are assessing those services. Were they in the first batch?

Ms Margaret Malone: They were in the first batch. We have approved a service for Longford and Westmeath.

Ms Anne Graham: Perhaps Mr. Gaston might pick up on the Mullingar town service.

Mr. Tim Gaston: On Mullingar we have developed a list of times that were noted in Ms Graham’s statement. We are looking at Mullingar as being high up that list. The planning team has met with the local officials and some local representatives in Mullingar and some ideas are coming forward. We will move that one forward as fast as we can. We need to determine how to procure those services as well, and who is going to provide them. It is on our list and it is our desire to see towns like Mullingar - as we have done in Athlone and as we will be doing in Kilkenny shortly - getting a much-enhanced service. I completely agree with what the Deputy is saying about encouraging people to use public transport more. There are so many benefits both in terms of health and the environment. Mullingar is on our list and on our horizon.

Ms Anne Graham: On the question of bus shelters, we do not underestimate the job there is in trying to put together and meet the deficit there right across the State. We are in a position now - we have a provider - to centrally roll out a programme, subject to funding being available, across the State. There are also local difficulties when one tries to put a shelter in place, particularly in towns, because they are not always acceptable in certain locations. We will do everything we can, however, by working with local authorities to improve the bus shelters and wheelchair accessibility at those stops.

Chairman: There were some questions there for Mr. Hernan.

Mr. Ray Hernan: On LocalLink, I accept that there has to be greater interaction between us, and perhaps greater co-ordination and planning, which will be facilitated through the auspices of the NTA, as it undertakes its review of the route network and the implementation of new services. Accessibility is something we are all extremely conscious of. In respect of a person’s age and when one reaches 18 years of age, it is a question of trying to get a co-ordinated response through bringing the various parties together on this. As the committee will understand, the Department of Education and Skills co-ordinates everybody under 18 years of age, in respect of providing transport services to the school or the location for people with accessibility and mobility issues. This responsibility goes to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport over the age of 18. I am not aware of any direct engagement with either Department on changing those rules. We are just implementing policy as it currently stands but I am happy to bring attention to it and raise it as an issue in any direct engagement we have with both Departments.

On schools, I do not wish to try to pass the buck on this, but I believe the committee would have a good idea of my answer on this. We operate the service on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, and all policy issue relating to the provision of that service are set by that Department.
The rules of eligibility and distance from the school, etc., as well as the family entitlement to go to the same school are ongoing issues for many rural communities. Those are issues that have been raised and about which we have had numerous discussions with the Department of Education and Skills. I understand is considering all of these aspects to try to streamline this and make it easier. Unfortunately, we can only implement the policies that we are given and we do apply them rigidly. If there are any disputes, there is an appeals process to cover that. We try to strictly apply the rules that are provided to us by the Department of Education and Skills.

On the question of fare structures, I might just hand over to my colleague, Mr. O’Mahony, particularly in the context of Goleen and west Cork.

Mr. Robert O’Mahony: I will deal with the fare structure and linkages to rail services in 12 Rural Transport Policy: Discussion(Resumed)

Cork. At the moment, in conjunction with the authority, we are reviewing the west Cork network and there are a number of prime issues that we are looking at, one of which is connectivity to and from railway services. The concept we are developing at the moment includes operating all of west Cork services to both the bus station and the rail station in Cork. It will not just be in the morning peak, it will be throughout the day.

As part of our planning process, where there is a rail hub, wherever we are redesigning a timetable, the priority is to make sure that an early morning bus, as far as possible, meets the first train which will allow people to make a day trip to Dublin that is, within a 24 hour period. We are doing that in August in Ennis, where there will be early morning services from Kilkee and Doonbeg.

The fare structure we work with is an historic one that was developed in the 1940s and 1950s and was based on the distance a person travelled and based on the longer distance, the fare tapered off. It is not suitable to a modern transport environment and we are working with the authority to revise that. In December of last year, as part of the fares determination that the authority approved, we reduced the number of stages, which is the price that is paid for the distance travelled. This had a significant impact in certain parts of the country.

We rolled out Leap nationwide. One can get a 30% discount on one’s single fare. We accept that the fares that currently exist in west Cork, while they reduced slightly last year, are still at a level that is prohibitive, particularly to students. We are about to start discussions jointly with the authority in terms of the fares determination for 2019 and west Cork is high on the agenda in terms of coming up with a proposal to deliver better value fares for our customers in west Cork.

Deputy Michael Collins: On a service for people with disabilities, Ms Graham said we should talk to the local manager. There is no better person to talk to in Cork but the problem is too widespread for him to cope with. We could be talking about 150 or 200 individuals. I cannot put a figure on it but I know that a huge number of people are affected. We have had discussions on this and the HSE needs to come on board in this regard. It cannot sit on the fence because it is funding much of this transport service but it is all over the place, and that is the view of many people in west Cork.

Mr. O’Mahony said he is reviewing the possibility of linking the rail service from west Cork. Who is involved in that review?
Mr. Robert O’Mahony: The review is being done by Bus Éireann central services, our local people on the ground in Cork and the authority.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. Recently, Dr. Eimear Cotter, director of environmental sustainability in the Environmental Protection Agency, EPA, said Ireland is locked into a trend of rising carbon emissions. She was referring to the transport and freight sector. The freight line between the Port of Waterford and Ballina recently ceased. Currently we do not have a national freight policy, yet freight is an environmentally sustainable way to transport bulk products. Why did that link cease? At a time the United Kingdom and other European partners are developing the rail freight networks, why are we closing them? Further, if that line is currently closed to freight, is there any plan to open a rail service, for instance, between Rosslare and Waterford, and Ballina? That would be a great link. The line between Rosslare and Waterford has been closed. We are going in the wrong direction because using the railway system is one way of mitigating congestion in areas but we are not doing that. We are closing the services. What is the witnesses’ reaction to that?

With regard to low emission vehicles and bus lines, last year I visited Nijmegen in Holland where most of the public buses are zero-emission. What is Bus Éireann doing with regard to procuring diesel vehicles? Is there a policy to move away from diesel to zero emission buses? That is not new age talk. The infrastructure is in place in other countries, and they are using it. What is our policy on that and are we moving in that direction? What are Bus Éireann’s plans to phase out older diesel buses and move towards using a more environmentally fleet?

Congestion has been discussed. The sooner we operate an efficient and effective public transport system, the better for the country for many reasons. I refer finally to a bugbear of mine. I live in Tramore, County Waterford, and my daughter attends NUI Galway. Every time she takes the bus from Galway to Limerick to connect to another bus to Waterford, the bus meets congestion in Limerick and she misses the onward bus to Waterford. There is connectivity according to the timetable but that is not the reality. I am hearing about this from other people. In terms of efficiency, my daughter is losing time but she is only one of many. What is Bus Éireann doing to adapt its timetables to offset congestion at peak hours in different cities?

Deputy Seán Canney: I welcome the witnesses. It is great to get an opportunity to discuss issues with them. Coming from a rural area in Galway, we have issues with school transport, which is a major bugbear. One issue that comes up frequently is that when a new school is built, it distorts all the school transport rules and families end up being split as a result of that. That is not helping the students in terms of their education. We need to take a common-sense approach to that issue. I hope that, working together with the Department of Education and Skills, we can come up with sensible answers to address the problem.

Senator O’Sullivan mentioned rail freight. I would also like to know what is happening with the Ballina to Waterford line.

The other issue the Senator raised was the type of buses being used by Bus Éireann. It will add 135 new buses. Are they diesel buses? If not, what type of buses are they? Is Bus Éireann moving
towards the new thinking in that area, which we have not implemented here yet, which is to do with carbon saving and more efficient buses in terms of maintenance?

On the Local Link service, I am glad to see that the other five Local Link groups have put in their submissions. One of the reasons I have a concern about rural transport links is that they are not being properly resourced. They are taking on more areas. I am concerned that Bus Éireann is now talking about the new procurement programme, which will place a huge workload on the Local Link manager. In many cases, they are managing the service themselves because they have no staff. We can cod ourselves all day about everything we are doing but we have to provide the Local Link groups with the proper resources. I recall that on the previous occasion the witnesses were before the committee they mentioned that the NTA uses a system whereby buses co-ordinate with rail services or whatever. That software is not available to Local Link operators but it should be to help them in terms of the planning. I was told that would be looked at but we need to put it in place.

On rural transport, Bus Éireann has Dublin to Galway bus link or local bus links but the problem is that the pick-up points are so far apart, people use their cars to drive to the bus stop but when they get there, they keep going. They do not bother using the bus. There seems to be a conservative approach to setting up new bus stops quickly. I am aware that private operators have also had the problem of trying to get additional bus stops or additional routes licensed. However, the approach to the application of that is fragmented in that they have to go to the local authority and here, there and everywhere. We need to tighten that up because we want to take people off the roads, out of their cars and on to public transport.

I have a question about Galway city and the provision of commuter rail services into the city from towns such as Tuam and Athenry. Galway city is congested. Despite what has been done to try to resolve this, apart from the outer bypass, buses still cannot drive over the bridge. Buses do not go that route, which is mind-boggling. They cannot go that route for whatever reason and this has been the case for years. They cannot go from, say, Newcastle across the bridge to the Headford Road and then on to Parkmore. They must go through the city. The other thing that is wrong, and which we need to put right collectively, is that we talk about providing park-and-ride facilities, but the big obstacle to local authorities doing so is that we do not have the bus lane network to make the buses run more efficiently within the city. The net result is that people from Loughrea, Gort and Tuam drive into the city, clogging up the place to go to work and spending perhaps three or four hours in their cars every day, when there is a solution. The problem is that no one is taking this by the scruff of the neck. The NTA needs to do this, bring all the agencies together and say we have a problem, this is the solution, and how are we going to do it?

One fine example of this is the bus lane into Claregalway village. It has been in place for seven or eight years. the former Minister, Mr. Noel Dempsey opened it a number of years ago, and that is neither today nor yesterday. We have been talking since then about developing a bus lane from Claregalway right into the city at Two Mile Ditch. This has not happened and still does not seem to be happening, although it is on everyone’s agenda.
Mr. Hernan referred to a “town hub and spoke”. What does that mean? For instance, Tuam a railway station is on a 13-acre site. It could be a fine park-and-ride facility if a commuter rail link or bus services between Tuam and Galway were opened. Could that be a “town hub and spoke”?

Ms Anne Graham: I refer to Senator Grace O’Sullivan’s questions about rail freight. Unfortunately, we do not have a role in rail freight policy. Our focus is primarily on public transport services and the use of the rail infrastructure for that. Irish Rail and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport will answer the Senator’s questions in that area.

Regarding use of the existing rail infrastructure, including the closed rail infrastructure - and this would apply across the State - it is expensive to maintain and keep open. People need to use them to offset the costs associated with not only running the passenger service, but also keeping the infrastructure safe and appropriate for use. A number of years ago, the number of people using the Rosslare-Waterford rail line was not sufficient to keep it open for rail passenger services, so it was closed at that time. We identified two years ago in our rail review some other rail corridors had low usage but operated at a high cost but there are no proposals at this stage to close any of them. We believe that in some cases it is more efficient and effective to provide a bus service rather than a rail service. The former is more flexible and can provide a frequent service for a much lower cost than for rail services.

We are moving towards low-emission fleet purchases in partnership with Bus Éireann. It has been set out in the national development plan that no diesel-only buses can be purchased after July 2019, so we will be required then to move in that direction, but we were doing so. The issue we had in recent years was that our funding was constrained. To reduce the age of the fleet and to reduce other emissions, we decided to purchase as many diesel vehicles as we could with Joint Comite on Rura l and Comunity Development15 our available funding, rather than invest in a lower-emission fleet, for which a premium must be paid. The cost for a lower-emission diesel fleet or diesel hybrid fleet is about 25% more per vehicle. One can pay an even higher premium for a fully electric or similar type of fleet. This is something to take into consideration as we move towards reductions in our carbon emissions. In moving towards a fully electric fleet, infrastructure must be put in place as well for charging of the vehicles. We have commenced this process. We hope to commence procurement of a low-emission diesel hybrid fleet this year. Both Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann are proposing to trial a number of buses, and Mr. Herman will probably refer to this. We are moving towards a lower-emission fleet as quickly as we can and as quickly as our funding allows us.

I refer to Deputy Canney’s questions. Rail fleet is a matter for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and Irish Rail. We are moving towards a low-emission fleet.

We believe the Local Link offices are properly resourced. Procurement is a requirement of our procurement laws and directives. It is just the Local Link management service that is procured. We will try to assist where we can to ensure the workload related to this is minimised as much as possible.

We have worked with Galway City Council and Galway County Council to put together a Galway transport strategy, which now needs to be implemented. Funding is set aside in the national
development plan for Galway BusConnects. As soon as we have moved forward with BusConnects in Dublin, our next priority will be BusConnects in Galway and to commence that implementation with the local authorities on the ground. This will include looking at improving both bus services and park-and-ride and seeing whether we can put in rail commuter services.

Mr. Ray Hernan: Regarding Senator O’Sullivan’s comments on carbon emissions, I will elaborate on what Ms Anne Graham has emphasised. Since 2015, all buses purchased by Bus Éireann, in conjunction with the NTA, have been compliant with Euro 6 standards. Euro 6 standard emissions are 98% less than the emissions of standard diesel buses that existed even ten or 15 years ago, and, therefore, emissions have declined significantly. The emissions of a Euro 6 bus now is comparable to the emissions of a compressed natural gas bus, which is a significant reduction. As Ms Graham said, we are working with the NTA on other types of buses - electric, hybrid and compressed natural gas, CNG - which is very much the focus of the Department now. We are beginning to review these alternative bus types. The last 135 buses to which I referred will still be Euro 6 buses, but thereafter we will look at acquiring other ones. To be clear, there has been a significant reduction in emissions in recent years.

Regarding connectivity, particularly in the context of congestion and timetables, congestion has had a significant impact on our ability to align ourselves with the timetables and connectivity with other services. This is something we face daily, to such an extent that we have put a large team together internally to work on this. This year, more than 80% of all our routes will have new timetables implemented to very much take cognisance of connectivity not just with our own bus services, but also with train services.

In response to Deputy Canney, the issues surrounding school rules are noted. It is something with which we continue to deal with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. As a bus operator, I very much promote the concept of BusConnects, possibly as a greater and more flexible option than rail. We can provide better value for money than a rail option, and probably a speedier way to market as well, in terms of implementing a modal shift from car to bus, at least. I understand, however, that in order to move significant volumes of people, rail is the way to go. There is significant investment going into Galway, Limerick and Cork, in particular, in terms of additional services. In those three cities, we have seen double-digit growth over the past two years in passenger numbers.

Deputy Seán Canney: What will be implemented in Galway city?

Ms Anne Graham: We developed a transport strategy with Galway City Council and Galway County Council. It is now part of their development plan. It sets out what is required to improve bus and rail services throughout the Galway city in order to reduce congestion and provide for greater movement around the city. That is in place. What we need to do now is move into implementation stage.

Deputy Seán Canney: When will the implementation stage commence? When will we see the effects of it?
Ms Anne Graham: The funding needs to be made available. It has been identified in the national development plan, not in 2019 but in the later stages of the plan. What we need to do is work with the local authorities to develop those projects and have them ready to go when the funding is available.

Deputy Seán Canney: It was said that includes enhancing rail links into the city. What is meant by that?

Ms Anne Graham: More services on existing rail infrastructure. At the moment, no new infrastructure is proposed.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank the witnesses for their most informative presentations. I have questions for the NTA and Bus Éireann. We are all very concerned about our environment, and my colleagues alluded to that this morning. I come from the constituency of Cavan-Monaghan. Are there any realistic or serious plans for a rail line from Dublin to Navan, continuing on to Cavan, where there was a line previously. Some of it is used for the mines in Navan. If we are serious about our environment, city congestion and making the cities realistic working places, which, as it transpires, they continue to be for people living in more rural parts, I would like to know Ms Graham’s views on that and whether there is any sense of priority about a rail development like that which would bring commuters from Cavan and Monaghan into the city. Unfortunately, we depend very much on our public transport. Fortunately, we have a good bus service but we have no rail line. I would like to hear Ms Graham’s comments on that.

I do not see the environment in Cavan-Monaghan changing any time soon - the number of visits by the IDA to Cavan and Monaghan is a single-digit figure - in terms of any real investment or employment. Unfortunately, we are back to a day when, like ten years ago, predominant employment for builders and skilled workers is in the city. Any day travelling on the M3, one will find car loads of people stuck in traffic on that corridor. That is why a rail line should be a realistic priority and something we think seriously about to service people in that area.

On a positive note, the feedback I get from constituents is that the local link is a positive development. We have to look beyond 11 p.m. at weekends, if we are serious about rural isolation, servicing and providing real transport for people living in rural areas like Cavan and Monaghan. That needs to be expanded upon. While there have been initiatives announced recently, I wonder if there are plans for expansion in Cavan-Monaghan. People come into my clinics from small villages, like Redhills, which are linked into the main towns of Cavan. It also provides a great service for students attending Cavan Institute. I would like to hear Ms Graham’s comments on that. What is happening is positive and we need more of it.

On Bus Éireann, I have spoken to Mr. Hernan before about its adjustments, which he has called “enhanced services” for the M3 corridor. I would like Mr. Hernan to reflect on those services and the changes that have been made. What is the feedback on them? Are they as effective as they were expected to be? I would particularly like Mr. Hernan to comment on the change of bus drop-off points at the Mater hospital because for me and for my constituents it was a real bone of contention and a real disappointment when those changes were made, particularly for the elderly and people
who are ill, attending the Mater hospital. That was a very important stop to them. I know changes were made to that. Could Mr. Hernan reflect on that for us?

I do not want to repeat what has been said already but I concur with much of what was said about school transport. While I understand that Bus Éireann is the provider and has to go by the policies laid out by the Department of Education and Skills, I concur with what was said. I came across a family of four siblings, three of whom were going to Virginia college. The only school the youngest child could get to was St. Clare’s in Ballyjamesduff. There were three children in one family going to one school, and the last child was sent to another. Could Mr. Hernan comment on whether there was a phasing-out period? That would have been a logical thing to do, and perhaps it was done. I am sure it is the same for my colleagues but the most frequent and probably the most frustrating representation made in my clinic is by parents coming in about school transport and Bus Éireann. I spoke with my staff before I came in here. They said last year they were getting responses much more quickly than this year. Could Mr. Hernan tell us to whom we can go to deal with representations about school bus transport?

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the witnesses for their opening statements. I am going to start on school transport because I have been dealing with it for a long time. We have the case of Kate, who has a valid medical card, but her parents were advised that Rebecca is eligible to get a school bus ticket but she cannot be issued with a ticket as there are no seats available on the bus. Kate’s siblings currently travel on that bus route. Whose responsibility is it to provide a bus big enough to take all the eligible students? Could Mr. Hernan answer that question, specifically? Who decides on when the closing date is for applications for school transport? Students who find that they have to repeat their leaving certificate are then considered to be late applications and are put into another category. Who is responsible?

On school transport, I suggest this committee invite the Department of Education and Skills, which is responsible, and Bus Éireann to come in and comprehensively answer questions. Children are being deprived of seats on the bus. I take the point that was raised around Government policy. I have followed the policies right through from Fianna Fáil’s Mary Coughlan, who did the review in 2008 or 2009. The buck must stop somewhere because children are entitled to a seat on the school bus, particularly in rural areas. There are all kinds of precarious situations where one could end up with child protection issues, children arriving late for school and all that. It has a real impact on children’s education because there is not a proper school bus service. I would like that to be addressed separately. The biggest problem is the lack of flexibility, or the rigidity, around transport. Changing anything is like trying to move the Titanic. Sometimes trains arrive in Westport five minutes after the bus for Louisburgh has departed. It would seem logical to change the departure time once a lack of connectivity has been identified. It is impossible to get routes changed and find out who is responsible. The National Transport Authority, NTA, is failing abysmally on the key objectives regarding route development and expansion.

One of the key objectives stated is to “ensure that rural transport services are comprehensively linked to and integrated with public transport services provided by other entities including Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and other private operators”. That is not happening. Does the NTA map
services in all counties and is there a proper map of all the routes? How often are these maps updated? What community consultation takes place on these routes? In my view, there is a lack of proper community consultation. Was Mayo among the counties that made applications for LocalLink later?

On communication and timetables, trying to have a timetable provided at a bus stop is like trying to send somebody to the moon. Could the provision of timetables and other forms of communication be facilitated in order that people can find out what routes are available? It is no good asking people to check a website because most of those who use rural transport services do not have access to broadband services or other technology. A means of communicating with people must be found to enable them to find out when routes are running.

While I am glad bus shelters are back on the agenda, we were told they are dependent on funding. Is funding available for bus shelters and, if so, will the witnesses outline the process for applying for bus shelters and the criteria and timescale involved?

Has any work been done on transport that is conducive to meeting the needs of children and adults with autism or non-physical disabilities? Has research been done on this issue and, if not, will a study be done in respect of noise and other factors that cause distress for people with disabilities, specifically autism? Will the witnesses also comment on moves to ban those with free travel cards from using transport services during peak times? Such a ban, which is being mooted, would be a backward step for people trying to access hospitals, etc., and I would certainly resist it.

The document also states that the level of engagement with the Health Service Executive differs between areas. Will the witnesses comment on that issue in the context of the HSE’s obligation and responsibility to engage with the NTA and Bus Éireann? A lack of access to transport has social and economic consequences. Many people cannot turn up for appointments because they do not have access to transport. People in parts of Mayo and Galway who have to travel three hours each way for an appointment - a six-hour round trip - need transport. The survival of rural Ireland depends on the NTA and Bus Éireann. I plead with both organisations to examine this issue. While certain things work well, major changes are needed and many of these require nothing more than greater flexibility and a different approach, as opposed to additional resources.

**Chairman:** I will bring in Deputy Niamh Smyth briefly.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I have a question for Mr. Hernan. How many buses are wheelchair accessible on the M3 corridor where changes have been made?

**Chairman:** I ask Ms Graham and Mr. Hernan to respond to some of the questions.

**Ms Anne Graham:** There are no proposals at this time for a rail line to Cavan and the line is not included in the current development plan. There is no proposal for the extension of the rail line to Navan in our 20-year strategy. When we were drawing up the strategy in the lead-up to 2016, we did not believe that the demand was strong enough to provide a rail extension to Navan. We did, however, undertake to review demand during the six-year review of the strategy to identify if there was a need for a rail service to Navan. That has been restated in the national development plan. There is no proposal at this stage for an extension of the line to Cavan.
Turning to the questions from Senator Conway-Walsh, I will be disappointed if it is the case that there is no connection between the rail link from Westport to Louisburgh. We will look at that issue and any other examples of lack of connectivity we receive. We rely on local people to give us information on these matter to enable us to work on making improvements with our partners in Irish Rail and Bus Éireann. A number of years ago, we produced a comprehensive plan for improvements to bus and rail services in Mayo and did a consultation on it. Mayo was the first county for which we produced a plan for services. We did a consultation on those changes. That was two or three years ago and we will give the Senator a copy of the document. Perhaps Mr. Hernan will outline the type of communications done in the lead-up to service changes.

On bus shelters and information at bus stops, we know major improvements are needed in this area and we want to roll out a comprehensive programme. More funding is becoming available now, although not to the levels we would like either this year or next. In future years, we want to rapidly expand the provision of bus shelters and, with our partners in Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus, improve the information and timetables at bus stops. We have not done any specific research in respect of noise-----

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** On the issue of bus shelters, what is the process for applying for a bus shelter? To whom can communities apply and what is the timeline?

**Ms Anne Graham:** They can apply directly to the NTA. In light of funding constraints, we had to put a priority on the demand for particular services. This means we rank the higher demand bus stops highest for getting a bus shelter. I can write to the Senator with the details on how we prioritise funding.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** Has funding been increased this year?

**Ms Anne Graham:** No.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** Was it increased last year?

**Ms Anne Graham:** No.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** In that case, why are we talking about a greater possibility of securing bus shelters?

**Ms Anne Graham:** There will be more funding because we have sight of our capital funding for the next four years. From this funding, we should be able to provide more funding for bus shelters. Our funding has been constrained in recent years and we have only been able to provide funding for a limited number of bus shelters each year. I will write to Senator Conway-Walsh with more details on this issue, including on the process and points of contact.

**Chairman:** I ask Ms Graham to send a note to the committee on that.

**Ms Anne Graham:** Yes, that is no problem. We have not done any specific research on transport services for people with autism. We can contact the National Disability Authority, NDA, and seek its advice on the matter. We engage with the NDA on improving all of our services for people with all levels of disabilities. We will take up the issue with the National Disability Authority. I will ask Mr. Gaston to respond to the questions on the free travel pass.
Mr. Tim Gaston: Members will have seen this morning in the newspapers a statement on a possible movement to off-peak hours. It is not in our immediate plans but we need to be aware that free travel funding has not increased very much, either to the CIE group of companies or the other operators. People are travelling during the peak hours, during which services are increasingly congested and reaching capacity in some places. Moving to off-peak would be one option to help to address the issue of peak travel and capacity issues. As I said, it is not something we are currently planning but it is a measure that might have to be taken depending on where we go in terms of funding and providing additional capacity. There is no doubt that this will be an ongoing problem because the number of people in the over-66 age bracket will increase quite dramatically over the next ten to 15 years. It is something that needs to be addressed. We welcome the fact that the discussion has at least been opened by the media commentary this morning.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I do not welcome that answer because it further marginalises people who are dependent on transport, particularly for a hospital appointment. I asked Mr. Gaston to proceed to the other questions.

Mr. Tim Gaston: If it were to be brought in, it would be a matter for the Government, I suspect, but we would certainly have to be very sensitive and careful not to marginalise people. I absolutely take that point.

Chairman: Mr. Hernan was asked a number of questions, from Deputy Smyth in particular.

Mr. Ray Hernan: In terms of the new timetable and services through Cavan-Monaghan, we recently increased the frequency on route 30. There will be increased frequency on route 32 also. We have also increased the frequency on the 109X route. Therefore, there has been a significant increase in capacity. There are no plans to add direct services from, say, Monaghan town to Dublin but services are flowing from the Donegal-Letterkenny area through Cavan and Monaghan with a significant uplift in frequencies. I hope this will deal with many of the capacity issues in this area because passenger numbers are growing.

With regard to the bus stop at the Mater Hospital, we have received a large amount of feedback. We also received feedback on the challenge being created for those visiting or attending the hospital. We are considering increasing the number of services that will stop at the Mater Hospital. I cannot commit to reverting to all the routes and frequencies that serviced the Mater in the past but we are trying to strike a balance between using bus lanes to reduce the journey times and trying to achieve connectivity with key locations, such as the hospital. That is under review. I expect some changes to be made in the current year.

The Deputy asked many questions about schools. An initiative last year that seemed to work well was the introduction of a dedicated line for all public representatives to contact us with any queries about schools. That was communicated a number of times last year. We are doing that again this year. I am not too sure whether it has occurred yet. I will confirm that the list of mobile numbers for all our regional managers will be provided. It was successful last year and seems to have reduced the number of queries. We were able to speed up the response times as a result.
We have also increased resources for telephone communication with parents. With the approval of the Department, we are expanding the resource applied to the telephone lines between now and September of this year. I would be disappointed if we did not see a stepped improvement on last year, which saw a significant improvement on the previous years. If there is any issue with Members not receiving information on the direct lines to our regional managers, they should please let me know. I know, however, that we sent the numbers to Members’ Oireachtas email addresses and local constituency email addresses last year.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: The responses to our representations are actually getting slower.

Mr. Ray Hernan: I will certainly follow that up. I will take any specific details the Deputy has directly after the meeting.

Deputy Smyth and perhaps Senator Conway-Walsh mentioned larger buses and the number of pupils. One of the main challenges we have as the operator - I know the Department of Education and Skills is challenged on this - concerns the difference between eligible pupils, who are absolutely entitled to space on a bus, and concession students. It is very possible that there could be three siblings who are concession students and if there is no extra space for the fourth, who is deemed to be a concession student or technically ineligible to school transport, it is highly unlikely that the Department will approve the provision of a larger bus. If there are more eligible students who require a larger bus, it will be provided. If, however, the students are concession students, I do not foresee at this moment in time the approval of larger buses by the Department.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I am not talking about concession students but eligible students. Whose responsibility is it to say there is a larger bus available and that it may be used?

Mr. Ray Hernan: We have to get sanction from the Department but the Department will sanction larger buses only if all the seats are provided to eligible students.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I am referring to eligible students in circumstances where the application is late because a student will not know whether he or she will repeat the leaving certificate.

Mr. Ray Hernan: We would have to take that up with the Department and get approval for that.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: In that case, it is Bus Éireann’s responsibility to take it up with the Department and the Department’s responsibility to sanction it.

Mr. Ray Hernan: Yes. First and foremost, it is our responsibility as the operator to be aware of what is occurring because we administer the scheme on the Department’s behalf. If there is a requirement, we inform the Department. If the Deputy is saying all the students are eligible, there is no reason a larger bus would not be sanctioned.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: It is not resolved but I hope that after our discussion today, it will be.

Mr. Ray Hernan: I will certainly follow that up. If the Deputy informs me of the specific circumstances, I will take them on board.
We implement the rules. Sticking rigidly to the rules that apply eliminates the likely challenges and prevents an inconsistent approach across the whole country. This is why we have been very determined to maintain the departmental rules and the consistency of approach, no matter what part of the country the rules are applied. I do not see that changing.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** Was there a phasing-in period? I refer to circumstances where three children in one family are going to a school and a fourth is told he or she cannot get a seat on the bus to the same school and must go to a different school. Was there a phasing-in or phasing-out period?

**Mr. Ray Hernan:** There was a phasing-in period. I cannot give the Deputy the specifics on whether all the rules were phased in. Certainly, however, there were new rules implemented in 2012. A six-year timeline was allowed for phased implementation to avoid the type of issue the Deputy raises. The six years should cover the timescale in post-primary school. Again, if the Deputy has a specific example, I will be very happy to take it on board.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** Who sets the application times? I refer to the April and July times. Is it the Department or Bus Éireann?

**Mr. Ray Hernan:** We set the timetable of deadlines against the background of what we are required to do. We have to put in place, for every September, 6,500 services per day. Trying to determine how many students are applying for each route and whether we have the right types of buses available is a massive logistical nightmare.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** Is Mr. Hernan saying people who repeat the leaving certificate examination or move into an area after the date in April and give details by July do not count?

**Mr. Ray Hernan:** Again, it all depends on whether the student is eligible or a concession student.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** Bus Éireann is ruling students ineligible because, according to the company, to be eligible school transport applications must be made on the Bus Éireann website prior to 28 April and medical card details must be received by 28 July. Bus Éireann, because of its deadlines, is making the students ineligible even though they are eligible in terms of medical cards. I am sorry but it is really important for all of us to tease out these matters.

**Chairman:** The Senator has made her point.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** I need an answer.

**Chairman:** We will get an answer. Deputy Niamh Smyth has another question for Ms Graham.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** When drawing up the NTA’s 20 year strategy, it was considered there was no demand for a rail line to Cavan and Navan. When is the six-year review of this due? How is the research conducted in deciding there is no need for a rail line to Cavan?

**Ms Anne Graham:** Our strategy is for the greater Dublin area. It was only Navan that was considered in this strategy. The strategy was agreed in 2016, meaning it will be 2023 when we will start the review.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** Will it include Cavan?
Ms Anne Graham: No.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: A rail link would be sensible for the environment as well as for changes in the economy. There will not be an east-west link, according to the Government, and there will not be a motorway to Cavan town. Accordingly, a rail line becomes critical and crucial if we are going to provide any sort of transport for young people who will have to work ultimately in Dublin.

Ms Anne Graham: In terms of rail transport infrastructure, the only role the NTA plays is in the greater Dublin area. We only manage and plan for the rail infrastructure in the greater Dublin area. We do not have the statutory powers to look at rail infrastructure beyond the greater Dublin area. That would be for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to look at.

For the Navan line, we will use general census information and information from POWSCAR, place of work, school or college - census of anonymised records, which shows how people are travelling to work and education. We use those data and projections on those data to plan for future infrastructure.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: When the six-year review comes up, will Cavan and Monaghan be included?

Ms Anne Graham: No, because the transport strategy for the greater Dublin area does not include the Cavan area.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: Does the responsibility lie with the Department solely to make that decision?

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Mr. Ray Hernan: On the 28 April deadline, one of our challenges is whether we ever have a hard and fast deadline. We tend to be as flexible as possible in terms of taking on board any people who come in subsequent to the deadline. If the Senator has received correspondence to say that this individual is not eligible, I will certainly look into it. I cannot specifically say I know all the rules around the scheme but I will take it up on the Senator’s behalf.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: The witnesses may write down some of the things I will be asking because I would like direct answers.

Why does Bus Éireann not outline on its tender documents, for any size bus on any route, that each year it will be subject to the number of people who will be travelling on it? Why has Bus Éireann not got a system that in May or June, the numbers of people who are eligible or discretionary are applied for and that it knows its figures by July to allow it put on whatever bus is suitable for each route? This was discussed with Mr. Martin Nolan of Bus Éireann when he was before a committee.

In a private business, that is how one makes money instead of leaving people standing on the side of the road or a youngster coming on after three more of them going on a bus. It is bread and butter in any business as to how a person does tender. With tender documents, a person must give him or herself the flexibility to have all the differently sized buses priced in on that route and that each year it is subject to A, B, C, depending on the number of people travelling and it is a three-year contract. However, it must also be written down - meaning there is no comeback for the subcontractor - that any child who may not have a medical card but wants to go to school is
facilitated. Funnily enough, the buses are passing by and they are giving Bus Éireann but they do not want to take it. I am baffled at Bus Éireann’s system. Whoever is in charge needs to have a damn good look at how it does its tender documents.

Bus Éireann is hiring a significant number of subcontractors on its routes with no meters on some of the buses. Why is that? Is it because it has no workers to drive its buses?

The size of the buses on different routes varies. On some routes, Bus Éireann uses a 53 seater when a 19 seater would do. It needs smaller buses for certain routes. I cannot understand why it is not buying them for efficiency. The whole country is on about carbon but there are large buses going up and down the roads with only a few people in them. I am a contractor. I do not send the largest tractor in the world to work the smallest field. I adjust accordingly. As is required, I can move it up and down. Bus Éireann has statistics on the numbers travelling on different routes, day in, day out.

I heard the views of two people this morning who are in favour of electric cars. Going on what I heard from them, I would not like an electric bus. People should know that the bus procurement budget has to be increased by 25% if we opt for electric. From what I have heard about hybrid diesel, particularly in the heavy vehicle sector, the diesel part will be used most of the time. There is no point in codding ourselves. For between €17,000 and €20,000, a heavy vehicle can be converted to gas. Why has it not been examined? Gas is probably the only way forward for the next 12 years until they perfect the hybrid diesel system. How many straight diesel buses has the company bought in the past two years?

School buses work a few hours day and are parked up for the rest. Why is there not joined-up thinking between the NTA and Bus Éireann for using them for local services such as Local Link?

Ms Graham earlier spoke about the numbers using bus shelters. Essentially, if three people get on a bus in Ballinlough, County Roscommon, and 23 get on at Mullingar, due to financial constraints, the passengers in Ballinlough will be down the ladder when it comes to getting a bus shelter. I want a straight answer to that. If that is the way, there are parts of rural Ireland which will never see a bus shelter. We are as well to be straight with them without announcements and people thinking they will get a bus shelter.

Is it correct that the NTA has nothing to do with the western rail corridor or any train service outside of the greater Dublin area? I have travelled on the DART several times. I understand the State has a lot of land extending out to Dublin Airport and I understand from talking to people in Irish Rail that there could be a spur from the DART to Dublin Airport. We keep going down this road of tunnelling, which would cost a massive amount of money. I worked on tunnelling, so I understand a bit about it. We talk about 15 years to 20 years time. The figures I am hearing from people in the rail sector is that €200 million to €250 million could solve it in the context of the DART. Why is that not being considered?

Could the witnesses elaborate on why per capita people in rural parts of Ireland have less money spent on them compared to those in the city of Dublin in the context of public transport? Am I correct in saying that the envisaged RuralLink service will pick people up at 8 p.m. and bring them home at 11 p.m.? If one was in any other part of the country, one could get a bus at 9 p.m., or at
10 p.m. if one was in the city. One might go to the pub at 11 p.m. and go home at 12 p.m. Is one going to be restricted to a certain length of time?

I would like the witnesses to comment on the anti-social behaviour we are hearing about at the moment and on what they intend to do in terms of protecting buses and the rail network.

The witnesses spoke about future plans involving Galway County and City Councils. There was talk in the national planning framework of a Luas-type system in Galway. What will happen in Galway over the next ten years? At the moment, Galway is chaotic. Will there be a Luas-type system in Galway in the next ten years because as far as I can see, there will not be? Galway needs bus corridors, of which we are all well aware. What concrete actions are being taken in Galway?

To go back to the western rail corridor, to Galway, Tuam, Athenry and Claremorris and to the line that is closed, Ms Graham said it had nothing to do with her. She said to Deputy Kenny that she did not envisage any new rail lines being opened under this plan, which is a ten year plan. Will a Minister have to make a decision to do this?

**Chairman:** I call Deputy Ó Cuív. I will also bring in Deputy Burke. Ms Graham has to attend another Oireachtas committee today, so her time is limited. Members should bear that in mind.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** As this is a rural committee, I will focus on the requirements of rural people and I would like to do so under a number of headings. What we know is that many more rural people, as evidenced from the travel to work surveys, travel to cities to work than heretofore, and they are travelling further. I will take Galway as an example, although from the very useful map, one can extrapolate the same thing for Limerick, Waterford, Cork and elsewhere. The commuter routes out of Galway are as follows: Galway to Carraroe; Galway to Clifden; Galway to Headford, Cong, Shrule, Ballinrobe and beyond; Galway to Tuam; Galway to Roscommon; Galway to Loughrea and Ballinasloe; and Galway to Gort and Ennis. What absolutely blows my mind is the lack of definition of what a commuter service is. There does not seem to be any focus on the fact that a large number of people want to come into the centre in the morning and to get out as fast as they can in the evening. However, they do not all start and finish at the same time.

I am going to define what a commuter service should be and what should be put in place along these routes. At an absolute minimum, it should be within the hours of 7.30 a.m. to 9 a.m. and should be every half an hour. For the rest of the day, it should be at hourly intervals. With the railway line from Ballybrophy to Limerick, one would be better off walking. There is one service in the day, one each way. Who would want to take a service like that? Miss one and wait until tomorrow. With a commuter service, one misses one and gets the next. Is there a commitment to that kind of frequency on the main commuter lines in and out of all the major towns and cities with third level institutions and hospitals because otherwise I cannot see how one will get the passengers? It becomes a fáinne fi, a vicious circle. If one does not provide the service, one will not get the passengers.

I accept the witnesses do not have responsibility for rail outside Dublin. However, it is interesting to look at the passenger numbers and the population of a town like Athenry. Proportionate to the size of the town, there is a huge number of people using the rail service from Athenry to Galway. Why is
this? It is because by accident, between the Limerick, Athlone and Dublin trains, one has a reasonable service frequency.

I would like the view of the witnesses on what is a commuter service. Is it one bus in the morning and one bus in the evening, with an hour and a half frequency after that? Am I right that to really attract commuters, one needs at least half an hour frequencies during commuter times and maybe hourly at other times?

I am totally supportive of the RuralLink idea, that is, that one runs buses on the main routes and one gets the RuralLink buses to pick up people in the villages and smaller places.

The next issue is my hobbyhorse. We, in rural Ireland, are fed up paying a subsidy in fares because people do not get fair play. There is a fear of giving them fair play. I am going to stay on this issue until we get justice. The rate per kilometre on rural services, non-Expressway, is twice that of the urban services. That is a simple fact. It is archaic and there is a fear of changing it because a slight rebalancing might be required. It does not matter how much rural people are over-charged as long as it is not rebalanced in respect of people who happen to live in big cities. We are not taking this anymore and we are going to keep highlighting it until we get justice.

That leads to the question my colleague, Deputy Fitzmaurice, alluded to. Bus Éireann serves in excess of one million people in the most densely populated part of the country and it gets €60 million of a subsidy. Bus Éireann and RuralLink between them get less than €50 million and they serve up to 4 million people. Maybe Mr. Hernan can confirm this, because he has access to the figures and knows the facts, but no State subsidy goes to Expressway, so we can take it out of the cake, and if I break it down the figure further, my understanding is that a fair bit of that €50 million goes to urban services in Cork, Waterford and Galway. In fact, when I take the rural services, I find that the subsidy per head of population is absolutely minuscule.

Some 1.1 million people live in the county of Dublin. There are 800,000 people living in Connacht-Ulster. That includes Donegal, Cavan, Monaghan and the province of Connaught. One would expect that Connacht-Ulster would get eight elevenths of the transport subsidy that Dublin receives. One would think it would be the other way around in a city where there are thousands of people using the services and that the subsidy would be hugely skewed towards the rural areas. We find, however, that it is the other way and that there is total inertia, bad services and unfair charges. We do not need to wonder why people do not use the buses. Country people are very pragmatic but I wish for services to be provided to meet our needs.

Other people may have difficulty getting responses to representations on school bus services but the service I get in that regard is first class. The co-operation and facilitation of the Bus Éireann school bus service is fantastic and I compliment it in that regard. I accept that it cannot go outside the rules. Is Bus Éireann going to move into the 21st century and focus services on meeting people’s needs?

It is impossible for young people attending university to get accommodation in places such as Galway. To qualify for a non-adjacent grant, one must live 45 km or more from the college. The witnesses can see on their map that Carraroe is the furthest westerly point of Galway Bay. Most of it is less than 45 km from Galway. Even if a student from Carraroe can get accommodation in Galway,
he or she will not be able to afford it because the adjacent area grant would not pay for a few weeks of accommodation. Travelling 45 km from Galway would bring one beyond Loughrea, Dunmore or Tuam. A significant number of students and young working people have to get home in the evening because they cannot afford to stay in the city. They cannot get home either, however, because there is no bus to take them there. I acknowledge that work is being done on an evening service but it is too slow and more is needed. It is archaic to be unable to get out of town after 6 p.m. on the arterial non-Expressway rural routes and it does not face the new reality. These are practical and doable services for which there is a market but the service must be provided.

I ask Bus Éireann and the NTA to consider a policy of toilets being provided on all new buses with scheduled route durations of more than two hours. That is not necessary on short services but it is important, particularly for elderly people, that there be a toilet on buses with a journey duration of two hours or more. Most modern buses that undertake long journeys have toilets.

Rail and subsidies were mentioned. We are running national transport services for the entire country, not just areas with lots of people. All people pay taxes. The loss on the Cork to Dublin line is €45 million, while there are losses of €11 million on the Limerick to Ballybrophy line and €13 million on the Limerick to Galway line. The loss on Dublin suburban lines is €51 million. The witnesses may point out that the loss per passenger on the Cork to Dublin line and the Dublin suburban lines is far less than on the other lines I have mentioned. Of course, it is less per passenger. How does one get passengers to use a service that hardly exists? If the services are provided, passengers will use them and the price per passenger will decrease. Those losses take the central costs into account. The savings would drop dramatically were the lines to be closed because there would then be no saving on the central services. These lines need to be upgraded rather than closed. They will not solve Iarnród Éireann’s problem because, simply, all rail lines need to be subsidised.

On Dublin, for years there was a very good campaign to reopen the Harcourt Street tram line. It is now the Luas line from Bride’s Glen. It was also very fortuitous that the Broadstone line through Cabra was preserved as it is also now a Luas line. For many years, people wondered why there was an empty tunnel under the Phoenix Park when most people want to arrive at Connolly Station rather than Heuston Station. Connolly Station is in the part of the city where people work. Suddenly, hey presto, the tunnel could be opened. Services are not frequent enough, however, and it is a pity the train from Galway does not use the tunnel or arrive into Connolly Station on the Mullingar line, but that is another day’s work.

There is an open railway line from Navan to Dublin which is regularly used by trains. The only problem is that they are freight trains from Tara Mines. Why does the commuter service which terminates in Drogheda not go to the railway station in the centre of Navan town? Has there been a costing of the upgrade of that railway line to allow it to take passenger trains? It seems obvious that the train could run to Drogheda, turn left, as do the ore trains, go to Navan and a few more stations between Drogheda and Navan and then return. One would not need additional trains because the ones currently operating to Drogheda would suffice. Why is the Navan-Drogheda loop not being used for commuter rail to Dublin? In a similar manner to the Harcourt Street tram line now being used by the Luas or the tunnel under the Phoenix Park once again being used, some day the penny will drop
and the line from Drogheda to Navan will reopen, as will the line from Athenry to Claremorris. The latter will not happen under this Government but it will open in my lifetime.

Chairman: I call Deputy Peter Burke to bring this round of questions to a conclusion. I will then ask the witnesses to respond and we will see if there are any supplementary questions.

Deputy Peter Burke: I thank the witnesses for their attendance. I will be very brief. I ask Mr. Hernan for an update on a town bus service for Mullingar. I note west Clare, Cork, Drogheda and Athlone are mentioned in the documentation provided to the committee by the witnesses but Mullingar was specifically mentioned in Project Ireland 2040 in that regard.

I also seek an update on a revised timetable for the Expressway service from Mullingar to Dublin. I understand it is at an advanced stage or ready to be released and I would be grateful if he could update me in that regard.

On the roll-out of Local Link, no service has been provided in Westmeath. I ask Ms Graham why that is so. Was no application made? It had been brought to my attention that the service from Granard to Longford town is very welcome. However, Killoe, the biggest parish in Longford and which is almost at the midway point of the route, is less than a mile from the road on which the bus travels but the NTA seems unwilling for the bus to stop there in spite of the demand that has been demonstrated for such a stop. Is there any way we could look at that? Councillor Gerry Hagan, who lives in Killoe, brought this to my attention. He has received many representations on it.

On trains at Mullingar station, there is supposed to be public consultation on putting extra routes on the Dublin to Sligo line. I was concerned that they would go in the opposite direction to commuters, so that the train would leave Dublin in the morning to Sligo and leave Sligo in the evening going to Dublin. What is the reasoning behind this being suggested? Perhaps the witnesses from Irish Rail could find out whether there is a possibility of holding a train at Mullingar station overnight, it could leave around 7 a.m. and that may assist commuters?

Chairman: I have some specific questions for the National Transport Authority, NTA. I understand two applications have been made by the Local Link in Clare for two services, one in west Clare from Kilkee to Kilrush and back into Ennis, and another service proposed from Ballyvaughan to Lisdoonvarna into Ennistymon, Corofin, Ruan and back into Ennis. Where do those applications stand? I am aware that the west Clare service was proposed some months ago.

I welcome the improvements to the Bus Éireann fleet which will get 135 new buses. I also note that local services will be enhanced in west Clare. Will the NTA expand on that? There was reference to Kilkee and Doonbeg in particular.

The key thing is connectivity and integration of services where possible, so that the Local Links service could complement a Bus Éireann service and also link into rail, as well as our airports.

Ms Anne Graham: I will start with Deputy Fitzmaurice’s questions. He is correct about bus shelter provision, we had to prioritise the areas that had the highest number of services and the highest demand in people being at the bus stop because of constraints in our funding. We would hope that we could put a bus shelter at every stop location but that will take some years. We had to put a
priority system in place and given current funding we must focus on areas where demand is highest but we would like that to change very soon.

On our responsibilities, we have responsibility for the provision of rail services. We have a contract with Irish Rail for the rail passenger services. The Department has a contract with Irish Rail for the maintenance of the infrastructure and any extension or improvements to that is the responsibility of the Department of Transport, except where it is in the greater Dublin area where we have a role in funding the infrastructure improvements including rail. On the matter of improvements outside the greater Dublin area we are talking about improvement in frequency and the number of services on rail.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** If one looks at services, obviously that means services for people to commute from A, B and C. I want to nail this because Irish Rail was very straightforward in its answer to my question at the last meeting. I refer to the line that is closed, to which the rail review does not refer. As part of the next ten year programme, does the NTA envisage any plans for that line to be reopened as means to bring people, be they in Tuam, the Claremorris area, or on to Athenry, as Deputy O’Keeffe spoke about, to Galway city as part of the transport network?

**Ms Anne Graham:** We are not looking at that now. The commitment was to examine the feasibility of opening up or extending the western rail corridor. Again, that is the responsibility of the Department and is not something that we would look at, but they would take our advice on what we see as the future passenger demand.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** What is the NTA’s view?

**Ms Anne Graham:** We have not done any assessment of that so I do not have a view. I could only have an informed view once we had done an assessment, if we are requested to do so by the Department.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** The NTA has not been asked to do so.

**Ms Anne Graham:** No. Our focus has been primarily on commuter services into the city, as in on the existing infrastructure, improving bus services especially in our regional cities and improving the priority for those services. That is our role on that.

On Dublin Airport and servicing it with a heavy rail line, in the lead up to developing the transport strategy for the greater Dublin area, we did a specific study on how Dublin Airport will be served by transport. Our recommendation, which was approved in the strategy, is that it be served by light rail not heavy rail and that in terms of serving the wider community in the Fingal area, the best option was a metro service serving both the airport and Swords. There is a commitment to examine whether heavy rail might be done but that would be after our transport strategy, which is 2035. That would be looked at again.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Am I correct that the cost of this light rail is envisaged at €3.5 billion to €4 billion and that it is ten or 15 years away?

**Ms Anne Graham:** It is €3 billion. Our estimate is that we would deliver services from 2027.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** The NTA will have it built by 2027.
Ms Anne Graham: Yes, 2027.

Obviously we are concerned by increasing anti-social behaviour on our public transport services. We would not like to see that on our pilot services. We would have to see what additional measure we will have to take if there were to be increased anti-social behaviour on our public transport.

Delivering BusConnects in Galway is in the national development plan. No Luas is proposed for Galway in either the national planning framework or the national development plan. In the transport strategy that we developed, the demand levels are not at the level they need to be to support a light rail service. The plan is to have improvements in bus services across Galway.

I will hand over to my colleague to respond to Deputy O’Keeffe.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Ms Graham missed the question on Local Link.

Ms Anne Graham: I will ask Ms Malone to answer the Local Link questions.

Ms Margaret Malone: On the Local Link, one of the queries about the evening service was the 11 p.m. finish and whether that was fair on rural communities. The span we are seeing in the applications is services running from 6 p.m. until midnight. We will have to see how it plays out. It is a pilot and we are looking closely at what the patronage will be like. It will be important for us to see as many people as possible using these services in order to build a case for continuing them into next year. To date, feedback has been that 11 p.m. probably works for quite a lot of people who are not using the services, particularly for going out for a drink but also going shopping, visiting relatives or socialising. We will play along with it and see how it goes.

On potential downtime in certain bus usage around the country, from the perspective of Local Link and rural transport, we have many small operators who are on contract with us to deliver services during the day but also on contract with Bus Éireann to deliver school services in the morning and early afternoon. We see many small operators around the country using and getting use out of their buses on an all-day basis.

Mr. Tim Gaston: To respond to Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív’s question, we have debated this issue before and take his point about the definition of a commuter service. Something on which we are engaging more is trying to differentiate between regular commuter services and other feeder and town services. As more funding becomes available, we are in regular discussions with Dublin Bus on where we can start to expand the reach of the day. We are starting earlier. The Deputy suggested a half-hour frequency in the morning peak. The next question is to what time will it continue in the evening. We agree that such a definition of a commuter service would be useful. Perhaps then we might designate certain services in that category. That might be something we could do in all major urban areas and, at the same time, designate other services in categories also.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: What if they cross into an urban area? In Galway would it cover Barna or extend to areas 45 km or 50 km away from where people are forced to commute because of third level education grant rules? According to the definition of the Department of Education and Skills people living 45 km away are considered to be adjacent, but according to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, they are in the sticks. That is a crazy disconnect.

Mr. Tim Gaston: I was not sure what the Deputy meant when he referred to a 45 km zone.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I am referring to someone in third level education who receives a grant at the adjacent rate. It is presumed the student goes home every evening to a distance of 45 km.

Mr. Tim Gaston: Do students living within 45 km receive a grant?

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: No, they receive the grant at the adjacent rate, not the non-adjacent rate. It is lower and based on the premise that they go home every evening. Most students do not own a car.

Mr. Tim Gaston: It is something at which we will look.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The presumption made by the Department of Education and Skills is that students can get beyond Carraroe or Dunmore every evening. They receive a grant of €1,000 if they have a piddly little income. The adjacent rate is tiny and the student’s parents are on a very low income, if the grant is awarded. The Department presumes students can travel 45 km, but the NTA presumes they only want to travel to Barna.

Mr. Tim Gaston: That is something we will definitely take on board. We will look at it and continue to work with our colleagues in Bus Éireann because we have expanded services into the evening and at the weekends in some parts of the country and would like to see more of it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: If there was a rebalancing of the money between highly intensive services in Dublin and the poor mugs outside it, would it solve the problem? Take €10 million or €20 million from Dublin which has a big population and give it to the rest of us. There are 4 million people outside Dublin.

Mr. Tim Gaston: If one puts Bus Éireann and LocalLink together, it is quite a bit more than for Dublin Bus. The balance has shifted slightly in recent years. We are actually looking at it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It should be four times more.

Mr. Tim Gaston: We have had that debate before.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We will have it again.

Mr. Tim Gaston: It is something to which we are moving where we are able to do so and where there is funding available to support it.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We are talking about equality. We are talking about the number of people living in rural parts of Ireland receiving the same treatment in the budget. Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív has the figures and pointed out that it is a pittance. Would it be fair to say it is 25%?

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is much lower.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Anyone who has been involved in business knows that things might be on the floor when one starts. A service could start badly, but the better it will become the more it is used. We are talking a great game about reducing the number of cars on the road and saying we will have everything hunky-dory and a beautiful country, but, at the same time, we are not giving people an opportunity. We are talking out of both sides of our mouth and it cannot continue.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: There was a service from Galway to the Aran Islands on a boat called the Oileáin Árann. It took half a day to get there and the other half to get back. To be quite honest,
there were bugger all people going to the Aran Islands. When I became Minister, we introduced services from Rossaveal. In fairness to the boat companies, they got better and better boats and increased the frequency of services. They are now being run on a purely commercial basis, with a subsidy for winter services. Massive numbers, amounting to hundreds of thousands, are going in and out. There are only 1,500 people living on the islands. What was proved was a frequent and fast efficient service would attract passengers. It does not take two days to get from the islands and two days to get back; people can travel in the morning and do their business. Everything is geared towards the level of usage and requirements. We insisted on a service starting from the islands because people wanted to get to town in the morning and back last thing in the evening. It was not a premium service because the islanders wanted to get to town and do their business and return on the one day. The idea that there cannot be demand on radial routes out of cities-----

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. The point has been well made. I ask the delegates to respond to the remaining questions.

Mr. Ray Hernan: To answer Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice, unfortunately, I do not have an answer on the flexibility of the tender process for schools. I do not have that level of detail with me.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Will Mr. Hernan look at it? I mean no disrespect to him because he has not been in his position long, but I have spoken to people who were in his role previously and it seems no one bothers his or her backside to try to change the system to make it better for Bus Éireann and the people. Someone needs to take the bull by the horns and sort out the problem.

Mr. Ray Hernan: My commitment to the Deputy is I will get the specific details and revert to him directly. He referenced sub-contracting. There has been an increase in the level of sub-contracting buses since last October, but I am relieved to see the level declining. The Deputy asked whether we faced challenges in terms of the availability of buses with the appropriate ticket machines on board. No, we did not. To ensure the continuity of services for our customers, first and foremost, I made a decision that, in some instances, we would have cash fares. However, we have invested in ticket machines. Bar a very rare exception at this point, all sub-contracted services, as well as all of our own, now have ticket machines that can also accept the Leap card across the entire network.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Mr. Hernan is telling me that on some bus services it was possible to take cash because the appropriate machinery was not in place?

Mr. Ray Hernan: It is possible that may have occurred in some instances. I do not believe it was a material number, but I cannot state categorically to the Deputy that all buses had a ticket machine. In some instances, needs must in providing a service. We always ensured cash would be accepted on services and have now eliminated that exposure to the company.

The Deputy referenced the use of school buses by LocalLink. One of the challenges is that the requirement tends to be at peak times in the morning and evening but particularly in the morning. These are the same times school buses are being used. I would like to see greater use of the dedicated school bus service, but using it is a challenge at off-peak times. They are being used at peak times. The question relates to when they are available.
**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** We have the new system being spoken about by the Department, whereby we will all be brought to the pub in the evening.

**Mr. Ray Hernan:** Again, it comes down to availability. Our school bus service is provided by part-time drivers. It is not just about the availability of school buses, it is also about the availability of drivers. I am happy to co-operate with LocalLink and the NTA. If there is flexibility, I am more than happy to consider the matter.

The Deputy mentioned fleet management, or the allocation of buses and their size. This has been an issue. I acknowledge it is something on which we have focused in my time to ensure the size and capacity of buses are more aligned with the demand for the service. One example to which the Deputy referred in the past was Athlone where the size of buses appeared to be excessive versus demand. I can confirm that, with the additional buses due to arrive between now and the end of June next year, all buses in Athlone will be replaced by others of smaller size, which will be more reflective of the demand for the service. Aligning the fleet with demand is consistently under review, both internally and also with the NTA.

The final issue to which the Deputy referred was the use of gas buses. As mentioned, that matter is under review. The last of the diesel buses with Euro 6 emissions will be delivered early next year. Beyond that date we will be restricted in the acquisition or use of diesel buses.

The emissions from existing buses are consistent with those from compressed natural gas buses.

I will refer Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív’s queries about the provision of services to my colleague Mr. O’Mahony.

**Mr. Robert O’Mahony:** The Deputy mentioned the fact that we were working on a proposal for services to and from Carraroe and referred to moving to an early frequency. The proposal being worked on would see a bus service approximately every 30 minutes at morning and evening peak times and then at a core frequency of every two hours throughout the day. The service would extend into late evening such that there could be a bus service at 7 p.m., 9 p.m. and 11 p.m.. That would meet the requirements of those who want to go to and from work, to college if they have late lectures, or to socialise in Galway. That is our initial plan for services to and from Carraroe.

When we make a change on a route, we review demand and the response from the public. Almost exclusively, based on changes we have made in the past two years, the frequency will increase further. An example would be route 458 from Ballina to Sligo to Enniskillen. We increased the frequency of the service to every three hours and are now considering increasing it to every two hours. Again, it is in reaction to demand.

There were two other comments on changes to networks. Route 115 was mentioned by Deputy Peter Burke. We are finalising that proposal and hope to introduce the new timetable in the first week of September, the week after the papal visit. That is the current plan.

With regard to route 336, from Kilkee to Ennis, and route 333, from Doonbeg to Ennis, we are completely revising the network. It will be based on enhancing connectivity between Kilkee and Ennis and also linking Doonbeg with Kilkee. A bus service will start in Doonbeg and travel to Kilkee and then to Ennis via Kilrush. One will also be able to catch a bus in Kilkee, travel to Doonbeg and
on to Ennistymon. There are two routes, with a circular bus route in each direction. We are considering increasing the frequency to approximately seven services per day on the main line between Kilkee and Ennis. It will start early in the morning, with the first bus service at 6.05 a.m., approximately, which will connect with the first train service from Ennis to Dublin. There will also be a later bus service at night at 9 p.m. from Ennis. There will be a bus service at 7 p.m. that will feed from the last train service from Dublin to Ennis. One of the requirements on which we receive a great deal of feedback was to be able to move from west Clare to Dublin, to do whatever business one had to do in the capital and to get back on the one day. There will also be an increase in the number of services on a Saturday, a Sunday and public holidays.

On the vehicles to be used, the service will be rolled out initially with standard coaches, but part of the new fleet is to be allocated to this network. Therefore, from early 2019, the service will be operated with fully low floor accessible vehicles.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I had a question on fares.

**Chairman:** Unfortunately, there is another meeting which is due to start here-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** It was a simple question.

**Ms Anne Graham:** We continuously look at improving the fare structure to make it better value for customers. Last year we offered improved fares in the regional cities with Bus Éireann. There were significant reductions in fares. Depending on affordability, based on our PSO budget, we will see whether we can do more in achieving value for money for customers.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Am I right in thinking people living in rural Ireland are subsidising in the fare structure those living in urban areas through their taxes?

**Ms Anne Graham:** We had this debate previously.

**Chairman:** Unfortunately, I must bring the meeting to a conclusion. I thank the delegates for this worthwhile and meaningful engagement. Is it agreed that the committee publish the opening statements, submissions and all other documents received for this meeting? Agreed.

*The joint committee adjourned at 1.15 p.m. until 3 p.m. on Wednesday, 27 June 2018.*
Committee Debate 27 June 2018 Western Development Commission

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 27 Meitheamh 2018

Wednesday, 27 June 2018

The Joint Committee met at 3 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Michael Collins, Senator Paudie Coffey.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice,

Deputy Martin Kenny,

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,

In attendance: Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Eugene Murphy and Senators Rose Conway-Walsh and John O’Mahony.

DEPUTY JOE CAREY IN THE CHAIR.

Chairman: At the outset, I remind members, witnesses and the people in the Gallery to turn off their mobile phones because they interfere greatly with the sound system.

The purpose of today’s meeting is to engage with the chairperson-designate of the Western Development Commission, WDC, and consider the past performance and future strategy of the commission. The chairperson-designate of the Western Development Commission, Dr. Deirdre Garvey, will discuss her strategic priorities for the role and her views about the future contribution of the commission. The chief executive and head of regional development, Mr. Ian Brannigan, will discuss the past performances and future strategy of the commission. We will call on the chairperson-designate and the chief executive from the Western Development Commission to make their opening statements and I will then invite members to put their questions to the witnesses. I suggest members limit their questions to between three and five minutes but members may speak more than once. Following public session we will have a short private session. Is that agreed? Agreed. It is proposed that opening statements and any other documents supplied by the witnesses to the committee will be published on the committee’s website after the meeting. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I will now read some formal notices for the information of witnesses. I draw their attention to the fact that, by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the Chairman to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are
Dr. Deirdre Garvey: I thank the Chairman for the invitation to attend the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development. At the inaugural board meeting with the Minister, Deputy Ring, in September 2017 I outlined my approach as chairperson in three key areas. The first is setting the tone and culture, as I hope it will be an effective environment in which we value and respect diverse perspectives and work together for collective decision making in a culture of openness and transparency. The second is setting the strategic direction and the current strategic statement for the commission will guide our decisions. We will also have the opportunity to review it and build on this for a strategic plan for 2019. The commission has already embarked on the planning for its strategic statement for 2019. The third area is governance and I hope to manage the governance responsibilities of oversight and effective control with the operational responsibilities of the executive in a supportive and constructive manner.

As many members know, the remit of the Western Development Commission is set out in the Western Development Commission Act 1998 as being “to promote, and procure the promotion of, and assist in, foster and encourage economic and social development in the Western Region”. The WDC was formed in 1998 as a Government response to intense public pressure to tackle population decline over a number of years. The peripheral location and weak infrastructure resulted in a lack of job opportunities and emigration. While there remains a challenge in creating balanced regional development, there is also great opportunity to develop a sustainable competitive advantage building on the strengths of the region. The WDC has played a significant role in the economic and social development of the region since its formation. It has supported, directly and indirectly, the creation of 5,000 jobs, invested €48 million through the western investment fund, WIF. The WDC has also developed a capability in securing EU funding for critical regional projects. The regional policy and analysis capability has contributed to inform and influence policymaking on the economic and social development of the region. The www.lookwest.ie platform has provided a regional identity and promotes the attractiveness of the region as a place to live and work.

I see the WDC as an integrator and enabler in this region, aligned to national policies and with the potential to contribute to a number of the strategic outcomes of the national development plan 2040. We initiated a strategic planning process in December 2017 and are engaging with national and regional stakeholders. The WDC has identified further regional growth areas supporting our national policies and contributing to the economic and social development of the region. Our
objective is to develop a coherent regional approach by working in collaboration with our key stakeholders. There are opportunities to create a competitive and attractive region with the necessary physical and digital infrastructure. The WDC has a critical role in delivering on the national priority of strengthened rural economies and communities.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Garvey and I call Mr. Brannigan, the acting chief executive, to make his opening statement.

Mr. Ian Brannigan: As stated by Dr. Garvey, the Western Development Commission welcomes the opportunity to address the committee. We are a statutory body formed in 1998 promoting economic and social development in the western region of Ireland. The WDC operates under the aegis of our parent Department, the Department of Rural and Community Development. The general functions of the WDC are set out in the Western Development Commission Act, as mentioned, and are to foster and promote growth in the seven counties of the western region.

The WDC has developed a way of working that delivers a unique and effective response to the development challenges of a predominantly rural region. It delivers a critical capacity to the western region to identify, design and implement economic development and growth. Furthermore, it adds value and regional sensitivity to the work of national and international bodies and actively engages with regional interests. The WDC has sought to establish a capability for future growth both for the region and all of its citizens. The WDC’s current key strategic goals are outlined in our strategic statement. The WDC aims to inform and influence policymaking on economic and social development in Ireland’s western region through high-quality analysis, promoting the benefits of living, working and doing business in Ireland’s western region, encouraging the development of the western economy based on the sustainable development of the western region’s strengths and resources, and providing risk capital to micro, small and medium-sized and social enterprises through the WDC western investment fund, WIF.

We are fully aligned with current and emerging national policy. We are also fully aligned with policy and best practice in the area of regional development. A Programme for a Partnership Government includes a specific commitment to reinforce the role of the WDC to support the implementation of regional jobs plans in the west and north west. We also work with the Government to realise the relevant commitments in Project Ireland 2040 and the ongoing regional spatial and economic strategies. Similarly, the recent strategic statement of our parent Department, which includes a strategic goal to enhance regional development, states an objective to strengthen the role of the Western Development Commission in contributing to regional and national policy objectives.

I will now address the committee’s specific request to comment briefly on our past performance. The WDC, through its collaborative efforts in recent years, has directly supported hundreds of regional enterprises. Through partnering with regional stakeholders, relevant national and international bodies, and the Departments, the WDC has also supported or created almost 5,000 jobs. Critically, it has also acted as an enabler for our region’s wider development through mentoring, advocacy and access to finance solutions for partners such as local authorities, the local enterprise offices, LEOs, Enterprise Ireland, the Design and Crafts Council of Ireland, LEADER etc. Through our innovative regional promotional platform, www.lookwest.ie, we have created and supported an identity for
thousands of citizens engaging in events and programmes and thereby promoting the region domestically and globally.

The key performance outcomes in recent years for the organisation have included investment in regional jobs. Since 2010, the WDC has sourced and directed in excess of €13 million in total funding towards regional enterprise and employment development through Exchequer, EU and own funds. Also included is the realisation of regional jobs. In recent years approximately 2,700 direct jobs and 5,000 in total, indirect and direct, have been significantly supported by the WDC in the region. Regional policy review and analysis capability has led to advances in critical areas such as broadband roll-out, extension of the gas network to towns in the region, showcasing novel growth sectors such as the creative economy, and ensuring the region is at the forefront of national initiatives such as Project Ireland 2040, the regional spatial and economic strategies, RSES, and the Commission for Economic Development of Rural Areas, CEDRA, of which we were a key component.

We also offer the region a unique strategic development capacity to design and implement, with stakeholders, solutions for sustainable socio-economic growth within the western region. This has led over the years to the realisation of initiatives in key regional growth sectors such as the creative economy growth programme, the Creative West, where the WDC has championed and delivered targeted microloan offerings, a €2 million regional film fund, and an export platform, all of which have been developed and offered by us with partners to grow the sector.

To what end has this been done? In 2018, the National University of Ireland, Galway, NUIG, estimated approximately 13,000 people are working in the sector. In 2009, when the WDC launched Creative West, the direct employment was around 11,000. The WDC has also supported the renewable energy and green economy sector in the region. Similarly, responding to stakeholder needs in recent years, we have created a regional capacity and capability to access EU programming resources and funds. From a standing start in 2009, the region now has the capacity to develop and deliver significant funding across the region and a range of key growth areas. We are engaged in nine major EU projects in 2018, with a total value exceeding €18 million. These have supported a wide and diverse range of regional clients and stakeholders to benefit.

I will give some examples. A total of 119 creative industry businesses in the region have access to international markets through the www.mycreativeedge.eu marketing platform. These include Derryhick Sticks in Mayo, Black Hen Design in Roscommon, Howling Hamster games in Galway, and the Secret Life of Plastic, an unusual initiative from Ennis. Our renewable energy businesses are gaining access to markets through our EU programmes. For example, ProAir in Galway has recently received funds and other support from us and is now evolving to Enterprise Ireland support and will grow larger through that. Through our EU capacity, we have offered scores of stakeholders and hundreds of SMEs access to EU expertise and resources. I refer to local authorities, higher education institutes, HEIs, Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, SEAI, the Marine Institute etc.

The WDC, in respect of performance, has also developed and delivered a unique regional access to finance capability. Our western investment fund, WIF, is a critical component in the WDC’s abilities to undertake its remit. This innovative solution to regional disparities was established by the Government to be a unique source of risk funding to projects, businesses and communities in the
region. Significantly, it has increased regional access to venture capital, VC, funding from 3% of total deals done in the State to over 7% in the past ten to 15 years, thereby addressing a key market failure for businesses in the region. Cumulative gains from this innovative initiative include €48 million invested, 140 enterprises supported within the western region, €208 million additional investment leveraged from private and other sources, critical jobs supported and created through this initiative, and now capital reserves available for more growth projects across a wider range with the development agenda. Due to its dynamic and significant performance in supporting access to finance for regional businesses and its strength, the Western Investment Fund, WIF, offers us an enhanced range of opportunities to realise regional growth.

In terms of performance, we will look at regional identity. Our www.lookwest.ie platform has given the region a brand with real reach - more than 1 million people have visited and accessed our website since its inception - and we now have almost 20,000 social media friends within the region. This has allowed local authorities, organisations, individuals and business engage with one another in all things of the west. Novel collaborations such as a talent tool for the region are examples of how this work strives to retain and attract human capital and thus inward investment to our region.

The WDC seeks to achieve a significant step change in the effectiveness of key parts of our regional economy, which, as I said, are mostly rural in nature. The goal of the WDC is to upgrade the diversity and nature of the regional economy to make the region better able to sustain continuous long-term growth and contribute even more to the national success story.

Importantly, while recognising that our region is primarily rural in nature, it is understood that urban centres, such as Galway city, may effectively anchor the regional growth. This is a positive aspect. What would make it an indispensable aspect is designing the support policies to effectively disperse the economic benefits to the wider regional hinterlands. As such, consideration for design and implementation of effective spatial and economic development strategies will need to be considered to support such an aim. The WDC looks forward to fully supporting the regional spatial and economic strategies, RSES, process in realising these ambitions.

While in the main, the WDC has sought to inform the members on its recent strong past performance in delivering both on its remit and on the applicable national and regional policy directives, it is also important to note the current efforts on formulating an appropriate future strategy for the organisation, as mentioned by the chair. Today the WDC is advancing the formulation of its next strategic statement. This is being led by the board which has appointed a dedicated subcommittee for the purpose of guiding and co-ordinating the work plan for identifying the goals of the 2019 to 2023 strategic statement.

The WDC has demonstrated a strong performance in terms of its remit of fostering and supporting economic growth within its geographical boundaries. This is seen in the capacity, reach, investment and job support numbers outlined this submission. However, it remains apparent that this identified growth areas merit consideration on how to continue to maintain and, indeed, accelerate this rate of primarily indigenous regional socio-economic growth. Opportunities are apparent and regional support to unlock their potential is essential, not only to develop a sustainable modern economy in the region, but also in addressing potential disparities.
I would like to take the opportunity afforded to us by the committee to note the efforts of the staff of the WDC and boards, past and present, for their efforts in all our endeavours. I extend gratitude to the Chairman and the committee for affording us this opportunity to talk to them today.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Brannigan. I now call on members for their questions and observations. I call Deputy Fitzmaurice.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank witnesses for their presentations. The witnesses might write these questions down because I generally tend to pose quick-fire questions to people. Mr. Paddy McGuinness has left but what the witness said was totally contrary to what his views were, in that there was not balanced growth. Has something changed overnight? Does WDC own Dillon House? Is it rented? If it is rented, how much is the annual rent? As regards creating jobs and moving forward, how much has WDC encouraged the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to bring in the west of Ireland into the Trans-European Transport Network, TEN-T, initiative? As regards funding, how much co-operation is involved with the North West Regional Assembly. Do the organisations tic-tac?

Mr. Brannigan spoke about broadband, gas networks and such matters. Is he happy with the level of broadband in the west of Ireland, especially in the rural areas, on which he touched? I know some towns have good broadband. I refer to businesses being set up and the opportunity to avail of gas. It may be coming to Longford but there are some towns in the west of Ireland which are crying out for it.

When one wants to create jobs, one needs an infrastructure in the line of Knock airport. Should there be a tax free zone there? How much lobbying has WDC done in this regard? The witnesses talked about the 2040 plan and the development of regions. In the same plan, there is talk about creating jobs and so on. We have to be honest and say that if we do not have a proper road network from Mullingar to Castlebar and from Letterkenny to the fine Tuam-Galway road which goes on to Limerick and which would link up with the Cork to Mallow road, which the Taoiseach announced would be done, we will be up against it.

The population in west Mayo, north-west Mayo and north-west Donegal has declined. On the agricultural side, what is WDC focusing in on in terms of trying to protect family farms or derive business from them?

**Chairman:** Will the witnesses try to address these questions please?

**Dr. Deirdre Garvey:** I will take the Deputy’s first question on Paddy McGuinness, the previous chair, and balanced growth. With two different chairs, one may have different perspectives on this. It is important to recognise that there are disparities in regional development. There are disparities in employment, incomes, growth areas and even within the region itself from Donegal, Clare to Galway. It is also important to recognise that in the 2015 to 2016 analysis of the census there has been a period of population growth in many of those counties. We are now seeing for the first time since the census, a population decline in three of those counties, against the national average. It is important to recognise the disparities. I take the view that balanced regional development is a national issue; it is not just an issue for these counties.
We are focusing on the attractiveness and the strengths of the region and developing sectors that are indigenous and sustainable to the region in the long term - for instance, in the creative sector, I refer to the Western Regional Audiovisual Fund, WRAP, fund, which continues to grow. There are small business within that sector that support even smaller businesses and enterprises.

There have been changes. Has it magically changed? There are still disparities. We recognise those but we are focusing on ensuring to build on the positives and the strengths of the region in many of those areas. As the acting chief executive outlined, there has been a very positive impact on many of the areas across a number of sectors. WDC looks across the investment fund, in particular, the region and employment as well as the sector it is in to ensure a balance within the region. We are very aware of the Galway-centric growth and how we can focus on a distributed element of that growth.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I will try to take these questions in order. The Deputy asked about Dillon House. We do not own it. The Office of Public Works owns it. The Deputy asked about TEN-T and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. In terms of creating jobs, infrastructure - road, rail, air and sea - is essential. We are working with the Department in terms of TEN-T. We understand through our direct policy work and through our wider European work the necessity of looking at policy development from a European-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Sorry for interrupting but when Mr. Brannigan says WDC is working with the Department, what has it done?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** We work with it on its ongoing committees-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** What is done? It is two years since this has been put into a programme. What has WDC done with the Department in two years?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** We have worked with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on an ongoing basis. I do not understand the Deputy’s question. Is he asking-----

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** What has been done the get the area into TEN-T in order to help it? In the past two years, what submission has the development commission made to, or what work has it done with, the Department or Brussels to have this area included for TEN-T funding?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** Every time the Department makes submissions, we supply it any information it needs to achieve that goal. We do not lobby Brussels directly. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has that function.

The Deputy’s next question was on co-operation with the Northern and Western Regional Assembly, NWRA. We work with it all of the time. Currently, we are working with it on a smart regions programme to develop a unique case for the digital agenda in the west. As members may know, there are smart cities around the world where connectivity is the basis for efficiency and growth. We are trying to do that on a region-wide basis. With the assembly, we have commissioned an assessment through Insight NUI Galway. We are now in phase 2 of that. We are working on this issue with various Departments as well.

We have worked with the assembly on the One Region One Vision effort to highlight what is ongoing in our region and the opportunities therein. To date, two large events have been held within the
region, which have attracted business leaders and they like to talk about how to grow business within the region. We also worked with the assembly on various committees in terms of the Atlantic economic corridor. We are examining the best way of pursuing enterprise growth through that with the NWRA.

As well as having a good relationship with the assembly on an ongoing basis, these are specific projects that we are working on with it.

The Deputy referred to broadband and gas networks and asked whether I was happy with the level of broadband. To be fair to all parties, I would say that, the better the broadband, the happier I will be. We have proof that people in the digital and creative economies want to work and live within our region. They demand connectivity to undertake their daily business. We are supportive of anything that accelerates connectivity in every part of our region. From a business point of view, it is needed for jobs. More widely, and to speak personally-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Does Mr. Brannigan believe there is a deficit?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** We are definitely working towards a goal, and that goal needs to be met as soon as possible in terms of implementation and roll-out. There is a business need. My Creative Edge and other platforms have been used to showcase goods and service from western businesses in Roscommon and beyond. That is all predicated on having sufficient broadband to enable them to transact on the back of that publicity and market exposure. It is self-evident that they need broadband. I would be happier were I able to say that the roll-out had been completed, but that is not within my remit. I am relatively happy that we are moving towards it, and I will be happier when we get there.

The Deputy referred to Knock airport.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I also mentioned the gas networks.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** We have worked on trying to extend the networks by examining the analysis undertaken by the relevant Departments. Our examination of net present value calculations has led to seven extra towns receiving gas. It is the case that gas is a more cost-efficient fuel and helps business wherever it is, and the more towns that have it, the better. That said, I am not sure what the Deputy’s question was. Did it relate to the town of Longford?

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** No. There are towns in west that need gas. Is the commission making an input on that issue?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** Where asked, we always make an input.

Knock airport is a key infrastructural node within the region for inbound tourism, visitors and so on. As to the WDC’s view, we are long-term investors in Knock airport. We are also engaging with it on publicity and PR. Previously, we worked with the airport and local authorities on direct marketing campaigns to keep flights from Milan, Frankfurt and London flying into the region so that it could better serve the wider hinterland. Specifically, we are engaged in an ongoing discussion with management about how to help the tourism initiative it is trying to create within the airport, namely, to increase tourist numbers and the value of the information on the region’s available tourism
products that it gives to people. The airport is key to the region, especially the north west, it connects the north west internationally and we are highly invested in it.

As to the question on the Project Ireland 2040 plan and the road network, road infrastructure is critical to the west. In every case where there has been investment, we have seen a bounce.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** It is critical, but it is not in the plan. How can we do something?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** Working with the local authorities and other stakeholders in the region, we made a submission to what was then the forthcoming Project Ireland 2040 plan explicitly outlining the importance of the road network.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Does that mean the Department was not listening?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** Pardon?

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** The WDC made a submission, as did probably every Member present. Does that mean the Department was not listening to us? We can make all the submissions in the world, but are we not being listened to?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I cannot judge that. The Deputy asked whether the road network was important. It is critical. We made that submission, as I accept the Deputy did. What happened afterward was, I am afraid, beyond my pay grade.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank Mr. Brannigan.

**Senator Paudie Coffey:** I welcome the witnesses and commend them on their work. I read with interest the more detailed submission that was circulated to committee members. It was clear that the WDC was playing a significant role in the economic development of the western region. I come from the south east, and I would love to have such a voice working for us across various sectors, be it with the Government, State agencies or local authorities.

I note with interest that the WDC has invested €48 million, supported 134 enterprises and leveraged an additional €208 million for investment, all of which is significant. Will Mr. Brannigan elaborate on the jobs that this investment has supported in enterprises in the western region? He mentioned that there was the potential for more growth in similar projects. Will he provide more information on same?

I was going to ask about the WDC’s views on Project Ireland 2040 and the national planning framework. Its submission refers to Galway as an anchor for the region. Sligo is identified as an urban area of growth in Project Ireland 2040. With both growth areas, there is potential everywhere in the region between them.

Members were right to refer to the infrastructural deficit. Being from the south east, I am concerned by a piece of infrastructure that links our two regions, that being, the freight train service between Ballina and the Port of Waterford, which recently ceased. The latter is the only port outside of Dublin with a direct rail connection. We should try to find ways to sustain such rail lines to improve interconnectivity between the regions and continental Europe. If there was a role for the WDC to identify replacement business, for example, by combining smaller volumes and then building the sustainability of such a freight train service between the west and south east, it would be a job well
done. Will the WDC consider carrying out a feasibility study of companies in the western region with a view to determining whether the service can be reinstated?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I will take the questions in order. The Senator mentioned our investment fund. I thank him for his kind words regarding the south east. I will give the committee an overview of the fund. The document we supplied to the committee refers to 134 enterprises supported, but the updated figure is 140. It is growing all the time. I will provide an example of where the money has gone over the years. I stress that the western investment fund was a really good initiative of the Government of the day and has done and is doing an excellent job. However, as we have had no fund since 2010, it is working on revolving funds, that is, funds that may have come back. The position is that the largest share on a sectoral basis of the spread of investments, the €48 million about which Senator Paudie Coffey spoke, is in the life sciences because of the cluster of world-class medical devices organisations in the west. After that comes the ICT sector, with a share of €10.1 million, followed by the clean tech sector, at €3 million; the food sector, at €2 million; the natural resources sector, at €1.4 million; the manufacturing sector, at €3 million; and the tourism sector, at €1.2 million. There is good diversity in the sectors funded, although, in fairness, in the life sciences risk and return are also considerations.

The way in which the fund has been dispersed geographically during the years is interesting. We mentioned the anchor that is Galway city. Owing to their population, city and county areas will obviously receive a proportionate sum. I will give the committee the figures and then discuss them a little. During the years Galway city has received €16 million. That is a large percentage of the outlay, but County Donegal has received €5.3 million; County Mayo, €9.2 million; County Sligo, approximately €2.6 million; and County Clare, €1.5 million. Therefore, there has been a regional spread of the money. That is one of the main aims in what we are trying to do. As the Chairman said and I intimated, we see fully the anchoring nature of what is a large area. The goal is to use the likes of Sligo, Castlebar, Shannon, Ennis and Letterkenny as mini magnets or mini anchors and try to spread from there. Many of our efforts in promoting regional development and providing access to finance are aimed at trying to get businesses and organisations to come to us to see whether they can grow. We have had some recent good successes in that regard.

As I mentioned to Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice, we worked on the national planning framework, the precursor to Project Ireland 2040, on a collaborative basis with many of the local authorities. I felt it was very much a concerted effort to seek what was best for the region, which was both good and new; hence, I think poles around Sligo, Athlone and Letterkenny emerged from the plan on the basis that there was an understanding that if we could have infrastructure and so on provided in these areas, it would benefit wider areas. I thought they were very sensible proposals and we were very glad to be a part of the process.

Senator Paudie Coffey made a really interesting point about Ballina and Waterford and the line between them and asked a very good question. The WDC is interested in all access infrastructure to grow the economy. About two years ago we made a rail freight analysis - it is on our website - that looked at rail freight as perhaps being a way to enter passenger numbers and so on to subsidise them. The analysis showed that three of the four freight lines in the country, of which Ballina-Waterford is one, emanated from or passed through the west. I know that there is work ongoing in
the Department in that regard. I would have to go back to the team to talk about the Senator’s request for a feasibility study to link with it. If I may, I will defer the response to that discussion and come back to the Senator on the matter.

**Senator Paudie Coffey:** I appreciate that response. It is in the interests of the western region and the region from which I come, the south east, because the Port of Waterford is an access point to continental Europe. It was served by a freight train service that, unfortunately, has ceased. If we want to sustain the port into the future, we must identify new opportunities. If the Western Development Commission could collaborate with whomever it must within the western region and the Port of Waterford to try to re-establish the line, it would be mutually beneficial. That is on what our efforts should be focused - finding solutions and new opportunities. I would appreciate it if the commission were to do so.

I was struck by Mr. Brannigan’s figures for development and tourism. Obviously, the Wild Atlantic Way winds its way through much of the western region. I note from the CSO figures announced only today that in the month of May more than 1 million overseas visitors visited Ireland, up nearly 250,000 on the figure for the same period last year. There are huge opportunities to attract overseas visitors into all regions which would help to sustain rural enterprises. I see this happening in the south east through the success of the Waterford Greenway, from which many rural enterprises have emanated in a very short period. Towns and villages along the greenway are finding vibrant new economic uses and there are new restaurants and services and so on. I know that there are greenways in the west also. There is one in Westport and I think there are plans to extend it to Achill. There are huge opportunities for all of us. The Western Development Commission has a role to play in identifying what lies ahead and where the potential for growth is. I wish it well in its work.

**Dr. Deirdre Garvey:** I will respond to the Senator’s comments on Galway being the anchor. To clarify, I mentioned Galway in the context of there being perhaps fewer disparities there than, let us say, in counties Donegal, Clare and Mayo. I reiterate my colleague’s comments about Sligo and its importance under the national development plan. It was an important contribution by the WDC to make that submission from a regional perspective, not from the perspective of individual counties in the context of what was best for the region. It had an impact and was hugely important.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** I thank the delegates for their opening statements. The difficulty with the Western Development Commission’s work lies in how it strikes a balance in putting sufficient pressure on the Government to make the right policy decisions for the west while being funded by it. That is a challenge for many agencies. It has concerned us all that someone such as Mr. Paddy McGuinness threw his hands in the air and said, “I cannot take this any more.” We can see that nothing major has changed since. As there has certainly been no game changer, we are concerned. While the delegates can present a very optimistic picture - I suppose it is part of their job to do so - we need to dig a little deeper on certain matters. I know that the commission’s remit does not include applying for EU funding, but are the delegates satisfied that in the west we are availing of all opportunities presented to the commission to obtain EU funding? How concerned are they about the withdrawal of the TEN-T projects? Has a renewed application been made? How much pressure is the commission putting on to have a renewed application made?
I want to ask the delegates about the Atlantic economic corridor and the task force that was set up. How many times do the commission and the Atlantic economic corridor task force meet? What is the relationship between them and has it made a difference? We are two years down the line from when it was set up and I know that it was to be reviewed within two years. Has it been reviewed and, if so, has it made a difference to development in the west?

We talked about broadband provision. We need to be a little stronger on all of the areas without broadband. It is not just broadband; there are huge areas without telecommunications. I am not talking about remote areas but about trying to make telephone calls in areas within half a mile of Castlebar. People have to go sit in their cars to try to get a signal. That is the reality.

Mr. Brannigan talked about part of the commission’s remit being overseeing the provision of connectivity. Connectivity is the key driver of all development, but how can we expect a CEO or other staff to relocate to the west when there are areas in which we do not have something as basic as connectivity even to make a mobile phone call?

I also want to ask the delegates about the promotion of education which is part of the commission’s remit. Are they concerned about GMIT and the slowness in implementing the report brought out last November? Were they concerned when courses were recently closed there? There does not seem to be the will to see GMIT’s development.

I must ask the delegates about Knock Airport. It is not just a matter of flights in and out; it is also a matter of creating an industrial zone. How important is it to have a decent fiscal incentive in place to attract companies to ensure we have a proper development hub at the airport? If the witnesses were to name their one key infrastructure priority what would it be?

I am concerned that the national planning framework, NPF, seems to be population driven and that while there are aspirations, there is no real commitment on timelines. It states specifically that projects will be considered. If the commission is to do a cost-benefit analysis of any project, population, as one of the main drivers, will almost predict the outcome of the decision. There are, however, many projects that I imagine are priorities for the Western Development Commission and that are certainly priorities for me and Sinn Féin. How can the commission influence the elements used in the cost-benefit analysis to ensure decisions are not only population driven? I welcome the opportunity to discuss this with the commission today.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** In respect of EU funds, broadly, the commission is happy that it has enhanced capability to offer EU funds such as INTERREG in the region and we do that to the tune of millions of euro. This funding helps the region. We work with Údarás na Gaeltachta, National University of Ireland, Galway, the private sector and others in this regard. This process is going well and this capacity is needed because it is like risk funding for ideas and concepts for development that people may not get easily elsewhere.

The TEN-T project is a completely different EU project. I fully accept the Senator’s point on that. We have to look further into how we will be centrally involved in the project because we fully buy into the idea that we need to be on the core not the comprehensive network of the TEN-T, which is important for infrastructural growth in the country and the region. While we are doing great stuff in the EU and have worked previously on TEN-T, there is scope to consider it again and see what we
can do to influence it. Ultimately, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Government will have the most influence on that.

**Senator Rose Conway-Walsh:** Has the WDC lobbied the Government to make a resubmission on it?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** We do not engage in lobbying. We are an independent State agency and we have to work within that remit. We have certainly informed in terms of what infrastructure we believe is needed. The Senator asked what infrastructure is required. Based on engagement with stakeholders, we are clear about what infrastructure is required in the region. We have to put that through the proper channels and push as hard as we can that way.

The Senator referred to the Atlantic economic corridor, AEC, and the number of meetings we have had with the AEC task force. As I do not have exact details, I may have to revert to her on the matter. Meetings take place regularly. One was held last week and there will be another next week. The WDC was represented on three sub-committees and is now represented on two, namely, infrastructure and enterprise. We are also on the AEC steering committee, which meets regularly. A website related to the AEC will be launched this Friday. There are things happening all the time.

The Western Development Commission fully embraced the Atlantic economic corridor task force. At first, the major point was that the chambers of commerce were involved and we could speak to businesses and get a lot of input from them. The chambers represent companies with 70,000 employees. We remain totally committed to the task force and we have made submissions on its behalf. In addition, it falls under the aegis of our parent Department. We work with the group. It is too early to say whether it has made a difference as it has not been up and running for long. It is not really for me to judge whether it has made a difference. It is working in the right areas and much good has come out of it, but these things take time. I have seen tangible results in terms of submissions and projects, meetings and infrastructure around the process.

The Senator mentioned connectivity as a basic necessity. We share that view, not only as citizens, but also because we hear it from the business communities with which we engage. Connectivity is necessary. We asked Paul Cummins when we were talking to Telegael, how he could produce in the west of Ireland and compete in international markets. He said he needed connectivity to be able to do the business in real time, not send it in the post to India. That was some time ago. We need to continue to challenge that dynamic. We have coalesced hundreds of creative businesses and almost all of them, even the artisanal ones, need connectivity to sell their products. Many of them need connectivity to create their products. We work hard with the relevant Departments to do everything we can to push it forward as an economic imperative.

I noted earlier how much we work with Knock Airport to help it, even historically in respect of flights. The Senator asked about the industrial zone and whether we need a development hub. I was most aware of that some years ago when we did an analysis with Knock Airport as part of a consultation on that issue. At the time, there was a need for some of the aviation business and material science businesses. I think the Senator’s question is about whether there is a strategic planning zone requirement or suchlike. I would need to study that again because I have not have discussions on this matter with Knock Airport recently. If that analysis stands up, that may be the case.
The Senator asked what would be our key infrastructure priority. While it is difficult to answer that question, roads seem to make the biggest difference to a wider economic hinterland. We believe, as per the submission to the NPF, that roads are very important. This brings me to the very interesting point the Senator made about some of the population based criteria. As I was not privy to that discussion, it is hard for me to talk about it. I am seeing and hearing that the UK realised its use of population based economic models led to a disproportionate investment in the London area which is coming back twofold. It is almost a bias that is built in - that is self-evident. The western region is a coherent region of 826,000 people. That, in the Irish context, is a large region, which deserves serious consideration. At the same time, the Senator is right that we need to reconsider population based models if they are driving decisions all in one way because under that approach we would not be able to realise the opportunities that we have in a geographic spread. There is one question left.

**Dr. Deirdre Garvey:** Senator Conway-Walsh’s opening question was about the previous chair of the Western Development Commission, Mr. Paddy McGuinness, throwing his hands in the air. I recognise the challenges Mr. McGuinness faced as I was on the WDC board at the time. Those who take on the position of chair of a board must believe they can make a difference and, in this case, that the commission can make a difference. We do that by building on the success we have. We have had many successes which have an impact, for example, in the creative sector, the WRAP fund, the accelerator initiatives, and the western investment fund or WIF. In 2010, no one would have projected that the WIF would be as successful as it has been, indirectly.

I appreciate what the Senator says about balancing pressure for regional issues with the pressure on central Government for funding. It is important not to become isolated from the centre, while at the same time having an ability to innovate locally and take measures to create sectors which are indigenous to, and sustainable in, the region over the long term. It takes between five and ten years to develop sectors such as the creative sector. We have identified several sectors for employment growth over the next few years and we are considering a strategic plan. I recognise the issue. It is not naivety but we believe we have to make a difference. We have to look at where we have made a difference and how we can build on it.

I will come back to the Senator’s other question about education. I have my WDC hat on today and not my education hat. With my WDC hat I say we share the concern about education in the region. Access to education is critically important right across the region. The HEA, in its report on the financial review of the institutes of technology, recognised that regional campuses, including Donegal and Mayo, provide access. That is a rationale to having education provision in those regions. They provide access for people who otherwise may not have access to third level education. It is highlighted in the Action Plan for Rural Development that the young male population in particular is leaving the region for education. Access to education is hugely important in retaining younger people in the region. I share the concern. It is hugely important that the provision of third level education in the region is maintained.

Was there one other point that we have missed?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I think that is everything.
Dr. Deirdre Garvey: The other thing I wanted to come back on was the cost-benefit analysis and population. I share the view and it is something I have spoken about previously in terms of balanced regional development. It has been written about by many economists, including John FitzGerald, who has written about it a number of times. These services cost more to provide in the regions. By using population-based models, we exclude social factors regarding the wider and longer-term impact on the region. I share the concern and think it is important we work in an integrated way to try to highlight it. We do it in various ways in the WDC, through the policy team, input and various submissions. It is important we keep doing that.

Senator Rose Conway-Walsh: I have a lot of other questions but I know other members need the time.

Senator John O'Mahony: I appreciate the Chairman letting me ask some questions because I am not a member of the committee. I heard that the witnesses would be here. They are both very welcome. It is important that I come to see my neighbours. They are based in Ballaghaderreen, where I live, and I am very aware of the great work the WDC has done since it was founded in 1998 in probing, researching, supporting and providing seed capital.

Knock Airport was mentioned. I am very aware that the role the WDC played in Knock Airport over the years has been crucial at a time when it was more vulnerable than it is now. It needs to be supported in bringing businesses that are located in the eastern side back to the west. I have lobbied many Ministers on all sides to improve that support. I will have a question on that in a moment. It is important that no matter what Government is in office we do not fall into the trap in the west of Ireland of talking ourselves down. It happens continually and the WDC is the one State agency that helps to lift the tenor of that conversation about the west. The IDA brings investment in from outside and Enterprise Ireland gives support to companies in the west that are exporting but there is a void in the middle where help is needed. The Western Development Commission could be used as that vehicle to give that help. I have brought people to meet Mr. Brannigan over the years for help, support, advice and mentoring. I have always found the door open and the advice very constructive. Sometimes I felt the criteria the WDC was working against was limited, for example, where it could give seed capital and buy in equity. Could the WDC play a bigger role if there was more funding? Could there be more flexibility in how it could offer help? Is that a constraint at times?

The other thing that has been mentioned continually is the TEN-T issue. Students from a local school did a survey on it recently. There is a perception being created that there is buckets of money in Europe and that we rejected that money. I do not accept that argument. When TEN-T was being formulated it was more about bankruptcy of the country than TEN-T. I am a member of the transport committee. The European Commissioner for Transport appeared before the committee a few months ago. TEN-T was not to be reviewed until 2023 but, in light of Brexit, the Commissioner assured us it would be reviewed a lot sooner than that. There may be an opportunity there for Government but also for agencies such as the WDC to feed into that. The Commissioner gave us assurance that the transport situation with regard to the land bridges of Britain, depending on what happens, would be looked at again. There is a possibility Ireland will need support. It will be supported by the European Union and the western region could come in on that. If there is
something to be gained from TEN-T, my reading of it was that most of the money was to be provided by the national Government and that 20% would come from elsewhere. I do not want to fight the war here but what we need to do, and what the WDC is doing, is look forward rather than look back and plan for the future. The WDC will play a really important role in the future of the west and the north west and the entire region it covers. Do the witnesses have a wish list in terms of how their jobs and their delivery to the region could be helped?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I thank the Senator for his remarks. His first question on the constraints is very perceptive. We always want to do more. That is the nature of continual improvement and trying to do better. We are in a good spot in terms of venture capital and access to finance. We created a microloan specifically for the creative economy when we had good information that it was an access to finance issue for such businesses. In recent years we looked more broadly at how we could do more if the possibility arose. There are quite a lot of what we feel are patient-investor-principle projects in the region. How can I put it simply? They are projects that would provide lots of jobs and lots of income for the region but which, for the core investor, would take a long time to return the capital. We are working on ways we could be involved in supporting them. There was analysis done on the bike trails. Our region has one national and two regional bike trails. They are Donegal, Galway and Sligo. It was a very good analysis. They will build what I would describe as ski resorts for bikes, if the committee understand that analogy. They will have different trails on them. We have worked with some of the projects which are really good commercial ventures. The trail itself does not generate a lot of income but it generates bed nights because people come in and want to stay for the weekend. If one considers what is happening in Longford with Center Parcs, it is a perfect fit. These are the types of deals we would like to see the private or public sector work on. We are looking at that type of patient investor and working with Departments and so forth to try to imagine how we could realise ambitions such as these.

A second example would be energy projects. From our work with the sector we know that many energy projects require a great deal of capital up front. Banks find that difficult because the payback period can be ten to 15 years, which is not a good business model. We believe it is a great business model because the projects use fuel such as wood chip, biomass residue and so forth from the locality. That is perfect. We are seriously looking at that and we are beginning to feel there is a solid business case there. We are in constant discussion with the Minister and the Department about how we move to realise these things.

The Senator mentioned the TEN-T. His point about an opening, perhaps, of a re-evaluation is incredibly interesting news, to be brutally honest. As I said previously, it would be nice if we could say to the various Departments, such as the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, that if there is an opening here, we would certainly like to put a case together for certain things that are in our region’s interests.

**Senator John O’Mahonyy:** The context is far different from what it was eight years ago.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** Absolutely. I have dealt with the two issues the Senator raised.

**Dr. Deirdre Garvey:** I wish to add to that. We would like to be able to replicate further what we have done to date. There is a challenge in scaling that budget-wise when working from year to year...
and also to scaling it, because there is a time factor in due diligence. One of the issues for the WIF has been having a pipeline of projects to come into the fund that will meet that level. There are a number of accelerators now in which the WDC is involved which will bring that pipeline in. Ideally, we could see that scale to the next stage with the Western Development Commission and the WIF, but it is difficult to scale that quickly. It will have to be more gradual and be done over the next two to three years. It is a positive position, however, in terms of the western investment fund and the experience we have of what has worked, and having done that in the past ten years while going through some very difficult times in between. We have come out of that with some very successful projects that the WDC has supported and from which we have seen employment growth. With regard to the key growth sectors, the biggest impact the WDC can have is the integrated and regional approach in particular sectors. We will not have an advantage in every sector that competes across the country or internationally, but there are particular sectors which are attracted to the region and can remain in the region, such as tourism and the green economy. The medical device sector has been a very successful cluster but there are other potential clusters within that as well.

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** Like Senator O’Mahony, I am not a member of the committee, but being from County Roscommon and representing the Roscommon-Galway constituency, I always have a great interest in the commission’s work. First, I compliment the witnesses on the work they have done since the commission was established. There is no doubt its presence was significant in terms of at least showing there was some survival in the region. My point is that if the commission had not been there, we would probably be in a worse position.

My questions might not be in the witnesses’ remit, which is fine. I will understand that. First, however, what is the commission’s budget for 2018 and how many staff does it employ? Is that budget open to all areas of development? We know it is open to industry, for example, but what about tourism and rural renewal? Is it open-ended?

I will make some brief comments before putting more questions. My big concern is the Roscommon perspective. According to the latest figures, between 900 and 1,000 people a day travel from Roscommon to work in Dublin. Somebody said to me recently that we are lucky to have the jobs, and it is great that we have employment within the island. I wish to reflect on families and the number of people I know who rise at 4 a.m. or 4.30 a.m., rush to get a train or get into their car to avoid the traffic, work in Dublin all day and return home at 9 p.m. or even later. It is no life for a family. One sees the situation in Dublin and the east coast. Galway city is also bursting at the seams, yet 40 minutes along the motorway Ballinasloe has lost almost 3,000 jobs in the past ten or 11 years. I constantly ask why we cannot consider some relocation. The same applies to other towns such as Mountbellew, Ballygar and so forth. That is the first issue.

Second, broadband is non-existent in many parts of my region. Obviously, there is an issue with the roll-out of the national broadband plan. It has not happened and that is a Government issue, so I am not blaming the commission. There have been many announcements about broadband but it has not happened. The reality in some situations, and it is a minority of situations, is that a number of small businesses are moving out of the county. For example, in the case of east Roscommon, businesses are relocating to Longford town from Strokestown, Roosky and elsewhere. I accept that they may be rurally based and that it is not all bad news with regard to broadband, but we are
losing some small businesses specifically because we cannot deliver broadband. We were told that broadband was going to be as important as rural electrification. If it is, why is it not happening?

We are told in the 2040 plan that the development of the N4 and N5 national primary routes will take place. Can we fast-track them? As the witnesses know, the big issue with the road from Westport to Dublin is the road through County Roscommon. I have met many people in the big industries in Mayo and they constantly complain about the state of that road. How can we push those further and get that work done as quickly as possible? The same happens in Carrick-on-Shannon. There is no plan for a bypass or ring road for the town, where there is a dreadful situation for traffic coming from the north west. The development of that ring road is very important. In addition, I have noticed that bypasses have affected business in our towns. If one owns a filling station, a newsagent or a similar type of shop the bypass has had an effect. It might not affect a hardware shop or a pharmacy, but it definitely has an effect on hotels, filling stations and so forth. I have asked this question previously but is there a fund available or can one be made available to rejuvenate such towns? Every time a bypass is completed, €60,000 to €100,000 is spent on a piece of art work to commemorate the opening of the new bypass so why can there not be a fund to rejuvenate part of the bypassed town?

I do not wish to take up any more time as Deputy Ó Cuív wishes to speak, but those are my questions. If they are not relevant to the witnesses’ area, I will accept that.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** On the first question about our 2018 budget and staff, we have 14 full-time equivalent staff in the building and our 2018 total budget from the Exchequer is €1.565 million. That is for everything, pay and non-pay.

**Deputy Eugene Murphy:** That is small.

**Dr. Deirdre Garvey:** We welcome the Deputy saying that.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** Yes. We have definitely diversified our funding to do what we do. That involves Europe and other things. However, I will move on. I moved back to the west for quality of life.

I will digress for a moment to return to the Deputy’s point on families, as I forgot to mention something. Earlier we discussed the economic base model population. Dr. Alan Ahearne is professor of economics in NUI. Something is emerging, which he described as being annoying to economists who are scientists, that relates to quality of life which is increasingly being seen as a key determinant for certain growth. It concerns why clusters suddenly arrive out of nowhere and why high-value people move to places. It is really important because when one speaks about the movement of families, part of our ethos is combat or offer alternatives to this. We do it through regional promotion and, as I mentioned in the written submission, we are working with IDA Ireland and the institutes of technology to do a talent tool, which we have done once before, to capture people of talent in the region as well as those who are outside the region and wish to return. It is predominantly being used to attract inward investment and grow the case for indigenous business. I am not saying that it is a solution or a panacea but it helps. It was apparently the key determinant for Randox moving to Donegal rather than continuing to expand in Northern Ireland. They did not know if there were enough PhD-type people. We showed them the data that indicated there were and that took that issue off the table. We are hoping to do the same thing in a better way in the
future to strengthen the case. We have done preliminary research and we know the reason that thousands of people want to be on the talent tool is because, rather than wanting any old job, they want a job in the region from which they came or where they wish to live, namely the west for its quality of life.

We discussed broadband. I could not agree more that the better the quality, the faster the roll-out. We hear that from business constantly. The Deputy said it was a key determinant of people moving out. I have already said that it is a key determinant of people deciding to stay. We have hundreds of businesses in the creative sector alone saying this.

On the national planning framework, it would be great if we could do that overnight. I join with the Deputy in asking that it could be fast tracked, but it is not within our remit. We believe it would realise huge gains for the region.

The question of the bypass is very interesting. I will have to consider it further. We have worked with small communities such as Letterfrack, where they might want to have an enterprise centre and we ask for what purpose, who will be there and what they will do. We are working with them now in phases two and three of that and some ideas are coming out of that. However, that was not due to a bypass; it was just us working with a small community. I will return to this because it is something that is new to me.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: That is good to hear. I thank Mr. Brannigan.

Chairman: If witnesses are giving clarifications or responding to a member afterwards, they might also furnish their responses to the committee, if that is okay.

Mr. Ian Brannigan: Absolutely.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I will be honest that when the Western Development Commission was established, I thought it was a token agency. Unfortunately my view has not changed. I am not saying that the people there are not doing their best with the tools given to them but the Government refused to take the west seriously. It was set up to deal with an urgent problem that was there at a time of the famous bishops’ campaign. It was a token agency to which the Government would not give similar powers as Enterprise Ireland or IDA Ireland, or powers Joint Comite on Rura l and Comunity Development like Údarás na Gaeltacht has or the Shannon Free Airport Development Company, SFADco, had at the time. Rather than giving the agency real executive powers to get on with the job and compete, they gave it a kind of research role with a tiny remit. I want to be clear that I am not blaming the witnesses or the board, with whom I have worked over the years, or the executive. However, if anyone were to suggest to me that the Western Development Commission is a large, powerful agency in the west, I would tell them to look at their budget, staffing level and statutory powers. They are not powerful because they are not allowed to be. People sometimes confuse criticism of a national structure set up by us in this House with criticism of the agency that is there. I recognise that with the resources it has been given that the agency has worked efficiently. However, much more could be done in the west.
Can the witnesses answer something that puzzles me? They do a lot of research and are very good on that. I asked a parliamentary question of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport - by God, it is a complicated Department to deal with - about what money had come in from the European Union for transport infrastructure from around 2005 to date. I am not sure of the dates. I thought I would get an answer. I thought it would know where the funds came through because I thought they were all siphoned through the centre, which they are. However, the Department wrote out to every agency involved and now I have a pile that I will have to go through. A quick perusal suggests they were very small for the whole of Ireland. In other words, all our motorways were not built with EU money, as most of the public think, they were actually built with national money. I am not interested in €0.5 million here or €2 million there, that is kids’ money in real development terms, but sums of €100 million to €300 million. I do not want to know about agricultural payments, such as ANC, PBS, and TAMS payments, which are compensation to farmers for getting a bad price for cattle. In structural funds for infrastructure, what serious money is coming from the EU? Is there really serious money available that if we just put our hands out we can grab it and it will flow in? I do not believe there is any but maybe the witnesses do because they are the type of people who know things like that.

On the trans-European transport network, TEN-T, I do not know who is codding who here. The Chairman will be very surprised about what I have to say on this. I did some research on this four or five years ago. The story was going around the west that the Government was doing things so I put in freedom of information, FOI, requests. I provided the response to the people who had raised the matter with me. It was somewhat messy because when one puts in an FOI request, one receives information here or there. Perhaps the witnesses have analysed this, but my reading was that the reason the core mainly came down the east coast - although I accept that the Minister, Deputy Michael Noonan may have looked after Limerick in relation to Foynes - was directed by the EU. It is the unseen hand. We do not designate any areas in Ireland for special areas of conservation, SACs. The Government proposes them but it has no choice because the EU sets down the criteria, and if one does not provide them, they come back and demand that more be identified. Can witnesses tell me if this was a unilateral decision on behalf of the Irish Government or was there an unseen hand operating from Europe that wanted infrastructure down the east coast because it had an interest in a trans-European network that would be very much focused on where the traffic was? It would be useful to have an answer to that.

I notice that the commission did some work on rail freight. I have never seen that as being the answer to our desire to have a proper rail network in the west. The province of Connacht has a population of around 500,000 and the city of Dublin has a population of approximately 1.1 million. If we look at investment in rail in Dublin for 1.1 million compared to the half million in the west, it is much more than twice the amount. If one pays tax according to the ability to pay - one should get services from the State according to some objective criteria, even based on population - we are getting skinned. Despite the myth, the reality is that we in rural areas get much less per head on many services. There are about 40,000 people in the major towns, Ballina, Castlebar, Claremorris, Tuam, Westport, north of Athenry. I have looked at journey times and commuting patterns to Dublin from towns such as Tullamore, Longford and Mullingar. The train journey between Maynooth and Pearse Station takes three quarters of an hour and nobody thinks that is an unreasonable commute.
It takes about the same time to get from Greystones, very much a commuter town, to Connolly Station.

Commuter services are high-volume in nature, much more so than intercity services. The term “intercity” is a bit of a misnomer in this country. Most people using the trains, even the so-called intercity trains, are commuting. There might be a reasonably high number travelling between Dublin and Cork but even on that service, many people get on that train at Thurles, Portlaoise, etc. Who would have responsibility to ask the WDC to compile a study on commuter and airport rail potential into Galway and Limerick, from the Clare side, since the commission does not operate outside of Clare? In the short term, a service in this regard would link Claremorris to Athenry and Athlone, Ennis and Limerick to Galway, and *vice versa*, Galway to Limerick. What are the drivers of commuter rail services internationally? Does the train have to arrive between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m., which seems to me to be a basic criterion? I have done some work on this myself. That work has given rise to interesting answers. If trains do not leave at certain times in the evening when people are finishing work, there is not much point in calling them commuter services. Are there examples of similarly populated areas that have efficient commuter rail services which attract passengers? It would be useful to know whether it is possible to have such services and, also, what is the best practice in areas with populations of similar size?

One could create 2,000 or 3,000 jobs in the west overnight without going to IDA Ireland or Enterprise Ireland or asking for any money. It would be awfully easy. It could be done by means of decentralisation, a dirty word which we should say quietly. Has the WDC done a study on the positive and negative impacts of decentralisation? Is it difficult or does it give rise to inefficiency? Are the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection’s offices in Sligo, Carrick-on-Shannon and Buncrana and the Department of Finance’s office in Galway much more inefficient than those Department’s offices in Dublin? The Department of Rural and Community Development and parts of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment are based in Ballina. Are they laggards or, as I suspect, leaders when it comes to efficiency? Is there a need to move huge numbers of people up and down to Dublin every week for meetings or do a few assistant principal officers and principal officers come up every few weeks? If they did not come up to Dublin, would there be a need for people from head office to travel down? Decentralisation has taken place over a long period and not just during the lifetime of the Government of which I was a member when it was done successfully. It was happening long before that. How major a contributor is it to the regions? As with other studies whereby one is trying to discover what would happen if one took a particular course of action, the great thing about that study is that it has been done and we are aware of the impact. As a result, it is possible to extrapolate the impact of having another 2,000 or 3,000 jobs in a particular location.

An examination of the Civil Service transfer list shows that many more people want to get out of Dublin than want to come here. In the context of decentralisation, is there a problem in getting people to accept particular jobs? Is it difficult to fill them? There are all the usual questions. There is huge potential to relieve Dublin of its problems, particularly as it cannot handle Joint Comité on Rural and Community Development
what it has, and not by means of transferring them to Galway, which also cannot handle what it has. The places that can handle them include Carrick-on-Shannon and, to a degree, Sligo. I still deeply regret that An Bord Pleanála decided to turn down the proposal to build the Government Department headquarters at Ireland West Airport in Knock, which would have given rise to a little concentration of development at that location. There is a great road service on the east-west north-south link cross south of Charlestown between it and the airport. Some great gurus in Dublin could not get their heads around that. These might be useful things to do.

The Minister, Deputy Ring, the Minister of State, Deputy Kyne, and I visited the back of a hill in the middle of nowhere the other day. At the back of the hill in the middle of nowhere there is an industry. Some 120 people are employed on the floor of that industry. Another 100 go in and out of that industry every day, so there are over 200 people on site most days. It is a timber industry, so there are another 100 out in the forest. That is not a small industry. It is in the middle of nowhere on the back of a hill. Despite popular myths that rural Ireland can only sustain micro-industries, there are some major employers in the region. There is an urban myth that these industries are not sustainable and that one cannot locate a big industry on the back of a hill in the middle of nowhere. Would the WDC consider performing a mapping exercise of manufacturing businesses?

I found another business, although this one is not located on the back of a hill. It is located in a flat place not too far from the area the WDC oversees. I was in Supermac’s in Cappataggle one night having a cup of tea and a guy came over to me. He said he had a little business down the road and asked if I would come to see it. I happened to be going to Loughrea the following weekend to visit a school. I decided to call in to find that there were 40 jobs in a boithrín in the middle of nowhere. It would be interesting to exclude Galway, Castlebar, Sligo and their environs and to try to map all the manufacturing industries that employ more than ten people in the WDC area and discover how many jobs there are within it. Most of these businesses have a local reason to be where they are, and the jobs created indirectly could be extrapolated. The commission will find that when it comes to manufacturing jobs, the centre of Dublin does not have most of the manufacturing jobs and that there are many businesses operating along the highways and byways of rural Ireland, despite the planning rules that are there to try to stop all of this. They make an enormous contribution to the economy. The great thing is that they are not really adding too much to the traffic chaos.

Looking at services in a similar way, there is an accountancy firm near where I live in a village that does not have 20 houses in it. The firm employs ten or 15 people. If the owner gets his broadband by the end of the year, he will probably add another ten employees. He is doing accounts from London. It is not a local accountancy firm. He has no problem getting staff. He has a very nice place from which to operate. We seem to have closed our minds to all these marvellous possibilities. We need to start mapping what is there despite less than conducive conditions.

How much cash does the commission have in the WIF? What cash is in hand? Are enough people coming in to look for that money or is the commission too constrained in the context of disbursing it? I have seen figures of €13 million, €20 million and €30 million, which is joke money in the context of developing a region. I mean no disrespect to the Western Development Commission. It was not given any more so I am not blaming it. I spoke about a small business on the other side of a mountain in the middle of nowhere. It invested between €20 million and €30 million on one side in
the past ten years. That is what it takes, as I know, having been involved in that kind of development, albeit on a small scale compared with what is possible nowadays. The one thing I found out is that just because it is a rural location, it does not suddenly get cheap.

I will not discuss the issue of broadband. The Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment should get on with the job of putting fibre into every house in the country and ensuring everyone has access to a mobile phone. That should not require more research. It is just a question of getting somebody to do a very simple job of running some cable along existing telephone lines and into businesses. There is no rocket science involved. It is as simple as putting up electric lines was when they were first installed.

I ask the witnesses to elaborate a little on the talent tool the WDC uses.

**Dr. Deirdre Garvey:** I appreciate Deputy Ó Cuív’s view of the agency, and I know he recognises it is not a reflection on the executive or the board. From the perspective of the chairperson of the board, we are working with the statutory instrument we have and the remit as defined within that. Regardless of whether we like it, that is our remit right now and our objective is to do that as efficiently and effectively as we can. While I understand the points the Deputy raised, it is not within our remit right now to address those matters.

The Deputy identified some projects in terms of potential and asked about a mapping exercise. There are also some to which he appears to have the answers and perhaps he needs those answers confirmed. In regard to whether there is an unseen hand, I am afraid I cannot answer that either, but perhaps the Deputy has the answer.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Does Dr. Garvey know the story of the TEN-T? Has it been analysed? Has it been researched?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** “Analyse” would be a bit strong. What we did was realise the importance of the TEN-T process in getting infrastructure into the west. We realised the issues in the comprehensive and the core, and we took a deep interest in working with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in trying to get ahead of this.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** It failed because the west was taken out. Did the criteria applied in Brussels make that decision inevitable or did the Department want to take the west out?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I cannot answer that. We saw it when the problem came up, so that was just before us. Hopefully, that does not seem like an evasion.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** No, I was just curious. I was wondering if anybody knows because I have my suspicions.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I will start by going backwards. As the acting CEO, I acknowledge and thank him for the positive comments he made, notwithstanding his broader comments about resources and so on, which were equally interesting.
We did the regional skills tool for LookWest.ie because, from the outset, we wanted it to be more than a website that people would visit. We wanted it to do things to get people employed and into work. The most visited page on LookWest.ie every month, one which we constantly promote on social media, is our jobs page. It was the most visited page through the downturn and still is, which is great. We work with all the recruiters in the west and nationally to show people the jobs available in the west. If one visits the page, one will see jobs in counties Galway, Clare, Roscommon and so on. We are pleased it has become the go-to place for jobs in Joint Comite on Rural and Community Development.

the west. We are not a recruitment agency; we simply facilitate the public in finding jobs. We have moved on as the site evolved. IDA Ireland and others told us they wanted to make a compelling case for businesses to locate and stay in the west. We are now advertising hard-to-fill jobs, which means top management and positions with specialist skills. There is a perception that there may not be enough human capital with the core skills needed. The Deputy addressed that issue when he spoke about manufacturing businesses. We know these skills are available because the attainment rates in the west are relatively strong, as they are nationally in any case.

We have completed the feasibility part of the talent tool, which was paid for and done by the WDC with IDA Ireland, the institutes of technology involved in the project and the regional skills forum. We are moving to the phase of designing and implementing the tool, which will require a little money and time. Thousands of people will indicate they have a degree in a certain area or a skill in another area and that will form the basis of the talent tool. We will then have to take account of the general data protection regulation, GDPR, and the various new protocols before sharing this information with appropriate parties, with their permission, to help businesses locate in the region.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The individuals in question would not necessarily have to be in the west to avail of the talent tool.

Mr. Ian Brannigan: No, that is why we call it the talent tool. In large part, they will be people who are from the west. Some 20% of the views on LookWest.ie are from abroad, specifically the United Kingdom, America and Australia. These are people who left and who will return if given half a chance. They hang their curricula vitae on the talent tool and these are then used when a major employer or indigenous firm decides it wants to grow and needs microbiologists or whatever other skill is required. As we already have permission from those using the talent tool, we can ask the employer to look at what we have and either make the investment or, even better, simply contact the individuals. Most of the users will be people who wish to come back as opposed to people living in the region. That is a fair point.

To give the Deputy a straight answer on the cash in hand for the western investment fund, as of last week cash in hand stood at approximately €20 million. I do not recall the exact figure but I can provide it. To put that in context, when we spoke to the Deputy, we would have been lucky to have had €3 million or €4 million on a revolving basis. While that seems like a large amount, we usually disburse between €1.8 million and €2 million a year. We need to retain a little more for investments made because of exemptions and so on. Basically, we were constrained and had no more than what we needed. We are now starting to imagine new things, which is interesting, but only since last year.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I know something was sold.

Mr. Ian Brannigan: We had an exit that was unprecedented.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: How quickly will the money be used? The commission is not a bank.

Mr. Ian Brannigan: No, the idea is to get this working. We are working with the board at the moment to figure that out. We have ideas and we are working with the board and the parent Department to figure out ways to make efficient use of this capital. I do not mean from a treasury point of view, but from a remit point of view and to get this money out there. I referred to some of the projects in energy, tourism and so on, that we have been gestating with partners for some time.

We would like to see many of those realised sooner rather than later.

I love the imagery the Deputy used about a factory at the back of a hill the middle of nowhere, and I totally agree. The Deputy asked if we could do a mapping exercise. We used to do a regional directory, which we paid a lot of money to get an external firm to do. Amazingly, there was no directory for companies in the region at the time. We stopped that for cost reasons about four or five years ago. It is something we would have to consider. The Deputy was referring to a mapping exercise outside of major towns, if I am correct.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Yes, outside Galway.

Mr. Ian Brannigan: Galway, Sligo and so on. We would definitely look at that.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The reality is that Galway has high visibility, with a chamber of commerce and so on. Politicians are often lobbied by chambers of commerce, for example, the Westport or American chambers of commerce. They are organised. I will name a company, which will not mind because it is blue-ribboned in every way. The manufacturing firm, McHale, is local and creative, operates in a competitive market and has a foreign branch. It is counter-intuitive in every way, from its inception to the position it has since reached. It is competitive and effective because the guy who owns it comes from where it is located. We have a great deal of that. Nobody ever figures out that there are some massively successful, internationally competitive companies in the strangest of places, sometimes because the people running them are in those places by chance. These companies are able to compete in locations in which people say that they should not be able to.

They do however, partly because they often have loyal workforces which one might not get in a city. If we could get a list, or even a sample list, of 70, 80, 90 or 100 of these companies in some way that would not involve spending oodles of money, we would be able to tell people that this is the real west of Ireland. It is creative, dynamic and competitive. It does not lie down just because it is a little bit further away by road. I know some of these companies. I find them on back roads all over the place. It would be useful for us to know exactly how many of those are around the place because they give a lie to the spatial planning idea that if something is not in a growing city it will not happen.

Mr. Ian Brannigan: There is a lot of value in that. The Deputy mentioned McHale. There is also PELand there is SIS Pitches, which is doing the pitches for the World Cup. There are huge technical services businesses located in rural areas for the reasons the Deputy has mentioned. Bringing them together in a mapping exercise is an idea we would need to consider and revert to him on. The
Deputy mentioned decentralisation. That is a fascinating study. It has not come across our desks to look at. Anecdotally, we have managed to hire into the organisation in recent years. We are small and modest but we are the definition of a decentralised but regionally-based body. We have had an average of 50 to 78 applicants for each position. I will be brutally honest; that surprised us. We were asking "Really?". That says something about people wanting to go to areas where one would not think it is logical for them to go. Again, I would have to come back to the Deputy on the idea of a more in-depth study. We would have to ask how easy it would be to do and whether there is information to hand. It is something worth considering however.

On the potential for commuter rail, we have looked at rail freight as an in to getting the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and others to look at the case. The previous board and chairman met Iarnród Éireann to figure out what it takes to create lines because we have an interest in biomass and bulk and in getting the infrastructure in the region improved. We did the analysis on rail freight. That has gone into the public arena. It helped push things along a little Joint Comite on Rural and Comunity Development.

bit. We have not looked at the international comparisons in respect of commuter rail which the Deputy has talked about, however, and we have not looked at the drivers. Again, that is something about which I will need to talk to the policy team. We will need to see what is easily to hand and what we should be doing.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I do not mean to interrupt Mr. Brannigan but I have an interesting statistic. The Athlone and Limerick lines converge in Athenry. Athenry has a population of 3,950. Some 300 people a day travel from Athenry into Galway city. The rail census November tells me that. It was taken in November so these people are not tourists. If we then consider Ballinasloe and Athlone, Athlone has 27,000 people. Fewer people travel from Athlone to Galway than from Athenry, which has 3,950 people, even though it is only a 55-minute journey. That is well within the length of journey that is considered a commuter journey in this city without a problem. When one is on a train, it is not the distance but the time that counts. Therefore, one has to ask why is one service doing better. Even though the service into Galway from Athenry is not great, at least it has twice the service Athlone has because it has two sources of trains - the Limerick service and the Athlone service. In fact, more people take the Limerick service to Galway because the times are better. Why is a population of 3,950 producing more passengers than a population of 27,000? It is the same situation with Ballinasloe. It is way behind both.

One has to say to oneself that there is something strange here and ask oneself whether it has to do with the frequency of the trains. Once one starts looking at that, building up a model, looking at best practice in other places and finding out what can be done to increase that figure in notches again and again with little investment, then one can start looking at Athenry, Tuam and Claremorris, which automatically links one in to looking at times. I have done some work on this. A good study needs to be done which would take the town populations into account, not to mention the hinterland populations. We can then start to look at the factors that get people out of cars and into trains, at how many potential passengers there are and so on.

To my knowledge, the WDC has done work on travelling to work in the region so it knows that half of Galway’s working population comes from outside the city. It probably has information on how
many come from the east, where there is a railway line. These are the kinds of factors we need to look at. I am convinced that there is a justification for the western rail corridor and a massive justification for improving services between Ennis and Galway, Ennis and Limerick and Athlone and Galway. Commuter rail is going to be the driver, not intercity or freight rail. Freight and intercity services are fine, but the big driver of numbers will be commuter rail. If look around the east coast, intercity is not the big driver of people getting off at Heuston, Connolly and Pearse stations, but inner commuter and outer commuter.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** The Deputy is correct that we have just finished research on travelling to work so we have some of that information to hand. I will bring that back to the team and discuss it because, as the Deputy realises, there is a good discussion to be had in detail to see where it takes us. We have discussed TEN-T, but the Deputy asked about Structural Funds available from the EU. We have talked about how we are now dealing with a lot of EU funds. I am not going to discuss the TEN-T straight away but I am aware that a lot of the available funds of which we were not heretofore availing but now are because of the efforts of bodies like our own will be reorganised after Brexit. The inter-regional funds - the INTERREG funds in particular, not the Structural Funds - will all now be reallocated.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** How much did we get into the regions in the past five years?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I cannot give the Deputy that figure. That is the problem.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Are we talking about €5 billion, €500 million, €100 million, or €5 million or €10 million?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** On the Structural Funds side, over a seven-year period, it is certainly in the hundreds of millions. That is not my specialism

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** It is in the hundreds of millions.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** Yes. That is the allocation.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Into what does that money go?

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** The NWRA would oversee that. It would go to the various Departments for Structural Funds for transport and such things.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** It would be spent on hard infrastructure.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** In the main, yes, although there would be other things as well.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** We have to get that information.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I am sure it is available on public websites but the Deputy would have to go looking.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Mr. Brannigan is saying that our region got €200 million or €300 million over seven years. We will say €400 million. We will be generous to them. If we divide that by seven, it is €50 million or €60 million a year.

**Mr. Ian Brannigan:** I would have to check those figures.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: In addition, the State spends €3 billion or €4 billion on capital spending every year and, therefore, it is not a big player in the game. If we want to redevelop the roads and the rail system in the west, looking to the seanbhean bhocht atá ag teacht thar sáile is a waste of time. We should just look to the Exchequer and get on with the job. We can let the Exchequer worry. If it wants to get European money to supplement its own, that is fine, but we should just get on with the job. That would be my message. There is an illusion out there that there is a pot of gold at the end of that rainbow. It is a rainbow; there is no pot of gold at the end of it. The pot of gold is in the building across from this one - the Department of Finance.

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I thank Dr. Garvey and Mr. Brannigan for their worthwhile engagement with us. I propose to forward a transcript of today’s meeting to the Minister, Deputy Michael Ring. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 5.10 p.m. and adjourned at 5.30 p.m. sine die.
The Joint Committee met at 7 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Michael Collins,        Senator Maura Hopkins,
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice,    Senator Grace O’Sullivan.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,

In attendance: Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy-Rae and Senator John Dolan.

SENATOR PAUDIE COFFEY IN THE CHAIR.

Business of Joint Committee

Clerk to the Committee: The Chairman has given notice that he is unavoidably absent from the meeting. In that case, according to Standing Orders for the Dáil and the Seanad, the joint committee must proceed at once to elect one of its members as Acting Chairman.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: I propose Senator Paudie Coffey.


Clerk to the Committee: Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Paudie Coffey took the Chair.

Regional and Rural Transport Policy: Discussion

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I am delighted to and happily step in as Acting Chairman. The Chairman, Deputy Carey, is actually in the United Kingdom on Oireachtas business. He is with the delegation to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly.

I remind members, delegates and those in the Visitors Gallery to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode. Mobile phones interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the proceedings of the meeting. Television, radio, Internet streaming and Internet protocol television, IPTV, coverage of the meeting can also be adversely affected.
The purpose of the meeting is to engage with officials from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on the matter of regional and rural transport policy. I extend a warm welcome to our guests, Ms Deirdre Hanlon, assistant secretary with responsibility for public transport, sustainability and climate change; Mr. Kevin Doyle, principal officer with responsibility for public transport and corporate services; Mr. Garret Doocey, principal officer with responsibility for public transport investment, and Mr. Dominic Mullaney, principal adviser on roads policy.

It is proposed that the opening statement and any other document supplied by the officials to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Following the meeting the committee will meet for a short time in private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: I thank the Acting Chairman for giving us the opportunity to present this opening statement on behalf of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. The Department has been invited by the joint committee to answer questions on transport policy in rural and regional areas and assist it in its consideration of the matter. I am joined by some of my colleagues in the Department working across the area of land transport. Mr. Kevin Doyle and Mr. Garrett Doocey deal with matters related to public transport policy, while Mr. Dominic Mullaney deals with matters related to roads policy.

The committee has had several discussions on rural and regional transport policy and will be aware that there are many actors in the transport arena in Ireland. In addition, there have been several changes in the way public transport is organised and governed in the past decade. Against this backdrop, it might be useful for the committee if I were to start by outlining briefly how some of the State institutions in the public transport area are organised, including the Department, and provide a summary of their respective roles.

As the committee will be aware, the Minister and the Department have responsibility for three overarching themes - policy and statutory frameworks, aggregate funding and corporate governance in State transport bodies, in which the Minister is a shareholder. In fulfilling these responsibilities we work on a number of fronts. We develop transport policy and also provide a transport perspective and input when other relevant Government policies are being devised. We develop the statutory and
legislative frameworks to govern the transport sector. They are often seen as they are brought to the Houses of the Oireachtas to be promulgated into law or as policy statements.

Through our Vote, we channel aggregate Exchequer funding for the transport sector. The Department’s total voted allocation in 2018 is around €2 billion. Of this, €1.6 billion relates to land transport. Committee members might be interested to know that a piece of analysis conducted a few years ago under the auspices of the Department indicated that more than three quarters of the spend on land transport at the time was occurring outside the greater Dublin area.

In the public transport area, that is, bus and rail services, funding from the Department flows mainly to the National Transport Authority. The funding is for investment in infrastructure and public transport service support.

With regard to the investment in roads that the Department supports, funding flows from it to Transport Infrastructure Ireland - one of our State bodies - and the relevant local authorities. Members will be aware that during the years of the fiscal and economic crisis which followed the banking crisis of 2008, many areas of Government expenditure were reduced in order for the State to regain fiscal stability. In the area of transport, this curtailment affected both current and capital budgets that were available to support services and invest in infrastructure. It impacted on roads and public transport. At the time, the Department undertook an analysis to advise Government and the Minister on how best we could prioritise transport capital investment in these circumstances. The approach adopted was published in 2015 in the strategic framework for investment in land transport SFILT, report. Ultimately, the report came up with one very clear conclusion, namely, that the key priority had to be very much to direct the funding we have into maintaining the existing and very extensive road and rail networks we have throughout the country in order that they remain operational and safe. There were some lower-order priorities, but this was identified as the number one priority.

Since then, it has been a priority to return to the levels of maintenance and safety investment required to keep the networks at what we call a steady state of service and reliability. Annual budget allocations have happily been increasing in more recent years and are scheduled and profiled to rise further over the coming periods. This is enabling us to regain and achieve what we call the steady-state investment level. Together with this, we are enabled to undertake a number of targeted new projects under the national development plan and in line with the strategic objectives that have been agreed by Government in the national planning framework. The Department also oversees the corporate sector in the State bodies involved with transport and exercise a shareholder role on behalf of the Minister in respect of the State-owned service provider, Córas lompair Éireann, CIÉ, and its subsidiaries.

Another significant actor in the sector, which the committee has already met in recent months, is the National Transport Authority, NTA. The latter is a relatively new body on the transport scene. It was established approximately ten years ago under legislation passed by the Oireachtas. It acts as an independent body with regulatory, funding and strategy development roles and now has a considerable role in the public transport sector. Among its statutory functions, as the committee will be aware, the NTA is responsible for: regulating and contracting all PSO bus and rail services; allocating PSO funding to the operators in accordance with their contracts; licensing and regulating
commercial bus services, that is, services that can be run on a profitable basis and that do not require public subvention support; regulating taxi services throughout the country; developing integrated ticketing; and some strategic transport planning.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland is another body under the aegis of the Department. Its main function is around infrastructure and providing an integrated approach to the future development and operation of the national roads network and light rail infrastructure.

There is another body I wish to mention because it has a vital role, although it probably does not come up for mention as often as the others. I refer to the Commission for Railway Regulation, CRR. It was set up by the Oireachtas under 2005 legislation and is the national body with responsibility for oversight and authorisations in the very important area of rail safety. In more recent years, it has also had a role in some economic aspects of the running of railways and facilitating market access.

In many respects, our national regulatory framework for public transport reflects EU law that applies across all member states and, therefore, like other member states, Ireland now has independent transport-focused authorities that are responsible for matters such as the allocation of funding and licensing - roles carried out by the NTA - and issues such as the oversight of safety, for which the CRR is responsible. These are functions that in previous years - going back some decades - were all exercised under the ambit of the Department.

The most visible set of actors in the State sector dealing with public transport is probably the long-standing CIÉ and its three operating subsidiaries: Bus Átha Cliath in Dublin, Bus Éireann, operating throughout the country, and larnród Éireann, operating the rail service throughout the country. They are visible because these are the companies that actually provide the services to passengers. They are the ones passengers can see daily and with which passengers and of us identify. The companies are responsible for running all their services, making decisions as to how they operate them and deciding on strategy, etc., in respect of the commercial aspects of their operations.

What I have described are the State operators in the sector. There are many non-State participants, the obvious ones being the passengers. Among the service providers there are many private firms and community bodies involved in transport provision. They do this under relevant regulatory, licensing or funding arrangements with the NTA.

The committee is primarily concerned with transport matters that affect rural areas and regional travel. Regarding the work of the Minister and the Department, our remit for policy development and overall aggregate transport funding is probably the most relevant to the context of support for transport in rural and regional areas. Members will probably be aware that on the policy front, A Programme for a Partnership Government, running over the Government’s lifetime, contains a number of commitments that are relevant to what we are talking about, in particular the area of public transport area. One of the commitments in which I am sure the committee is very interested is to look at how best to improve the integration of services in the rural transport network and to provide a report on this to the Oireachtas committees. The matter is being examined and developed by the Department in the context of a broader piece of work that we have under way, which is to review public transport policy more generally. This review of public transport policy is another
commitment in the programme for Government, which asks us "to ensure services are sustainable into the future and are meeting the needs of a modern economy".

As a key part of this policy review process, the committee may be aware that the Minister hosted a round-table discussion involving a very broad range of organisations and individuals closely linked to the public transport sector in May. Specifically regarding rural transport, these included representatives of the Rural Transport Network and Irish Rural Link. The purpose of the discussion was to give all participants the opportunity to outline their perspectives on key public transport policy issues and, equally, to ensure that all those involved were in the room at the same time in order that they could hear the perspectives of others and engage in a dialogue about the challenges of achieving appropriate policy balances. The discussions, papers and presentations made at that event are forming the basis of a public consultation that we plan to undertake very shortly. The public consultation will feed into the work the Department is doing on reviewing public transport policy, including the rural transport dimension, and we hope the upshot of this will be the development of a public transport policy statement.

This transport policy review work is taking place against the backdrop of another piece of work in which we were heavily involved, which is a noticeable policy development that came to some fruition earlier this year. I refer to the recently agreed Project Ireland 2040 plan. The latter was developed by means of a cross-Government initiative led by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and involving other Departments and Ministers, including ourselves. The plan was published earlier this year and it comprises two elements.

First, there is a new national planning framework, which sets the vision and policy direction in which the Government sees Ireland developing over the next 20 or 25 years. Alongside that is a new capital development plan, which is the strategic capital investment plan for infrastructure for the first ten years of the longer-term vision statement. Transport is a key element of national infrastructure. It is a critical component of how we plan for the country’s future development. Therefore, transport features strongly in Project Ireland 2040. Equally, Project Ireland 2040 will influence and shape how we develop transport over the next number of years.

The Exchequer provides considerable funding for public transport. This includes subvention support, which is provided via the National Transport Authority, NTA. This goes towards the public service obligation, PSO, operations of Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, both of which have very substantial operations and services across rural Ireland and to facilitate regional connectivity. It also provides investment for their infrastructure. Exchequer funding also supports the rural transport programme, which is obviously specific to rural areas. That is aimed at addressing issues of social isolation though providing a public transport service. It is very much tailored to local needs. This funding is also channelled by the NTA. Since 2012 that body has had national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the rural transport programme. Members will probably be more familiar with it under the rural transport programme’s new branding, which is the Local Link brand.

The delivery of demand-responsive transport services has been and remains the cornerstone of the Local Link programme. In tandem with this, there has been an increasing focus on trying to provide some regular commuter services. This has occurred since 2016, and it responds to identified local
demands that have cropped up over the course of the delivery of the Local Link programme. These scheduled services are high-frequency services, running as often as seven days a week depending on where they are. They are designed to facilitate regular access to education, employment and healthcare in addition to recreational opportunities. Key features include connectivity with other public transport services and better linkage of services between and within towns and villages throughout Ireland. The NTA tells us that since it began opening scheduled services under the rural transport programme in 2016, 60 such regular rural services have been introduced into the network, which is managed by the Local Link offices.

One of the priority areas under the national planning framework is the essential requirement to enhance and upgrade accessibility between urban areas of population and their regions and hinterlands, while trying to initiate the development of more compact growth within urban areas. Compact growth, improved public transport and decarbonisation of car journeys are all necessary elements of our transition to a low-carbon future.

Another major objective of the framework is to make substantial progress in linking regions and urban areas. That does not just mean linking them to Dublin, but also linking them with each other and with local areas of significant interest. Project Ireland 2040 recognises that significant investment in public transport will be required to accommodate changes in growth and provide more choice for the travelling public, improving the quality of people’s lives. The plan builds on this investment. In June, the Minister and Minister of State at the Department launched “Linking People and Places”, which involves investment of €8.6 billion specifically in public transport. The aim is to link more people and more places, as the title says, while also improving the quality of life, easing congestion in our cities and doing our part to deliver a low-carbon society.

New major public transport programmes to be delivered under the national development plan, NDP, will be fully accessible for people with disabilities. This has been done as part of the normal design. Designing for accessibility is part of how projects are designed nowadays. In tandem with that there will be a continued investment programme to retrofit existing older public transport facilities to enhance their accessibility features.

One of the flagship investments that will be delivered within Project Ireland 2040 and the ten-year NDP horizon is BusConnects. This will apply in Ireland’s cities. It will commence roll-out in Dublin, followed by the other major cities starting with Galway. It is a key investment priority for public transport. It will address congestion in the short to medium term and is Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development therefore a key project that we wish to see developed. The programme of BusConnects in the regional cities will include new bus fleets, bus lanes with segregated cycling facilities, revised bus service networks and park-and-ride facilities. The objective is to deliver a bus system that will enable more people to travel by bus than ever before, to make the bus an attractive option and to allow commuting by bus to become a viable choice for employees, students, shoppers and visitors.

With regard to the inter-urban rail network, the funding priority in the NDP and the planning framework is to protect the investment that has already been made over several decades in the
development of the railway system by funding maintenance and safety projects that are needed to maintain safety and service levels across all rail operations in the State.

Turning briefly to roads, the sheer scale of Ireland’s road network tends not to be very well known. Our roads have a combined length of 100,000 km. This is twice the EU norm on a per capita basis. The road network is really the workhorse of economic and social infrastructure throughout the country. Most of our freight is carried on it, all of our bus services rely on it and the people of Ireland rely on the road network to link regional and local areas and to connect communities.

Maintaining and renewing the road network is recognised in the NDP as being of critical importance. Within available budgets, both Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and the Department are very focused on maintaining the network in as serviceable a condition as possible. In the case of regional and local roads, the main grant programmes operated by the Department are targeted at specific policy objectives. One of these is pavement sealing. This protects the surface of the road from water damage. Another such objective is road strengthening. This is based on giving the road a condition rating. It is intended to lengthen the life of road pavements.

These grants, which are intended to supplement the local authority’s own resources, are allocated on the basis of the length of the road network within a local area of responsibility. It is done this way because that is seen as the fairest and most equitable basis for allocation. The committee might be interested to note that the Department’s grant funding for regional and local roads is principally directed to local authorities outside of Dublin. This reflects the fact that since the revision of the arrangements for the retention of local property tax, carried out in 2015, the Dublin councils no longer receive any grant assistance from the Department under the main road categories.

In addition to substantial support for the maintenance of the road network, the NDP lists 23 new national road schemes. They are already at the stages of planning, design or construction. These include things like the strategic road link between Cork and Limerick. At regional and local level, another 13 significant road improvement projects are currently being advanced under the NDP.

Together, all of these schemes will better link local communities. They will reduce congestion and contribute to the local economies and society of their areas. Work is also under way on appraisal and early planning work related to a pipeline of road projects identified as suitable for future development. Overall the Department works on providing the general policy context for all transport in Ireland, including land transport in rural areas and connectivity within and between regions. The road network and the public transport networks are integral to this and they each received substantial levels of support from the State each year. This is set to continue and be enhanced into the foreseeable future and is closely linked to key outcomes that have been identified by the Government in Project Ireland 2040, the development and investment strategy plan.8 Regional and Rural Transport Policy: Discussion

We hope we can assist the committee in its deliberations by explaining and discussing the policy context for land transport in Ireland. As mentioned earlier in my statement, as we are currently embarked on reviewing public transport, including rural transport policy, we hope that in the course of discussions this evening, we will learn from hearing members’ views and will be able to take on board those views and experiences to help inform the work we are doing on our policy review.
I thank the Acting Chairman.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I thank Ms Hanlon for a wide-ranging and comprehensive opening statement. We will open the debate to members to ask question. Every member is offering. I will take contributions from three members at a time. I know that many will have similar concerns and questions. I call on Deputy Ó Cuív, to be followed by Senator Hopkins and Deputy Michael Collins.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I thank Ms Hanlon for coming before the committee today. I have read her script carefully and it is clear she has set out an overall policy remit, not choosing a specific item here or there. I will try to keep my focus on policy.

First, has the Department a policy on public transport fares to ensure the setting of fares is evidence-based and that there is an equality between rural and urban fares? I received the most extraordinary statement from the NTA dated 16 October 2018 stating that as is common practice internationally, different fares apply in city areas reflecting the different operation characteristic in those areas as opposed to rural areas. I do not care what they do internationally. I do not live in an international area, I live in Ireland. I do not care what irrational policies they have anywhere else, I like to see Irish policy being rational.

Let me give Ms Hanlon a simple example of what is happening all over the country. If one takes the train from Dublin to Sallins, that journey is considered to be within the urban area and is half the cost of taking the train to Newbridge, which falls into the rural category. By going to the next station, the fare is suddenly doubled. When one asks the NTA or authorities, their response is that the way it was and that is the way it is and that is the way it will be forever, Amen. That is not a rational decision. On an expressway bus route, one can travel from Galway to Dublin for €20 but a bus from Galway to Carraroe costs something similar. I do not want to be fobbed off with the answer that this is a decision for the NTA, but I want to know whether the Minister has a policy set out for the NTA that all fare should be based on the same rationale and one cannot double the rate per kilometre just because one must travel a further distances down the road.

Is there a ministerial policy that lays down that Iarnród Éireann must do what it is meant to do, that is, provide on the railway lines it owns efficient national services and not just concentrate on a few routes?

From a study I have done it would appear there is a clear relationship between frequency, fares, timetabling and journey distances and when one puts all those factors together, one gets the passengers. I have looked on a spot basis, but has the Department looked at the massive latent potential arising from the interplay of those four factors? For example, there is a frequent train service from Athenry to Galway because there is the Limerick train. There are 399 people travelling on the train from Athenry, which has a population of 3,950, to Galway city and making the return journey every day. If one compares that service with the service from Clonmel to Waterford, one will find that practically nobody is travelling on that train, even though the population of Waterford is 17,140 and one would think that four times the number travelling from Athenry would be travelling, which is more than 1,000.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Waterford city has a population of more than 50,000.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I meant the travelling population from Clonmel to Waterford. The population of Clonmel, which is 17,140, is four times the population of Athenry but as the Chairman knows, nobody is using the train. That is not surprising because the train leaves at 10.38 a.m. and arrives at 11.29 a.m. Similarly, one would leave at 7.45 p.m. and would get home at 8.45 p.m. Given a very small town like Athenry has achieved such numbers, has the Department conducted a study on the potential, should the four parameters I mentioned be co-ordinated? I think one would find similar outcomes on the east coast, where there are frequent services into Dublin.

I have two more questions. Has the Department developed or is it developing a commuter rail policy in line with the spatial strategy? Not everybody wants to live in an area of housing density, and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport should forget that long-time dream that will not happen because people do not do what the Department wants them to do. They will do what they want. If people want to live in Tuam, they will live in Tuam, and travel to work. The same applies in every area. If they want to live in “Cloneedebonk”, they will live there. That is the way it is. I am focusing on policy. Allowing that my assessment of what people will really do is correct, has the Department a plan to develop commuter policy into the cities of Galway, Waterford, Cork and Limerick along the existing rail network, including open and closed railway lines? There are three classes of railway lines, open, semi-open - I count Nenagh to Limerick as semi-open and Limerick Junction to Waterford as semi-open - and real open railway lines. Is the Department developing a policy on this?

There is a little known provision in law in rural areas for rural hackney cars, Public Service Obligation, PSO, vehicles. It is nearly impossible to get this licence. How many PSO vehicles have active licences? I got an answer before and it was minuscule. Is it intended to review the PSO vehicle licence to ensure there would be an attractive arrangement for public service vehicles in every small country area, particularly since the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport was diligent in introducing the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 2018? I am absolutely against drink-driving and I wish we could do something about the people who are driving when five times over the limit, but if one goes out for a meal or an event in a rural area, there is no service that will bring people the four or five miles to their home. When one tries to ensure there are local PSO vehicle licences, one is told there are five taxi licences, but those with a taxi licence are working in the city as they are not confined to a local area and are not available when one needs them. Will the Department review that and will the officials look at a policy of introducing an attractive PSO local-based licence system for new entrants, which would mean that such a licenceholder would have to pick up and deliver a person within a certain radius? This would fill a very big black hole in terms of rural transport services that people living in urban areas take for granted.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I thank Deputy Ó Cuív. I ask the witnesses to note those question and I now call on Senator Hopkins.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank Ms Hanlon for her presentation. One of my questions is about the road network. I am from the west where there are huge concerns about the need to develop a fit-for-purpose road network. I live very near the NS. Everybody is aware of the 10 Regional and Rural Transport Policy: Discussion
need to upgrade both that road and the N4. The current map of Ireland shows that there is very little motorway access north of the M6. What policy is there to support the development of road infrastructure in the west? I am aware that work is ongoing on the N5 and the N4, but it cannot happen fast enough. We must have fit-for-purpose road infrastructure to facilitate both individuals and businesses. That is critical.

My second point is related to what Deputy Ó Cuív mentioned about timetables. This morning I took the train from Castlerea to Dublin, but if I wish to get home this evening, the last train leaves at 6.15 p.m. We live in changing times and many people have to and do commute. Many would use public transport if the timetables met their needs. The Department must play a more active role in facilitating greater efficiency in having timetables that meet people’s needs. As Deputy Ó Cuív gave another example, we are not talking about the matter in isolation. There are challenges in trying to meet people’s needs. Obviously, we wish to create employment in rural areas, but we must deal with the reality that many people commute.

I emphasise the importance of Local Link and the improvements that have taken place in its infrastructure. Last week I was in a school in Tulsk where the Local Link bus service has been very beneficial in bringing children from the school to an after-school childcare centre. That is just one example of where the service is supporting families. There are other examples where it links with bus services and towns. I believe that as the service is developed more people will use it. Improvements have been made, but can the officials address my concerns about train services and the road network?

The document mentions that there have been round-table discussions which will result in a public transport policy statement. As I am a practical person, what will that mean? Ms Hanlon has said there is a particular emphasis on rural areas. What will that mean for people living in these areas? How will it translate into or deliver better services for them?

Deputy Michael Collins: I thank Ms Hanlon for her presentation. There are a few issues of concern. I would love to talk about rail services, but, unfortunately, there is no rail service west of Cork city. I cannot talk about it being early or late because we do not have one. When we had a discussion with representatives from Bus Éireann, they gave an indication that they would link bus services with rail services from Cork, but that has not happened. Do the officials have any indication that it will happen in the future? As it appears that there will never be a railway line running through places such as Bandon, Clonakilty or west Cork, why is there no bus service linking people living in west Cork with the rail service every morning? Such a service would help workers and reduce the numbers travelling to and from work in their cars.

Another issue is the cost of fares for those living in rural communities. I hear about it from many young people who are in college or the cities. They find that fares in the cities are much cheaper than they are in rural areas, particularly west Cork. Yesterday I was talking to an operator, Damien Long in Skibbereen. He is willing to provide a service in west Cork to take people to the city early in the morning to work. The service would be in competition with Bus Éireann, but competition is the lifeblood of trading. However, he needs a licence. If he, Cremins Coaches or any other operator in west Cork wishes to provide such a service, we should encourage it. He is willing to offer it at a much cheaper rate. Why has it or something similar not been progressed? Bus Éireann has been
given ample time to reduce fares to favourable rates, but that has not happened. Perhaps the officials might elaborate further on the matter.

The other issue is transport for people with disabilities who are over 18 years of age. In the last two and a half years I have raised this issue in the Dáil with the former Taoiseach, Deputy Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development.

Enda Kenny, and the current Taoiseach. In west Cork - I can only talk about my constituency - if somebody is 18 years of age, he or she will not be provided with a transport service. He or she will receive a public bus pass, but that is not sufficient for many people with disabilities. People are driving here, there and everywhere for up to four hours a day to take their children to and from training or other facilities. When I mention it to the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, he tells me that it is not an issue in Dublin. Obviously, in Dublin they are being collected from their home, which is correct. However, it is an issue in west Cork. The previous Taoiseach sidelined it as not being an issue and when I raised it today the Taoiseach sidelined it and said I should deal with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. The bottom line is that once people with disabilities reach the age of 18 years, they are left totally alone, as are their parents. It is extremely stressful for their parents, most of whom might be in the 60 to 70 years age bracket. They are travelling every morning and evening and it could take up to two hours to travel each way to and from west Cork. This issue must be examined because something could be done. There are many taxis and buses that are probably paid for by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport or the HSE and they are crossing paths, but nobody is talking to anybody. Local Link has a huge chance to play a role in organising and co-ordinating such services. Obviously, it would take a little funding to put a service together, but money might be saved in the long term and everybody might be looked after. We read in the newspapers last week about Sarah Dullea from Dunmanway, a very successful business woman who has spina bifida. She cannot avail of public transport from Dunmanway because Bus Éireann has told her that it cannot collect her at her bus stop in Dunmanway owing to accessibility issues. We have signed agreements that we are now compliant with disabilities requirements in the European Union, but we are not. We are very far from it. Perhaps the officials might enlighten me on that transport issue.

I will comment briefly on roads. As we do not have rail services, people must use the roads in travelling to and from the city and places such as Bandon, Clonakilty, Skibbereen, Bantry, Castletownbere and the peninsulas. We have not received what I would call decent money. For as long as I can remember, money has not been spent on the N71 and the R586, other than on fire-fighting repairs. I was very young when the Skibbereen bypass was constructed. It was a fabulous bypass, but that is the last time a real amount of money was spent in west Cork. Let us take as an example when someone is travelling to Bandon and has to take the R586 in travelling between Ballineen and Enniskeane. There are two major factories, Grainger Sawmills Limited and the Carbery factory in Ballineen. Lorries are travelling at a speed of 25 to 30 km per hour and cars have to travel for 15 to 20 km behind them. There are no passing bays. The situation is the same if one travels from Bandon to Clonakilty and Clonakilty to Skibbereen.

I am not here to criticise anybody. However, I must face the electorate at some stage, whether it will be in one month or two years hence, and the first issues that will be raised are broadband and
roads. Mobile phone coverage might the third. I have no answers. I have been here for two and a half years seeking answers and trying to see if we can create simple solutions such as providing passing bays on the N71 and the R586. I am not looking for flyovers or anything else, only common sense. Reference was made to an announcement by the Minister, Deputy Ross, and the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, of an investment of €8.6 billion in the report, Linking People and Places. A bridge in Lyre in Clonakilty that was severely damaged six or seven years ago as a result of bad weather has not been replaced. It has resulted in the community being split up and people having to drive a few miles in one direction or the other but no consideration has been given to replacing that bridge. It was probably built in the 1900s and money was found to construct it then, but in 2018 no money can be found to repair it. The community keep asking me why money has not been spent on repairing that bridge as it has 12 Regional and Rural Transport Policy: Discussion been blocked up for the past few years. Small measures such as that one would mean a lot.

A transportation plan is being drawn up for Castletownbere. Will the officials examine the way plans are developed in the Department in terms of working with the local communities as there is a great deal of resentment to that plan? Some parts of it might be excellent but nobody sat down with the community and teased through the difficulties. The officials will say they consulted the community, they advertised what is proposed in a notice displayed on a wall, which I saw, but they need to talk to the community. We are now at gridlock and it is left to politicians like me to try to resolve very serious issues for people whose businesses are haemorrhaging in rural Ireland. They are afraid there will be further closures if they do not resist much of what is proposed in the plan. Those issues could have been noted at the beginning of the process and now councillors are being asked to oppose the plan. It comes back to officials sitting down with the local community and teasing out the issues. That can be done in many communities but if people feel they are being ignored, that will not happen.

The officials might say I am viewing developments in a negative sense but I am not. I see many improvements in towns like Drimoleague where a great deal of money has been spent on a fabulous resurfacing project. Similar investment has been made on the N71 in Leap in west Cork, but we are firefighting. All we are doing is repairing damage. We are not looking to the future. West Cork has been neglected for a long time and it needs to be prioritised. Funds need to be moved from the second part of Ireland, which is Dublin, and we need to focus on the other part of Ireland, which is rural Ireland. I would appreciate if the witnesses would consider those points.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Quite a number of issues were raised by the three members to which the delegates might respond.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** A wide range of heartfelt issues were raised by the Deputies and Senator and they have spoken from their experience in their areas. I will deal with them in the order they were raised, cluster some of them where points were made regarding interventions in a few areas, and I will ask my colleague to comment on the road items.

The issue of public transport fares was raised by Deputies Ó Cuív and Michael Collins. The Public Transport Regulation Act 2009 specifically provides that one of the functions to be carried out not by the Minister of our Department but by the independent National Transport Authority, NTA, is to
regulate, set and determine fares. It does that typically by way of an annual statement. It issued its fares determination sometime last week or the previous wee,. That is an exercise of powers the Oireachtas conferred on it and that it has specifically stated should no longer be exercised by the Minister of our Department but by an independent authority and that it should be done in this way. Matters about fares and the fairness of them-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We are not talking about anybody setting a specific fare. Could the NTA decide tomorrow, as it does every year, to have outrageous fares for rural Ireland and outrageously smaller fares in urban Ireland because it does not like rural people? Will the Minister not intervene there? Has he no policy role whatsoever there?

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): The Deputy should speak through the Chair. Allow the witness to respond.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Can I get a clear yes or no answer to that question?

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): Okay. Allow the witness to continue without interruption. I can allow the Members to come back in if they want further clarification.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: The legislation states that fare setting is done by the National Transport Authority.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Does that include fare policy, the big policy? Is the answer to that yes or no?

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: Regarding the setting of fares and the reasons fares are set, the legislation sets out the responsibilities of the NTA in that respect. They are not matters in which it is proper for the Minister to make an intervention.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Change that law and we will make it proper.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: The laws that are set by the Oireachtas are the laws that-----

(Interruptions).

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): We will allow the witness to continue without interruption and Deputy Ó Cuív can come back in later.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: It is a statutory function of the NTA. It does not arbitrarily set fares. It published a document spanning 50 to 80 pages about two weeks ago setting out its explanation of the changes it had made to fares and its approach and strategy with respect to fares over a period. As I understand it, it is seeking over time to move to having fares that are relatively comparable on a distance basis or on like-for-like journeys. Obviously, the experience the Deputy has raised with us would be at variance with that and we can bring that to the attention of the NTA. However, overall, the approach as to how it is to be dealt with has been decided by the Oireachtas and that is what happens. The NTA sets its fares and publishes them annually. They are available on its website. They are published and made public together with an explanation of the rationale for them and the longer-term strategy the authority is following regarding the setting of fares.

Regarding other matters that were raised, Deputy Ó Cuív asked if there is a policy on Iarnród Éireann providing efficient national services. Yes, the expectation of Government is that Iarnród
Éireann, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of CIE that is fully owned by the Minister for Transport on behalf of the people, would provide transport services on the rail network that it has not run and it does provide services on a national basis. It provides many types of services, including commuter services, particularly around the cities, notably the DART. As referenced by the Deputy, an increasing commuter-type service is being built up in or around Galway. Commuter services around Cork have also been developed in recent years. In addition to those services, Iarnród Éireann runs the InterCity services.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: There is no commuter service around Galway.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon**: Pardon?

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: What is the commuter service into Galway?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon**: I was referring to the fact that the Deputy referenced the services that are run on the line into Galway from Oranmore and from Athenry, and that there is now a frequency of services between all of the trains that are run that are helping to make it more useful-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: I have the service on my app but there are no commuter services. A commuter service means there are regular trains coming into the city at commuter times. There is no such commuter service. Two trains come into the city in the morning and two trains depart from the city in the evening. One goes to Dublin and one goes to Limerick. By chance people can get on those trains but they cannot be said to be a commuter service.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey)**: The Deputy has made his point.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: The idea that the company is developing a commuter services if it happens to run two InterCity trains into the city-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey)**: The Deputy has made his point. I ask Ms Hanlon to continue.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon**: My point is that passengers are choosing to use the trains in certain ways. They live in certain areas, work in other areas or commute for education purposes, and they are availing of the services that are operating. InterCity services are run right across the network and then, on parts of the network, services are not run between cities but between large towns and these provide facilities for all passengers who want to travel between those points along the lines.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey)**: On that point, both Deputy Ó Cuív and Senator Hopkins raised the scheduling and timing of commuter services and how they match the needs of modern society. Has Ms O’Hanlon a view on that?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon**: That is an interesting set of points and one that has come up from a few members of the committee. It is one we will refer back to our colleagues in Iarnród Éireann and the National Transport Authority.

Timetabling issues are core operational issues for the transport companies. Timetabling is done primarily by the public service transport providers and, in the particular case raised, by the rail company. Overall, especially in the bus area, timetabling is overseen by the NTA. The authority has a role but there is no role for Ministers or Departments in respect of operational matters. Yet, the
fact that Deputies and Senators are raising this as a point is one of the things we are interested in hearing about today and it will feed back into our thinking about the development of services, public transport policy, the approaches that can best be developed for the future and how public transport can best be articulated for the public.

The Deputy is correct in respect of the point about rural hackneys. The rural hackney licence was an innovation introduced by the transport regulator several years ago in or around 2012. It was a response to the fact that in rural areas there was an identified issue about the availability of taxi services. It was thought that this might provide an additional feature that could be availed of by some people. It has not proven popular. Deputy Ó Cuív asked whether there is a proposal to review it. Some review work is under way with the taxi advisory committee and the National Transport Authority, which is the statutory regulator for taxis. In the course of this work one of the issues they will look at is the fact that the rural hackney licence, although introduced as an innovation, has not been taken up much. They will examine the reasons and whether there are other ways of approaching the matter that could be useful to pursue. Some suggestions were made in the course of comments today. We will reference this back to those involved in the review.

Other points were raised. I will not go over the points on the LocalLink service again but I referenced the service in the opening statement. There has been strong development of the service. There seems to be strong and positive feedback about it throughout the country. Obviously, that is a good thing but there is cause for more. We have been able to provide additional funding for the service through a combination of specific funding for the rural transport programme and through the public service obligation programme as well. Communities throughout the country are seeing the benefits. Small interventions can have a major effect and impact on linking people and places. That was the phrase the Minister of State chose when launching the transport part of the national development plan. That is the critical theme those involved are trying to speak to in developing these proposals.

Senator Hopkins asked about the policy statement that we are working on bringing forward and whether it will translate directly into benefits for rural Ireland or rural people. She asked how they will know when it is done and whether they will see the benefits. I suppose what we are talking about with a policy statement is a gathering together and articulation of State policy or Government policy in respect of a particular area. In this case, it is useful to look at public transport and other areas of our Department. Public transport is an area where we have not yet pulled together one single cohesive statement synthesising the policy. We have any number of policy documents here, there and everywhere but we do not have a synthesis. The Department has worked on that approach in recent years. It has been done for aviation policy. There is a single document called the national aviation strategy. We have a national tourism strategy. Recently, only this summer, a national sport policy document was pulled together by the Department synthesising the approach to things. It was launched by the Minister and Minister of State. The aim for public transport is to do something similar.

Of itself, a policy statement does not necessarily make anyone’s life any better but it provides in a single place a coherent and easily accessible definition of what we are trying to do. It enables a discussion on what we should be doing as we come to formulate policy and then it allows for Government to agree on the key principles. These are not likely to be principles alien to what has
been done heretofore, but the statement represents a synthesis, an articulation and a setting down in one place at one time of what is expected to be at the core. It offers guidance for Government, policy-makers and the plethora of agencies, including State agencies, working in the sector. It guides them for the future. It is a something of a reference point they can use as a compass to check they are navigating in the right direction.

Deputy Collins asked about bus services linking with rail. Again, that is in or around timetabling so it is not a matter the Department deals with directly, but it is interesting to hear that perspective and to hear of the real need to provide connectivity and interconnection by ensuring the various strands and facets of public transport that we provide link up with one another. The NTA has a specific role in the integration of transport. That was seen by the legislators and policy developers around 2008 and 2009 when the NTA legislation was being developed. This is critical because it helps us to get beyond the sum of the parts. If we have a bus service providing a given level of service and a rail service provider another level, then they are good. If we can have some level of integration that makes sense and that still has a healthy competitive tension then we can get better outcomes. We will reference that matter to the NTA to examine for the Deputy.

The Deputy also asked about potential bus licensing for a commercial operator interested in providing a bus service. This is something the NTA does, although going back some years it would previously have been done by the Department. The NTA runs this now. A good deal of 16 Regional and Rural Transport Policy: Discussion information is available on the NTA website if parties are interested in developing a proposal for a bus route and have ideas. The website provides guidance on how to make applications. It also gives an outline of the timeframe for making an application, the timeframe within which an applicant can expect to have a licence application turned around and when the applicant can expect to have a response.

The question of disability and transport services was raised. I only touched on this briefly in the opening statement because of the length of other matters but there is an increasing drive to improve the accessibility of public transport. There have been strong improvements over several years and the Department has become more involved with stakeholders in the sector by engaging with them regularly to get a better understanding of the needs and how they can best be dealt with through the public transport systems we have. We are not there yet. There are elements of the system that are not yet fully working or are not working as cogently as we would expect. That said, within the cities, there is 100% accessibility on the urban transport fleet.

There is substantial accessibility at bus stops. In the context of the urban transport fleet, there are a small number of bus stops that have still to be upgraded. By and large, there is a good story within the cities. Around the country the situation is not as good but it is improving over time. Within its network, as Bus Éireann replaces its coaches, it is replacing them with coaches that have improved accessibility. It has gotten to a level now where 86% of its coach fleet is accessible. That said, we are back to the same issue. Is the bus stop compatible with an accessible coach? It tends to be that journeys between bus stations are accessible but if one is getting off at other points in between places, which many people are, accessibility is not as good. For that reason, the NTA is rolling out a programme to improve the accessibility of bus stops throughout the country. It is trying to do it on a
route basis. The routes it has picked to start with are the Dublin-Donegal routes where there is no alternative public transport service and no rail service. It is trying to start it there. It is scheduling to develop it around the country. I do not know the precise pattern on which it is doing it. I am not aware of what the plans are specifically.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I will interrupt Ms O’Hanlon briefly. The committee has a specific remit in terms of rural services. The Deputy referred to the case of a disabled lady in west Cork who is finding it very difficult to get transport support. Is there anything Ms O’Hanlon can tell the committee? Is the Department or NTA planning an evaluation of disability services to address the concerns the Deputy has raised?

**Deputy Michael Collins:** There are places that have no service at all.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** There is no service or support at all.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** There is no service or support in west Cork.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** I will address that. It is an issue, as Deputy Collins said. When people with disabilities turn 18 years of age, all of a sudden they do not have transport, particularly in places like west Cork. One of the things the NTA is doing, which is part of its strategy statement and plan for the next four years, is the integration of the non-emergency HSE transport services with the LocalLink services. It is something it is looking for to give a better opportunity for better services in that regard. It is doing a pilot with the HSE. I think the Cork-Kerry region is the planned area to look at. It is specifically with the HSE and relating to people with disabilities. That might assist in some way but we will certainly bring it back to the NTA. We have also met with the HSE in that regard but we are leaving it to both the HSE and the NTA to run this pilot and hopefully it might achieve some results.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** That is perfect. I appreciate it.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We will move on to the next group of questions, if that is all right. Before I do, I will note Ms O’Hanlon’s title, which is assistant secretary for public transport, sustainability and climate change. It is something we should mention in the committee. We all know the energy, agriculture and transport sectors contribute a lot to our carbon emissions. I have a brief question on sustainability policy. With regard to the potential for electric vehicles in the public transport fleet, what is the view of the Department on motivating our public transport agencies to improve their carbon emission footprint? Will Ms O’Hanlon give a view on that? Senator O’Sullivan will agree with me on some of this. With regard to cycling infrastructure in our towns and villages, where there are new roads or upgrades of roads, there should be adequate provision in our Estimates for cycling infrastructure to try to improve access for cycling and sustainability. Will Ms O’Hanlon note some of those questions?

I call on Senator O’Sullivan, who will be followed by Deputies Fitzmaurice and Danny Healy-Rae.

**Senator Grace O’Sullivan:** I thank Ms O’Hanlon for her presentation. I will refer to the comment made by Deputy Ó Cuív about fares. Should we be looking at affordability in terms of equality so there is a fair regime throughout the country so people in rural areas are not disadvantaged? It
might be something we could look at in the committee. If the NTA has put out its fare regime, we should look at it and make sure there is no inequality.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** That is a welcome proposal. The Department can answer but it would be in our interest to have the NTA in specifically to talk about fares and affordability in the regional context.

**Senator Grace O’Sullivan:** Exactly. I am a Green Party member. We were quite disappointed with the recent budget in terms of the focus on public transport and the allocation of funds to the areas of cycling and walking. I want to press Ms O’Hanlon a little bit more in terms of the Department’s policy on sustainability. With regard to our carbon emissions, what is the policy of the Department in terms of transitioning away from oil-burning modes of transport? What is the policy with regard to supporting electrical vehicles? What is the Department’s policy on supporting bicycles with regard to schemes in Dublin and in cities like Cork where there is a very efficient system at the train stations? It is an example of smart connectivity where people can benefit from using public transport. I lived in the Netherlands for nine years. It is very frustrating to be here in Ireland - I am from Tramore - because the opportunity to use public transport is restricted by timing. With rail services, the last train in the evening is around 6 o’clock, which is a pity. The morning schedule is excellent but the evening one is not. What is the Department doing to try to create a better system where people can use public transport, have connectivity and avoid congestion? Congestion is an enormous problem in this country. Trying to access Dublin is a disaster. Galway is a disaster. The congestion is desperate. When people are sitting in congested traffic, not only is there frustration but they are burning fossil fuels that are leading to the acceleration of climate change. What is the Department doing? Ms O’Hanlon’s remit is sustainability and climate. What is the Department doing in terms of mitigation policies around extreme weather events? In Waterford, when there are heavy rains the train station floods. What moneys have been set aside? Is the Department adapting or mitigating in this regard?

The freight train between Ballina and Waterford ended service in May 2018. It seems regressive that we are pushing away from using systems of transport. In that case, one could have taken the train from Rosslare through to Waterford and up to Ballina. What will happen with that railway line? Could it be used for public transport services because, again, tourism forms part of the Department’s remit? Could tourists be brought by rail from Rosslare along the Wild Atlantic Way via Waterford? We could probably still do it. What is the policy on closed and abandoned railway lines in the context of greenway development?

On procurement and the use of EV buses, if one travels to Nijmegen or anywhere else in the Netherlands, one will see that the shift to electric buses has already been made. What can we do to speed up the process?

What is the strategy for the future for the rail line running from Waterford to Limerick Junction? Has there been any discussion in the Department on connecting Waterford, Limerick and Galway on the rail network?

Having regard to climate change, cost, affordability and the difficulties experienced by students in renting, what do the officials think about making public transport in all its forms free for students?
Do they think this would be a realistic idea, given the pressure exerted by affordability, to encourage young people to use public transport?

It is funny that I am raising the issue of BlaBlaCar----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Will the Senator clarify her comment?

**Senator Grace O’Sullivan:** It is funny because I am from Waterford. BlaBlaCar is an international car pooling mechanism that is used throughout Europe. My children use it all the time when abroad. It is such an efficient system. Are the officials aware of it? Is there any opportunity for us to encourage a company such as BlaBlaCar to operate in Ireland in an effort to be more efficient in car usage? It is a brilliant mechanism in the context of affordability. If people are operating on very tight budgets, they could go online and link up with one or two others and car pool. It is a really good mechanism.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank Ms Hanlon for her presentation. She spoke about the programme for Government in reference to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. In it there is a commitment that Ireland will make an application to the European Union for Trans-European Transport Networks, TEN-T, funding for services in the west. However, nothing has been done in that regard. Why not? Freedom of information requests have been forwarded to the Department, but it seems to be very reluctant to provide information.

From what the officials have said, the priority when it comes to funding for the inter-urban rail network under the national development plan is to protect investment already made in the network by funding maintenance and safety projects which are needed to maintain service levels in railway operations. If we are to move to the wonderland world about which everybody goes on where we will move towards the use of electric vehicles from Dublin to Cork, Belfast, Galway or Westport, from speaking to people in Iarnród Éireann, it appears that the cost will be €3 billion. Is that money available?

I do not want the officials to box from my next question because I have been trying to get to the root of it for about six months. There is a rail corridor from Limerick to Galway and talk of a rail review of services connecting Athenry, Tuam and Claremorris. When representatives of the NTA appeared before us, they said the review would cover the eastern side of the country. Two groups have appeared before the joint committee that I have tried to nail down to get a straight answer. It has been alleged that a rail review is ongoing. Do the officials agree that when it comes to funding, the Department has no intention of opening the rail corridor because their statement is very clear? I have spoken to Barry Kenny and in detail about services to places such as Longford and Athlone and the use of high speed trains, but we need to make sure we are not talking about apples and oranges. The Netherlands is the same size as Munster and has a population three and a half times the size of that of Munster, yet it is more economical to run trains around it. We need to make sure we will not get carried away. I fully understand Ireland is more remote, but we need to nail down an answer to the question as to whether there will be a western rail corridor? I have been waiting for an answer to that question for about two years.

Do the officials agree that emissions from Euro 6 engines are the same as for gas engines? Has the Department carried out research into the use of bio-diesel buses? It is my understanding there is a
company in England, 20% of the buses of which are electric, and that after three years, it is getting rid of the lot because the batteries have been giving ferocious trouble. Will we jump into the sea and be unable to swim when we spend a lot of money? Has the issue been fully researched and is the system workable?

On transport policy in Galway, I do not think the west matters to the Department for the simple reason that there is no Luas service there. It is like the words of Nanci Griffith’s song “From A Distance”. Next week we are going to An Bord Pleanála to consider the outer bypass. We will probably travel around the world and back again, with people objecting to the project which might proceed in seven or eight years time after a heap of court cases. The situation is chronic and I live 40 miles from Galway, but the officials might not know about it because they do not live there. I live 112 or 118 miles from Dublin and can get to Leinster House faster than I can to the county council building in Galway. Is it not a fierce denunciation of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport that a city such as Galway to which the biggest companies have come does not have a rail network and infrastructure that can handle the volume of traffic going into it? In case the officials do not know, Galway city is losing jobs, even in areas where it is growing. I am not criticising a Government; it is due to the lack of infrastructure.

Every year we meet business people in the west. Senator Hopkins will also raise this issue. There are companies in Westport that tell us that 20% of their goods are damaged by the time they reach Dublin because the road from Westport to Mullingar is a disaster. The officials spoke about the quantities of goods being transported by road. At the same time, there are many small towns to which Expressway services have been cut. We should bear in mind that we are talking about the need to get people to use buses instead of their cars. At the same time, we have problems with haulage services on the rail network because the carriage of passengers must be prioritised.

The Department is examining the position regarding hackneys. I have dealt with a licence. Prior to making an application, the person applying must go to the local authority for a letter stating that there is a need in an area and, after three months, he or she receives a lovely letter stating that a study is required. These people operate on a voluntary basis and they are needed by communities. When the letter to which I refer is issued, a community group must formulate a study to prove that someone is needed to provide a service in an area where there is currently none. People are sick to their back teeth of the paperwork involved. I can answer the question on this because I dealt with a licence application. We compiled a study, which we were then told was out of date even though there was no mode of public or private transport in the area. People must still get a community group to carry out an analysis - without funding - of why an area needs someone to bring a few people home from the pub.

Last night, I was speaking to a guy who bought a new bus. Under the rural transport scheme, it is now compulsory that buses must be wheelchair accessible. That is good and I agree with it. If, however, someone wants to bring US tourists from Kerry to Donegal and he or she buys a new bus, there is nothing in writing about it having to be wheelchair accessible. Whether a bus owner gets the VAT back depends on the length of the bus. Under the rural transport scheme, making a bus wheelchair accessible costs €6,000. This means it would cost €12,000 to accommodate two wheelchairs and the bus owner will not get the VAT back. If we are trying to incentivise people in
rural areas to buy proper buses in order that they might provide local transport, why are we driving them away? At the same time, depending on the size of the bus and whether there is a big bumper on it, people will get the VAT back. Our guests know that LocalLink transport providers use smaller 18 or 20-seater buses because they will not bring 53-seaters down a bog road. They must go to all the expense. It probably costs the Department and the NTA more because there is no incentive.

Our guests referred to 100,000 km of road network throughout the country. Galway has one 20th of the overall total. Why is County Galway less funded per kilometre of road than 99% of the remainder of the country? We have had departmental officials speak on this. We can speak about property tax and that we are getting €12.5 million from central government but €14.5 million was collected in property tax so the local authority gave back an extra €1.5 million.

Our guests referred to Cork and Mallow. Is there any vision to put in place what I would call a proper road from Mullingar to Westport? I know our guests will speak about Collooney and Tarmonbarry but they are only pieces. What I mean by a proper road is a dual carriageway at minimum. Will this also be the case from the Tuam motorway up to Letterkenny? The motorway is exceptionally good. It has provided a connection all the way down. When the route from Cork to Mallow is completed, it will be a fine road. If we look at the area that includes Sligo we do not have a proper bus service in Galway or all of the towns that will be made cities under the 2040 plan. We have no plan whatsoever for a Luas or tram system. The witnesses spoke about park and ride, which is a great idea, but seeing it will be believing it. Where is the vision? The start to the vision is in the first question I asked about the TEN-T funding. I know the ifs and percentages involved. I am not asking about them. It is written in the programme for Government but we are two and a half years into that so why has it not been put in place to go from the west to the north of Ireland?

Chairman: The Deputy asked many questions over a wide range of topics. I ask the delegation to bank them. Various members have asked questions that have given an interesting insight into rural concerns and I ask our guests to take them on board.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: As we are speaking about transport and school transport, I must declare an interest in case someone says I have a conflict. I have a small bus transport service. My father operated it before me since 1956.

My question is on the rule operated by Bus Éireann whereby private contractors providing school transport cannot have buses older than 20 years. If they are older than 20 years, they are off the road. How is it that until very recently Bus Éireann was using buses that were more than 20 years old? Perhaps they are off the road now. I have been advised that they were on the road until very recently.

There was a big hullabaloo, instigated by the Minister, Deputy Ross, and some Fine Gael Joint Comite on Rura I and Comunity Deve lopment

Ministers, which involved propaganda about an evening service operated by Irish Rural Link to bring people out and home. In Kerry, eight services were to operate. Seven of the services were on a once-a-week basis and the other was once a month to bring card players from Castlegregory to Croghane. A promise was given that this pilot service would be extended but I do not see any
mention of it in any budget or hear any talk that the service is to be enhanced. What is the position in this regard?

There is no test centre for buses or lorries in south Kerry, which means people who want to have their vehicles tested must leave Valencia or Cahersiveen and travel to north Kerry or to Cork, whichever is nearer. Many of these operators are asking for this service to be provided in the southern half of the county. Who makes decisions in this regard? Is it the Department that decides where test centres are located?

Three-year road funding was announced recently but regional roads have been put together with local roads. It has been highlighted by our local authority for many years that regional roads should be given funding of their own because they take the bigger part of the local road funding in any three-year period. Many members of Kerry County Council are asking for separate funding for regional roads because they are longer and wider and take a sizeable chunk of the funding from local link roads and long cul-de-sac byroads.

There are two types of funding, one for road paving and the other for road strengthening. Road strengthening is great when we get funding. Many who see us doing road paving, which is to seal a road surface, ask why we are spending money on a good road when their roads are in way worse shape. The relevant Department, which I am sure is that of our guests, has insisted that funding of €50,000 be put aside in each engineering area should bad weather come and damage roads. It is very hard to explain this. I refer to prioritisation on the list and to what is included in the roads programme. When people who travel on a road that is very bad ask what the €50,000 is for, we have to tell them it is being kept for bad weather or flooding. They then say that they do not have to wait for their road to get bad because it is already in bad shape and they ask why the money cannot be spent on it. If there was bad weather or extreme circumstances in the past, the Exchequer provided funding to help. The current arrangement is diminishing the amount of money we receive. It is difficult to explain to people who must travel on an already bad road that we are waiting for some other road to get bad in order that the money might be spent on it.

How are national primary route projects selected? IBEC tells us that we have fewer projects than any other country in Europe. It keeps pointing out that interest rates have never been lower and that money is easily obtained for these projects. I am asking how the projects are selected because the Killarney bypass was promised in 2003. In 2004, there was a big presentation in what was then the Great Southern Hotel and the project was to proceed. The name of the hotel changed for a while and now it is the Great Southern Hotel again but we still do not have the Killarney bypass. Some 18,500 vehicles travel on the ring road. It is chock-a-block. It has been determined that the road is no longer safe in view of the volume of traffic. I ask that the project to which I refer be progressed and prioritised. We are now hoping and taking for granted that Macroom bypass will go ahead. The existing road serves the traffic coming in from the Moll’s Gap side. If the bypass were put in place from Castletough to Lissivigeen, it would help the people. It would take all the traffic around Kenmare Place that wants to go on to Tralee or up the country and, likewise, the traffic coming in on the N22. The town is absolutely choking. It is good that there is traffic but it is felt that the town will lose out eventually because people are not happy to be sitting in their cars for perhaps an hour and a half or two hours between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m on warm evenings. No one is happy with that.
I want to ask a question that contractors ask me. How is school transport funding given to the operator, Bus Éireann? Is it subsidising other services of Bus Éireann?

I, like many throughout the country, am very upset about all the talk of climate change, carbon tax and the big cry since the budget-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** If the Deputy has a specific point on public transport and climate change, we will take it, but we are not widening the debate.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice raised the issue earlier and I agree with him. There is a lot of talk about climate change and electric vehicles and it is said that a certain percentage of the bus fleet should be battery operated. It is now a fact and it is coming home to roost that batteries, even in cars, are giving a lot of trouble. Will this be another ridiculous experiment that will cost the Exchequer, taxpayers and fare payers? Road hauliers and others were before the committee and complained that the Euro 6 diesel engine does not affect the climate and that there are no emissions from it. Why, when we have something right, do we have to experiment, make changes and go down some other road about which we are not certain? The signs are that battery-operated vehicles will not last. I spoke earlier about Bus Éireann vehicles being over 20 years of age. If the officials expect buses operated by battery will last 20 years or more, they need to think again because it will not happen. There is so much talk about climate change. If we were reduce our emissions altogether, our contribution would amount to only 0.13% in the worldwide context.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We will ask the officials to respond regarding the future fuelling of public transport and to outline the thinking in the Department in this regard. I thank the Deputy for his views that matter.

I am conscious of time and want to give every member an opportunity to ask questions. Senator Dolan will forgive me for making some comments before I call him. Most of what I had to say has been covered so I will be very brief. We have spoken a lot about connectivity for regions and rural areas, be it in the context of broadband, road or rail. It is essential that, whatever policies we devise, we improve regional connectivity in the first instance. If our regional connectivity is good, local access will be better.

I note the comments on Project Ireland 2040 and the national development plan. One of the regional cities identified for substantial urban growth is Waterford. Of all the access routes to Waterford from other cities, the only good one is that from Dublin. The N25 to Cork is dilapidated. There are road works in Castlemartyr that have been going on for ever. I remember travelling to Munster finals in the early 1980s and there were road works there. I am now almost 50 and there are still road works going on. Why is the N25, a primary national road, in what seems to be a very poor state?

The N24 connects two cities, Limerick and Waterford, whose populations are estimated to almost double by 2040. The N24 is one of the worst national routes in the country in terms of its surface, the number of bends, the number of accidents on it and the number of villages through which it runs. It is a terrible road connecting two of the cities for which we have such high ambitions. How are we going to connect the cities with proper national primary routes and, by extension, improve
access to those networks in the regions? It is 2018 and the N24 and N25 are in a deplorable state. I would like to hear the views of the officials from the Department on how we are going to improve that in accordance with the ambition already outlined in Project Ireland 2040 and the national development plan. It is essential that we do so. I apologise to Senator Dolan.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: I have to follow up very quickly. I refer to the issue of the University Hospital Waterford, which relies on-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): The cardiac issue.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: -----that route from Waterford to Cork. The bottleneck in-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): Castlemartyr.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: -----Castlemartyr is dreadful. There are major health and safety issues that need to be addressed.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I apologise to Senator Dolan and I call him now.

Senator John Dolan: I thank the Acting Chairman and Waterford has still not brought home an All-Ireland after all that travelling.

(Interruptions).

Senator John Dolan: I thank our guests for attending and for engaging with the committee. I would also like to say a word of appreciation because a number of things have happened for people with disabilities, although there is much more that must happen. The increase in the parking fine for people wrongly using disabled parking bays has been a great fillip and morale boost. Much more can be done there as well but credit where credit is due. The appointment of approximately half a dozen people with disabilities to a slew of public transport boards is a move in the right direction. That is also welcome.

I want to start, believe it or not, with Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. At the start of Article 9 it is stated that parties - that means Ireland since April - to the convention “shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications ... both in urban and in rural areas”. We are referring, in particular, to rural Ireland here today. The article also states, “These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility, shall apply to [a slew of things we will not go into]”. On 19 April last, Ireland lodged the papers with the United Nations in New York. On 19 April 2020, two years from now, Ireland will make its first report on progress made. Does the Department have an implementation plan to make Article 9 accessibility happen? What is the Department’s intention? What does it hope to be reporting in respect of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in April 2020?

We mentioned the rural aspects. Approximately 37% of the population lives in rural Ireland. That is 228,000 people with disabilities and their families. I state that to make it clear. The NTA is mentioned in the Department’s presentation. I will say again - sadly and clearly - that I have no confidence in the NTA. That is based on what I have seen of its understanding of and empathy with
the issue of providing inclusive transport solutions for people with disabilities. My evidence comes from March 2017, when the NTA advised the Minister - and the rest of us - during the Bus Éireann strike. Three sets of Bus Éireann vehicles were being taken off of three routes, leaving three operators with licences to operate those routes. The NTA stated at the time that there would be no diminution in service. It was interesting that it could say this when all of the buses left on the routes were not wheelchair accessible. What was even worse - and this goes back to points raised by colleagues to my left - was that they were not required to be accessible. I refer to licences that are being given to bus companies. I am not getting into public versus private, I am just talking about Joe Bloggs who is in a wheelchair or who has a mobility impairment. He does not or should not need to know the logo on the bus to be able to get the bus from Clonmel to Dublin and out to the airport. That was one of the routes involved.

The other instance to which I wish to refer occurred on 18 July last when representatives from the NTA were before the committee. I asked about BusConnects. The eye of that storm at the moment is in Dublin but, as has been said, it is due to go nationwide in the fullness of time. There was no engagement with people with disabilities or their representative organisations until two days before the meeting in question. That engagement happened because a person with a disability on a national disability inclusion strategy committee pushed for it. The horse was well gone by then. I am not sure if it was 60 or 80 buses, I forget the exact number, but they had been ordered from Wrightbus in Ballymena, delivered, paid for and liveried. Everything had been done. The day before the meeting, people with disabilities, visual impairments, physical impairments and hearing impairments got their first chance to look at those buses and point out a number of things. The committee was told that some of the things could be resolved but the solutions were being retrofitted to something that should already have been done. There has been a disability access committee in the Department since the 1980s. This is not new. Some 20 years ago, 100 buses came into the fleet thanks to an Exchequer grant of £1.5 million. That was unprecedented at the time. Not one of those buses was accessible. Now, 20 years later, the same thing is happening. The consultant appointed to the BusConnects project was not asked by the Department, the NTA or whomever, if he or she had any experience of providing accessible public transport systems.

Those are my reasons for saying that I have no confidence in the NTA. I do not see any change. Such an important body was being dismissive, I will use that term, because it could not even indicate or provide an estimate regarding the number of disabled people with mobility impairments who currently have a single bus journey from start to finish but who will have to take a second bus as a result of BusConnects being put in place. I refer to the number of people who would have to get off one bus and onto a second. We could ask the drivers on the routes and I am sure they could nearly tell us passengers’ names and where they get on and off. It is quite dismissive of the whole project Ireland has taken on. I would be interested in any comment the Department has to make on that point.

Wheelchair accessibility is available on a number of Bus Éireann coaches on the Expressway regional service. I will qualify that by saying that it is when the services operate the way they should and to the 24-hour rule, etc. The number of routes is limited, however, due to constraints with accessible bus stops. This has already been touched on. The introduction of additional fully accessible routes is
dependent on the production of suitably accessible bus stops. Each wheelchair-accessible coach has one wheelchair space which must be booked 24 hours in advance using the reservation system.

There are still routinely issues. It sticks in my craw that members of the public still have to give 24 hours’ notice to use a public bus or train but that is the case. When they do that, they still have the fingers on both hands crossed that the bus, when it gets there, will be accessible. Even if they get to where they are going, they then have a bigger plight wondering if they will get home. That is reality for people with mobility impairments. There are many different issues but the coaches are now accessible. The figure of 86% was mentioned. There is still the issue of the bus stops along the routes. I will return to that in a moment.

There are six Expressway routes that are wheelchair accessible. The routes in question are Dublin to Belfast, Dublin to Waterford, Dublin to Limerick, Dublin to Galway, Dublin to Letterkenny and Waterford to Cork.

I want to start with, believe or not,

All but one of the seven public service obligation, PSO, routes serve Dublin and the Dublin hinterland. The one that does not runs from Galway to Ballina. I refer to the routes from Navan to Dublin, Navan to DCU, Trim to Dublin, Drogheda to Blanchardstown and Dublin to Kells. There is a strong pull into and around Dublin city. There is an equity issue here, and other committee members have raised that in other ways. Whether it is in regard to people with disabilities or others, there is a huge drag in and around Dublin. I can understand that, but those of us involved in public policy have to create a counter-drag running the other way so that people can move around.

The Chair raised the N24. We need the Saw Doctors to do something about the N25 and the N24. I know the N24 well. I come from Tipperary town. There was a big protest in Tipperary at the weekend. A greater number of people than the town’s population came out and protested about jobs and other issues. The state of roads and the lack of a bypass were some of those issues. Public transport is not just about transport. It is about people’s social and economic lives. On the outskirts of that town, there is a rail junction, Limerick Junction, which horizontally and vertically links Dublin, Cork, Limerick, the area beyond it and Waterford. That town is dying on its knees. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and agencies under its aegis could do some very practical things. They could provide the bypass, address the state of roads in and around the town and make strategic use of the fact that north, south, east and west are connected through Limerick Junction.

Finally, I wish to ask some very specific questions connected to some of the things I have raised already. What level of engagement does the Department have with local authorities throughout the country with regard to the creation of wheelchair accessible bus stops? That is part of the conundrum. The whole fleet could be accessible, but the bus stops in rural and regional Ireland must also be accessible. Local authorities bear a responsibility too. What percentage of the LocalLink fleet is wheelchair accessible? Has there been any progress in inserting a protocol to the effect that no new public service licences will be issued to operators unless they have a 100% accessible fleet? It is unfair to the public purse and the public service that we are licensing private operators while the public transport operator has at least one hand tied behind its back. A private operator can just rock up with an inaccessible bus. Quite apart from people with disability issues I do not see the sense in that. Obviously my concern is for people with disabilities. Can the officials revert to the committee
with figures on disability awareness training undertaken by Irish Rail, Bus Éireann and LocalLink staff and on how often refresher training is delivered? Go raibh maith agat. I thank the witnesses.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I thank the Senator for his advocacy on behalf of those with disabilities. It is important we bring that into the wider context.

**Senator John Dolan:** We will all be going there some day.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Definitely. We have had a lot of wide-ranging questions and comprehensive engagement. There are good insights into what members are seeing on the ground concerning access to services and where investment is needed. We need to return to local, national and regional roads as well, as I mentioned. We would be interested to hear the officials’ responses. I am conscious of time and I thank the officials for their continued engagement with the committee.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Perhaps an appropriate way forward would be for me to address the climate and green issues together. I will then hand over to my colleague to address roads and disability. I will wrap up by addressing various other issues.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** That would be great. I thank Ms Hanlon.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** In regard to sustainability and public transport, we take the view that of its nature public transport is more accessible, more sustainable, more environmentally friendly, greener and better in terms of liveability in cities and other areas than private car use. There is a considerable level of State investment in providing rural transport now and in the future. There are several motivations for that, one of which might broadly be termed the green agenda, that is, a policy direction towards more sustainable and environmentally friendly approaches to life in Ireland.

On the question of the public transport fleet and the type of fleet it is appropriate to bring forward, let us start by looking at emissions. Transport emissions account for 20% of Ireland’s emissions. Just 1% of that is public transport. It is very low. One could ask if it matters whether it is made greener. As some of the members of the committee have correctly pointed out, the standards of transport vehicles change as they move up the European emission standards classes. We were at euro 3, euro 4 and euro 5. Euro 6 is the norm nowadays. Moving up the standards, vehicles become more sustainable and environmentally friendly and have fewer emissions and better exhaust profiles. It is getting better all the time.

That said, a leadership role must be taken by the public transport sector. While its own emissions might not be at a tipping point concerning Ireland’s emissions generally, the fact that so much public funding goes into the area suggests that it should be leading rather than following. Public transport should be demonstrating possibilities to other parts of the economy, particularly private personal car use and private business vehicle use, whether heavy-duty vehicles or lighter-duty goods vehicles are concerned. There are initiatives around this. A commitment has been made in the national development plan that by the middle of next year there will be no more purchases of diesel-only fleet for urban public transport services. That sends a very strong signal. To support that, not just in regard to immediate purchases but throughout the coming period, the Department is researching these issues internationally, looking at evidence from other jurisdictions, what they have done, how
they have got on and the experience they have had. We are examining whether other jurisdictions have taken a straight route or done about turns on the way. In addition to that and to hearing from the manufacturers, we want to test it for ourselves. We want to test the technology on our roads, on hilly and flat bus routes and on routes where a vehicle has to stop ten times going down a street because of traffic, traffic lights or whatever. That is a piece of work the Department has commissioned. A set of trials will be rolled out. They will start within a few weeks, certainly before the end of the year, and they will run for a fixed number of weeks.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Ms Hanlon said that there will be no diesel-only buses from next year. What does she mean by that? Will the Department be buying diesel-electric vehicles or electric-only vehicles after that? A few weeks of trials do not test anything about how a vehicle performs. The battery performance of electric vehicles must be tested for three years. I presume Ms Hanlon is aware that the transport budget will need to accommodate an automatic 20% rise in fuel costs. If the Department buys biodiesel or electric-diesel buses or vehicles with two different types of fuel, its budget will fuel eight buses instead of ten. That is going by the prices. Has a budget been laid out? Costs are 20% higher. Is Ms Hanlon confident the Department will not be buying a pig in a bag? I have had machinery all my life and I know that weeks of use do not test something. Things should be tested for three years or perhaps five years in order to find out whether they are going to rob or make a person.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I will incorporate those points into my response. Alternative fuel technologies and different types of buses are more expensive than conventional diesel buses at the moment, so they will cost more. The Government is aware of that, and has been aware of that since it made its commitment to move away from diesel-only buses. We have not started to prescribe the precise technologies to be purchased. I was trying to explain that there are horses for courses in this. A number of technologies are available, for example, hybrid electric vehicles, being part electric and part diesel, fully electric, either via battery or by plug-in, hydrogen vehicles and CNG, or compressed natural gas-powered vehicles. A range of buses will be tested in the trials mentioned to see which are suited to particular types of routes. We want to find out whether the technology appropriate for hilly terrain is also appropriate for driving in flat areas or in congested urban areas where one is starting and stopping regularly. This is not the be all and end all. It is only one component of the research we are doing, but I am talking about it because it will be done over the next few weeks. We will run these different types of buses under simulated conditions on real Irish bus routes. We are not talking about bus routes in a foreign city that we are being told about by manufacturers, but rather we will find out for ourselves and actually measure what is coming from the tailpipe.

This is a practical move by the Department which will support the trial and testing of innovative solutions where we just do not know the absolute, definitive best answer, and no one else can give us the answer. Members of the committee are raising very real points about this approach. Considerable experience has been built up internationally, but it is not entirely conclusive. We are trying to add to it with our own analysis and understanding and to help inform decisions so that better purchasing decisions are made over time. Indeed, we expect technologies to develop further as we go into the future, so we do not expect that we will definitively come up with the correct answer at a particular point in time which will forever after be the approach we slavishly taken.
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Ms Hanlon has said that the Department intends to get rid of diesel. A euro 6 engine has been proven, without a doubt, to be the same as gas in terms of emissions at the moment. I am sure it will be tested by the Department as part of its testing process. Why are the gas engines being tested while the euro 6 engines are being ruled out? Perhaps the euro 7 will be even better than gas. Why has that decision been made?

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: It is a policy of the Government that we should move away from a diesel-only fleet for urban areas and from purchasing a new diesel-only fleet for those areas. We will measure not only the carbon emissions but also the emissions of nitrous oxide, sulphur oxide emissions and the particulate matter. There are impacts on two fronts, and we want to try to get measures on both. One is the impact on climate, which largely comes from carbon, and the other is the impact on air quality. Air quality impacts are more acute in areas where there is congestion and places where there is a higher proximity to people and buildings. Technologies, which might not cause the same impact on air quality in rural areas, might have a larger impact on air quality in urban areas.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I am conscious that we could delve very deeply into this debate, but I am also conscious of the time. Following on from Deputy Fitzmaurice’s contribution, is there a timeframe for the Department’s evaluations? When does the Department expect to report on its various experimental tests? Will it be done by the end of this year or spring of next year?

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: As far as I know, testing will begin in the coming weeks. I believe it will be running for a number of weeks beginning in late November and the beginning of December. We will report on the outcomes after that. I would expect initial outputs to be available in early spring. Those results will help to inform purchasing decisions going forward, but there may need to be further analysis.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): Will the Department also take into account the associated infrastructure required to support that type of technology?

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: Yes.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): If gas infrastructure is required to run gas vehicles there will be a big demand for it because we do not have that infrastructure. It is important that is evaluated.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: One of the issues is reliability and the level of re-charging required for particular vehicles.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I am conscious that another committee exists which can deal with this matter in far more depth. This committee is interested in this area in terms of connectivity and fuel technology. We would be interested to hear the outcome of the testing to be done when it is completed.

Senator Grace O’Sullivan: I am interested in the testing in general. Where will it be carried out? Will it be carried out in different locations around the country? What are the parameters for that testing?
Ms Deirdre Hanlon: I believe it is being carried out largely in Dublin and Cork on particular routes which have been chosen because of the variation between them and the range of testing conditions that can be captured.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Who is carrying out the testing on behalf of the Department?

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: It is being run in conjunction with Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann. A company has been employed by the Department to carry out the actual measurement.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I am anxious to hear responses about investment in rural, regional and national roads and rural link and on the issues of disability discussed.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: The N4 and the N5 were mentioned. In terms of the N4, the route between Collooney and Castlebaldwin, tenders have been received and it is expected that contract will be awarded and the project will be under way before Christmas. The next project on the list is the N5, between Westport and Turlough. We expect that the contract for that project will be awarded next year. The route between Ballaghaderreen and Scramogue is on the N5. It has recently gone to An Bord Pleanála, and we await the outcome.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Why are they all single-lane roads?

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: They are not. Collooney to Castlebaldwin is-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am talking about the routes from Westport and Ballaghaderreen.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: Westport to Turlough is a duel road. Ballaghaderreen to Scramogue is a single lane road. The simple reason is that the decision is made based on the volume of traffic, especially heavy goods vehicles, HGVs. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has to go to An Bord Pleanála, justify the land take and the proposed road, and has to make a call on what capacity will be needed on these roads in the future.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Does Mr. Mullaney remember the roads needs assessment of many years ago? There was a big-----

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: Yes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: If one looks at that, it was proposed that the road from Athlone to Ballinasloe had the least amount of traffic and that it should be a single carriageway. Would it not be beautiful to travel out of Galway on the duel carriageway, onto the single carriageway and then back onto the duel? Over half of the national primary routes are already duelled. Is it within the policy remit of the Department to decide that all national primary roads, which are being upgraded, are to be duelled? Can that be done? The other road it could apply to is the one in Dromod.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: It is within the Department’s remit. The Government made a decision that the Dublin, Waterford, Limerick, Cork and Galway roads would all be duel carriageways.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: That is just as well.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: There were some sections where the traffic figures did not justify a duel carriageway but TII was able to use the decision to go in and-----
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am a believer in building for the future, not for today. Everybody is talking about balanced regional development but we will not get that if a company is struggling or a businessman is behind the 35X but when he is trying to get to Castlebar, Waterford, Donegal or anywhere in Ireland. I spoke to a person who met their boss from America and who hired a helicopter to bring them to Donegal because they were afraid that if they were on the road too long, the boss would pull the investment. It is about jobs in these areas. I do not know why we cannot make the decision. It is our business, as public representatives, to bring in something to ensure that we have dual carriageways. I am not looking for a motorway everywhere but a road on which one can overtake with some comfort and not be stuck behind something all day.

Under the transport regulations, it is illegal to drive a tractor on the hard shoulder so one has to stay on the road and block everything. Frustration builds and people take risks by overtaking at the wrong time, which leads to crashes. I do not know why, for the sake of the extra few euro it costs to purchase land compulsorily, we do not have a structure north, south, east and west to tie the A5 at Aughnacloy into the M1. We need a vision so that everyone from Donegal to the south of Wexford and Kerry has the opportunity to bring industry to their regions. I drive to Dublin every day and the Dublin-Galway road is the greatest road that was ever built. That is what gets people moving.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): The Deputy’s points are well made but I want to hear the responses.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I want to clarify what we are talking about. We are discussing national primary roads. I understand that the N11 is almost finished.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: Yes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The M1 is done and a bit of the M2 has been done but one can go down the M1 and then go across. The M3 is great down to Virginia, when it runs into the bog. On the N4, one gets to Mullingar and then runs into the bog. That is also the case with the N5. The N6, N7, N8 and the N9-N10 have been done and the N11 is almost done. All that remains to be done are the Waterford to Cork and Waterford to Limerick routes. Cork to Limerick will be a dual carriageway and will be done, as will Cork to Killarney and back to Adare, by which time virtually the whole south of the country will be done, with a bit more to do in Wexford. Then we will go into the black hole of Ireland, which is from Tuam to Letterkenny. One way to measure a road is to count the 50 km/h speed limits on it. If the Acting Chairman drives from Waterford to Limerick, he will see that a speed limit of 50 km/h applies on the final 16 km, which would drive one nuts. The wear and tear on vehicles is phenomenal in such circumstances. Does the Department think the Government made a good decision to forget about doing patches on the M6, the M7, the M8 and the M9 up to the Border but to do it all instead?

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: In retrospect, it was the right decision.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Am I right in thinking that a national primary road is up to the number 50, be that M50 or N50?

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: Yes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: There are very few of them.
Mr. Dominic Mullaney: Yes, but other projects are in for appraisal, such as those relating to the N24 and N25. The N4 Mullingar to Longford road will probably be a dual carriageway. There is also the N4 Carrick on Shannon to Dromod and the N25 to New Ross. The N11 public private partnership project from Gorey to Enniscorthy is being done, as is the N30 off it. The N24, from Waterford to Cahir to Limerick Junction, is to be appraised by TII. The cross-section has not been decided yet and is still in its early stages. The N25 Waterford to Glenmore is also to be appraised under the national development plan, as is Carrigtwohill to Midleton. The N22 from Ballyvourney to Macroom was mentioned earlier, as was the Westport job, and they will start construction next year.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): We also spoke about disability access and about Irish Rural Link and LocalLink.

Mr. Kevin Doyle: Senator Dolan raised a number of issues regarding disability access, including Article 9 of the UN convention. We have the implementation plan from our accessibility consultative committee and this contains all the actions we are required to take in respect of public transport arising from the national disability inclusion strategy, comprehensive employment strategy and so on. It has been published on our website and there are a lot of actions in there. There have been successes recently but a lot of retrofitting is to be done relating to disability access.

The Senator also mentioned an issue regarding engagement with the NTA in the context of matters such as delivery of buses and so on.

Senator John Dolan: I also raised the issue of the reorganisation of people.

Mr. Kevin Doyle: That is certainly an issue. We have held discussions with the NTA on it and the authority engaged with the National Disability Authority, as a result of which it was able to make changes to delivery, particularly in the context of visually impaired people. The NTA is also looking to appoint a dedicated accessibility officer, which it does not have at the moment. This will be useful to do. It is looking to provide for better engagement with disability sector. We have a disability and accessibility committee and each of the transport operating companies has one. Perhaps the NTA needs one too.

The Senator also asked about bus stops. These are an issue and they are part of our retrofit programme. We have a significant capital programme over the next number of years to deal with the antiquated infrastructure which we have in some cases, and it is being rolled out on a route by route basis. We have done Dublin to Donegal and Dublin to Letterkenny. The NTA plan is to have accessible bus stops in 43 towns with populations of over 5,000 people by 2021. It will mean one such stop in each direction so there will be a total of 86 accessible bus stops.

Approximately 69% of LocalLink services are defined as fully or partially accessible. The NTA is now retendering in respect of the more than 1,000 routes on the LocalLink service. One of the conditions it is putting on that is that all those services must be wheelchair accessible within two years. The existing services must remain accessible; the other 31% must be accessible within two years.

On commercial operators, as the Senator mentioned, this is certainly an issue on coaches. Bus Éireann Expressway services have to be wheelchair accessible. There is no requirement on commercial bus operators to provide wheelchair accessible coaches.
Senator John Dolan: Does Mr. Doyle mean that the Department does not put a requirement on them?

Mr. Kevin Doyle: Exactly.

Senator John Dolan: That is the nub of my question.

Mr. Kevin Doyle: There is none. The NTA will publish proposals for consultation shortly which will set out minimum accessibility standards for commercial public transport services. I understand it will engage in that consultation towards the end of this year. That will guide future ways of dealing with the licensing of commercial operators and whether there should be a requirement on them to provide accessible coaches.

Senator John Dolan: If they are being contracted to provide a public service and we have decided that these services should be accessible, there are accessible buses. Surely there is no other decision but that this should be done. The only row should be about how quickly it would happen.

Mr. Kevin Doyle: In this case, we are talking about the licensing of commercial bus operations. The NTA has a certain role-----

Senator John Dolan: To provide the public service.

Mr. Kevin Doyle: It also provides public service obligation contracts for Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann, and many private operators are using those as well. They must be wheelchair accessible. However, in the commercial sphere, there is no requirement currently. That is something the NTA is examining.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Has Mr. Doyle taken on board my question regarding the length of the buses? This issue will lead to LocalLink prices increasing. Buses must be wheelchair accessible, which costs €6,000. The cost is €12,000 for most buses now. The cost is down to the length of the vehicle. It does not have to be used for bringing Yanks around the country and, depending on the length of the bus, the operator will get back the VAT on that cost. Can the Department not communicate with the Department of Finance with a view to offering some incentive in regard to claiming back the VAT? First, we would have a better standard of bus and, second, they will be more accessible for people with disabilities. The only criteria currently in that regard is the length of the bus and if it is an inch one way or the other, the operator is out.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: I am not familiar with VAT rules relating to transport services because they do not come within the remit of our Department. From what the Deputy is saying, however, this is an issue that affects the people who are trying to provide transport services and, therefore, it is real in their world. It happens to be transport but it is VAT law, which is tax. It is administered by the Revenue Commissioners and the rules are set by the Minister for Finance.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Is there any way the Department could contact the Department of Finance and inform it that there is a problem in this regard and that the operators need a break.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: I am not aware of the problem other than as a result of the Deputy raising it here. We will talk to them and see what the matter is-----
**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** If Ms Hanlon carries out a search on Google, she will find the criteria.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am sorry to interrupt again but members have a number of genuine concerns that are affecting access to rural transport and making rural transport work. The specific remit of this committee is to try to identify either blockages or the areas where funding is required. I know Ms Hanlon will note it and take it on board but, in a general sense, it is important that departmental officials recognise the concerns of the members.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Yes.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** In our guests’ engagement with the various State agencies - and we will have their representatives before the committee and will have an opportunity to put questions - it is important that this issue be flagged. If we want access and connectivity to rural transport to work, we will have to address the concerns members are raising. That is the general gist of it. To wrap up, could we have some-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I wish to raise an issue briefly. We must flag the fact that there needs to be a policy to the effect that services will be provided late in the evening. We will be commemorating the centenary of the First Dáil on 21 January 2019. The general election took place on 15 December 1918 and the results were not in until the end of the year, with Christmas in between, yet those involved managed to set up a Dáil, with translation and stenography services and everything else in place, within 21 days. That monumental decision 100 years ago will be commemorated by this institution in January. I approached Bus Éireann on the issue of getting late night services to Carraroe, although it could have been to any Carraroe in the country, because the last bus leaves Galway at 6 p.m. In early spring, Bus Éireann put a proposal to the NTA, and the service was meant to be in place in September. Bus Éireann assured me it was ready to rock and roll. If the first Dáil could be set up within 21 days, will our guests explain why, as I have been informed, it will take until January to put this service in place? Bus Éireann has just put in a revised timetable. Will somebody explain to me what has gone wrong in the past 100 years? We could set up the First Dáil in 21 days and we cannot reconfigure a bus timetable to provide a vital service, which has taken eight, nine or ten months to set up. Something is wrong in this country. Nothing seems to get done.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I have to interrupt the Deputy. He has made that point well. It is an operational matter for Bus Éireann.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** No. When I was a Minister-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Correct me if I am wrong but schedules and timetables are an operational matter for Bus Éireann.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** That is not the point. I am not asking the Department to interfere with schedules or timetables. I am asking the officials about the steps the Department intends to take to ensure that the agencies under its remit act efficiently, make decisions immediately and stop the petty carry-on over a little place.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am conscious of time.
Senator John Dolan: My question-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): No. I will move on.

Senator John Dolan: One of the questions was not responded to.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I have a list of them and we will try to get to them. Specific questions were put. Deputy Fitzmaurice had one regarding the western rail corridor.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: TEN-T funding in terms of the western rail corridor.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I would like to hear the answers to two questions put by Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. He said that buses older than 20 years are not allowed to be used in the private sector and asked if this is also the case in the public sector. He also asked about access to vehicle test centres in the regions, which is important.

Senator Dolan asked specific questions on Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

Senator John Dolan: That has been dealt with. We can pick up on it. I made comments on disability awareness training and I sought a response. The current 24-hour waiting period when booking wheelchair-accessible transport is not acceptable. People still routinely ring up to book that and it does not happen for them even though a bus or train with the necessary ramps is available. We need to have a zero-tolerance policy in terms of people booking wheelchair-accessible transport 24 hours in advance who still cannot get that bus or train.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): We will try to get a response on that.

For the officials’ information, we devoted a full meeting to discuss a flooding issue on the Galway to Limerick railway line at Ballycar. I understand there has not been a resolution in respect of that matter. We engaged with all of the agencies but none of them is taking ownership of it. Do the officials from the Department have any information with regard to finding a resolution in respect of that issue? This is a primary railway route from Galway to Limerick - two of our main cities identified under Project Ireland 2040 - and it is unacceptable that it is being shut down due to flooding. If the officials have some information on that, we would appreciate their response. We will hear final answers now, and I thank the officials.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: To use a technical transport phrase, I gather the Acting Chairman would prefer a whistlestop tour in terms of answers to-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I would prefer brief, specific responses if that is possible.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: If the Acting Chairman wants more information, he can ask me another question. I will go backwards through the questions.

We are aware of the issue of flooding at Ballycar. Progress seems to have been made on it in that the bodies involved are working together with Clare County Council. Irish Rail is involved, as are some consultants who are looking at the issue. The issue seems to be one of flooding in the area. It
affects the rail line but it also affects other things in the area. They are considering what would be the best approach to bring forward. It is heartening that matters seem to be moving in that those involved are working together, co-operating and looking jointly at identifying the best way forward. We await the outcome of that.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae asked about the ages of school buses being 20 years or older depending on whether they were operated by or on contract to Bus Éireann. The school bus system is a matter for the Minister for Education and Skills and his Department. Bus Éireann operates it for the Minister as his agent. It is not a matter in which our Department has a role or knowledge.

I do not know the answer about the question on test centres for heavy vehicles and buses. We can find out. It is not in the public transport remit so I am not aware.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Will Ms Hanlon ask her colleagues to respond to the committee?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I will write to the clerk and let them know whether that is our responsibility or that of someone else.

There is a commitment in the programme for Government that the costings of proposals for the extension of the western rail corridor northwards from the existing part of the project that was opened in 2010 would be examined. The programme for Government also makes a commitment that in the meantime, there would be no development which would preclude its bringing into service for rail purposes in the future.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Is the Department doing the review?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** It is more than a decade since the project was last examined and costings put in place, and those costings are affected by several things. A new road is running along it and what the McCann report described as its most potentially economic part has already opened. Therefore, during the summer the Government decided that the business case must be revisited. It is not sufficiently robust on which to base a decision.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** My memory was that the most viable part of that line was from Athenry to Tuam. I clearly recall that when it came to us for a decision by Cabinet, one of my colleagues said we should not have done the Ennis to Athenry segment but should have done the Athenry to Tuam segment. We can check that out.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** My recollection is that the McCann report identified the piece that already has been built as that piece which connects Limerick and Galway and that the economic benefit one would derive from that is stronger than the potential economic benefit from the others because none of the possible future phases would connect areas that already are centres of such economic activity and population density. Therefore the benefit to come from it would not be as strong.

The Deputy asked who is doing it.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Who is doing it? Where are they at? My understanding is that it was nearly done. When is it being done?
**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Irish Rail has been told by Government to do the review. It is out to tender for assistance with economic expertise and technical help to compile a business case. We expect it will be a couple of months. Alongside the business case, which comprises the technical financial procedures that are required in accordance with the public spending code, Irish Rail also has been told to carry out a consultation. There is a wide variety of views as to what is the best use of that alignment, be that for rail, greenway, something else or nothing at all.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Ms Hanlon should wait one second. In the part of her statement that I read back to her, it says the priority is to look after the existing network. Where does the money come from?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** What I said was that was the priority set when times were hard and we had to cut very deeply into capital budgets. We asked what was the best thing to do and it was to hunker down and keep the existing extensive network running. Now that more capital funding is coming forward and being profiled under the national development plan, we can do that. We have reached the steady state of keeping the existing networks going and we can undertake targeted additional projects. Several of those projects are specifically set out in the national development plan, such as the metro, BusConnects and the DART expansion, but there is also scope for more. What is happening in respect of the western rail corridor is that the Government has told Irish Rail to do an up-to-date robust business case and return with it. When Irish Rail returns with that, in accordance with the programme for Government commitment there will be an independent review and peer assessment of the Irish Rail case because there is a significant degree of dispute as to the robustness and quality of figures that are being put forward by different parties.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** How long does Ms Hanlon estimate this will take?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Irish Rail is getting consultants on board around now.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I know. In addition to costing money, they take a long time. When will we know one way or the other?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** We expect the consultants’ report to come within approximately three months from when they start work.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** When will that be?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I imagine it will be in or around the end of the year. Irish Rail must also do a consultation but it can run that alongside the business case. The two do not need to be sequential; they can be concurrent. Then Irish Rail can return to Government and then the Government can assess the appropriate action.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Where are we in respect of TEN-T?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** There is a commitment in the programme for Government that a concept called the western arc, to which the Deputy referred, would be put forward by Government to the European Commission proposing its inclusion as part of the core network of TEN-T. Work in that regard is under way in the Department.
**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Nothing has been done. Files have been requested from the Department. There was a commitment that this would be done within a certain length of time from the Government taking office. People have requested files and from the information received, the Department has done nothing on the matter. Why is there a blank on the west of Ireland under the TEN-T programme?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I understand that the approach is being prepared at the moment. It is expected that something can be progressed to ministerial level in the coming months. At EU level, there is a requirement to review the entirety of the TEN-T network throughout the European Union. It is a network of core routes for transport, rail, road, airports and ports. That review has to be done at European level by 2023.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I was involved in the programme for Government. The commitment was that it would be within six months. I will look up the programme for Government.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Yes, it was a very short period.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Why was it not done in that time? Why are we talking about it two and a half years later and talking about 2023? That commitment was given in the programme for Government. Why has the Department not done so?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** It is one of a number of priorities the Department is-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** It is obviously not that big of a priority when it relates to the west of Ireland because every other priority has been done. A rail service was put in towards Navan and that was done even though a business case for it would not stack up. It was the one thing that was put into the programme for Government for the west of Ireland. People have tried to secure information on this from the Department through freedom of information requests but have been dilly-dallied around with and not given the information. They requested files but there is nothing on the file. There was nothing that said the Department had tried to do this TEN-T application. We keep getting fobbed off on this issue because it relates to the west of Ireland.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I will explain if I may.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We will have a final response because we have exhausted this particular issue, which is something we will revisit.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** A large amount of work has been done, which was significant to the context and quality of the case that could be put forward for TEN-T designation of that arc. That is work done in the development of a national planning framework and the national development plan which has only been completed in recent months. If one goes to the European Union to look for the inclusion of particular corridors or routes as part of a core network across Europe, one has to have as good a case as one possibly can. It bolsters one’s position in making the case if one can show a national development plan which gives strength to developing networks across the regions.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** We were included in it up to 2011 or 2012. There was no big deal about it. We had a case before then.
Ms Deirdre Hanlon: We are already included in the comprehensive network. The issue is whether we should be upgraded further for inclusion in the core network. The comprehensive network is still a good place to be in. The question is whether we can step into-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: My understanding of Trans-European Transport Networks, TEN-T, is that the fund was meant to drop money all over the place for everybody, but is there any money for the comprehensive network?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: One can obtain funding for a study. If one is undertaking rail and road projects to connect to a place such as Derry, one has to join two countries together.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: It is difficult to give a short answer to this question.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): Ms Hanlon should try to be as brief as she can.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: There are various levels of funding. Inclusion in the comprehensive or core network does not automatically lead to the giving of money, but it does mean that one can then compete in funding calls. One still has to compete with projects all across Europe.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): Will Ms Hanlon provide the committee with a more detailed update on this aspect?

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: We will ask our colleagues who do that work to do so.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: There is one thing-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I am moving on.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: One day I asked the Department what I thought was a simple question. I asked how much EU money had been funnelled through the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport for road and rail transport projects in the period from 2000 to 2010. Instead of giving me the answer, I was referred to every agency within the Department’s remit, all of which give the answer in different ways. I now have to sit down and spend a week trying to put all the stuff together. Is it possible to find out how much money was channelled through the Department from the European Union for road and rail infrastructure projects in the period from 2000 to 2010?

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: I will give a short answer which might help to explain why there was such a complicated reply. If we are undertaking projects, we fund them up-front from the Exchequer and apply for EU funding afterwards. One can obtain approval for the allocation of EU funding, but one would not hang on in waiting for it.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: With due respect-----

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): No interruptions, please.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: The money goes from the Exchequer through the Department’s Vote to our agencies to build whatever they have been authorised to build. As they build, pay contractors or people who undertake the project, they fill in claim forms and send them to the European Union and the money comes through in due course. As they have already been funded from the Exchequer through the Department’s Vote, the funds typically flow back into the Exchequer. They do not
necessarily flow through the Department. That is what happens in the main, with a small number of exceptions.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: My experience of seeking EU funds includes seeking funds under the LEADER programme, for example. Exactly as Ms Hanlon says, money is given to the LEADER group and money comes back from the European Union when claims are made every quarter or six months. One then has at the bottom of the Estimate appropriations-in-aid. I could have received appropriations-in-aid, but there were other things thrown in which were not EU moneys and I could not desegregate them. Surely all of the EU payments came back into the Department as appropriations-in-aid.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon**: Not any more. On the whole, that approach has been changed. As far as I recall, the money tends to go to the central Exchequer, rather than through the Department.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: Does the Exchequer not give it back to the Department as appropriations-in-aid?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon**: I do not think that happens any more.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: Certainly in rural Ireland.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon**: A number of years ago the flow of funding was simplified to streamline the process.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: Then-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey)**: I am closing the discussion on this item.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: This is important. I need to know. Is Ms Hanlon saying the Department of Finance could tell me? Will she find out for me?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon**: It would certainly know the aggregate figures, but I do not know if it divides them.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: I only wanted an aggregate figure.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey)**: We are moving on. I am trying to focus on specific questions.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív**: This is relevant.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey)**: I know it is and we will come back to it. Senator Dolan asked some questions. If the officials respond to them, we will be satisfied.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle**: Senator Dolan asked about the advance notice period in travelling on public transport. On DART services the notice period has been reduced from 24 hours to four. It will be rolled out on the Maynooth line and may already be in place. It will be rolled out on the northern line shortly.

**Senator John Dolan**: When people give notice, it should be as rare as hen’s teeth that it does not work for them, but often that is not what happens, which is unacceptable.
Mr. Kevin Doyle: We are assessing with Irish Rail how the pilot scheme was run and if there are issues, we encourage people to contact the company and us. If the Senator has any evidence that people have not-----

Senator John Dolan: My point is that people with disabilities should routinely not have to make complaints about something that they have been promised will happen. It sticks in their craw that they have to give a day’s or four hours’ notice. There is no excuse for it not working every time. Who will crack the whip with the public companies? To say it comes back to the disabled person is like saying it is up to an individual to keep complaining every time it does not work. The public system has picked the required number of hours, whether it be 24 or four. We have not picked it and would pick zero. We would rock up and get on the bus or train just like anyone else. The public system has put in place that backstop.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I understand specific agencies or providers are responsible. Is there an evaluation of the service, whether rail or bus, provided for vulnerable groups? I include the elderly, the disabled and the young. Is there an evaluation of the service levels provided? If there is, what are the actions taken following the evaluation to deal with the problems identified by the Senator? It is a pertinent point which the officials should take on board.

Ms Deirdre Hanlon: The NTA has contracts in place with the service providers, within which it has service levels which are required to be met. I am not familiar with the details of the contracts and do not know whether these items are part of these service levels, but it is something about which we could have a useful discussion with the NTA.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): That would be helpful. We need to prioritise that evaluation of the service provided. The Senator is raising an important point.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I propose that we decide that within three months, if all outstanding issues have not been resolved, and if they are willing, officials from the Department come back and set aside a reasonable amount of time to discuss where we are.

Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I am sure the officials are always willing to come back to the committee to revisit some of the issues to see whether progress has been made. That is within our remit.

It has been a long session in which we have covered a lot of ground. There have been valuable insights given and issues identified which are of concern to members. We hope the officials will take them on board in their various engagements with service providers. We can come back to them again in the future.

I thank the officials for giving of their time and their patience. I know that we have run late, but it is an important engagement on where we are going with policy on access to public transport in the regions and rural areas. As a committee, we will continue to engage on it with various stakeholders.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Safe home. If any of the officials takes the Luas towards Sandyford, he or she remember that the line was closed. I was on a train on it the week before it closed. It was closed because it was said the service would never be viable. It is now the busiest railway line in the country. Those who are trying to butcher the western rail corridor should remember that.
Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey): I again thank the officials and wish them a safe journey home.

I propose that the committee now go into private session to conclude some business. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 10 p.m. and adjourned at 10.05 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 14 November 2018.
Flooding at Ballycar on the Galway-Limerick Railway and Investment in Heavy Rail: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: I welcome our guests witnesses and thank those who have travelled at a time when the country is experiencing the effects of Storm Diana. Before the committee are: from Geological Survey Ireland, Mr. Koen Verbruggen, director, and Dr. Ted McCormack, groundwater flood programme; from the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Mr. John Fitzgerald, principal; from Clare County Council, Ms Carmel Kirby, director of physical development, and Mr. John Leahy, senior engineer, roads and transportation department; from Iarnród Éireann, Mr. Jim Meade, chief executive, and Mr. Colin Hedderly, senior track and structures engineer; and from the Office of Public Works, OPW, Mr. John Sydenham, commissioner, Mr. Liam Basquille, principal, engineering services, and Mr. Cian O’Donaill, south-west regional engineer.

I remind witnesses, staff, members and those in the Gallery to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode. They interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for parliamentary reporters to report the meeting as well as affecting the television broadcast and web stream.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity.
by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the longstanding parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. It is proposed that any submissions, opening statements or other documents supplied by the witnesses to the committee be published on the committee website.

On 23 May 2018, the committee held a public meeting on the question of flooding at Ballycar on the Galway-Limerick railway and investment in heavy rail. The committee has also engaged with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Transport Authority. Six months later, we resume our hearing and we have invited the same organisation back to update the committee on progress in mitigating the flood risk at Ballycar.

The first railway in Ireland and the first suburban railway in the world was opened in 1834 and is still in use today, 184 year later. That is the Dublin to Dún Laoghaire line. It seems that we need to take a very long view when considering investment in heavy rail, which is capital expenditure with a long-term payback. Members of this committee have spoken of the closure of railway lines in the Border regions including Donegal, Monaghan and Cavan, the Derry route, which gave a fast connection between Derry and Dublin, and the Sligo-Leitrim railway, some of which were closed because of the policy of the then Government of Northern Ireland. This made the remaining sections of the railway line in the South non-viable. Members also spoke of the closure of the west Cork railway, which makes it difficult to travel from west Cork to Dublin and back in one day.

It is not all bad news, however. Many railway lines were closed only to be reopened years later. The Harcourt Street line was closed in 1958; a member of this committee travelled on one of the last trains on that line. Part of the line with a cross-city link to the Broadstone line, which closed to passengers in 1936, is now one of the busiest in the country. The lines from Cork to Midleton and Dublin to Dunboyne, the Phoenix Park tunnel and the Galway-Limerick line were all reopened in recent years. However, the Galway-Limerick line is regularly closed due to groundwater flooding at Ballycar. These line closures are all too frequent and cast doubt on the viability of further investment in the western rail corridor. This means the certainty of supply that rail passengers expect is simply not there. I hope the organisations here today will indicate their willingness to work together to mitigate this flood risk at Ballycar. The flood mitigation measures, which could reduce the flood risk to an acceptable level, would be to lower the water level by draining Ballycar Lough to the sea via Lough Gash, to raise the railway, or a combination of the two. The committee would also like to receive an update on heavy rail investment plans. The Geological Survey of Ireland, GSI, is the lead agency for groundwater flooding, which occurs in karst, or limestone, areas. I look forward to hearing what progress is being made with the study on this flooding which occurs in the west of Ireland, in south Galway, areas of Mayo, Roscommon and the neighbouring counties and, in particular, in Ballycar, County Clare.

I call Mr. Koen Verbruggen to make his opening statement on behalf of the Geological Survey of Ireland, GSI.

Mr. Koen Verbruggen: I have sent the committee an update on the statement we provided in May. I will not read through the full statement but will focus on the main update.
As the Chairman noted, we have taken a lead on groundwater flooding because of our work on the groundwater programme which prior to this had focused on groundwater pollution and protection issues. We are working a great deal with the EPA and Irish Water.

In 2016, A Programme for a Partnership Government, under the area of climate change and flooding, contained an objective on turlough systems, namely, that the Government "will provide resources to the OPW to commission studies into individual problematic (prone to flooding) Turlough systems, if requested by a local authority or another relevant State agency." That is what our programme has been designed to do.

The GSI has progressed this to the point of near completion of the first phase. In the first quarter of 2019, GSI will deliver groundwater flood maps to the OPW as required under second implementation cycle of the EU Floods Directive. That has involved instrumenting up to 60 of these turloughs. We have had data loggers and have also developed a methodology for studying them which uses the European Space Agency’s Copernicus Programme data which enables us to look back at the historical record and create stage maps to display how they have responded. They are quite complex as they behave quite differently to river flooding which is much more flashy and responds indirectly to groundwater.

On the monitoring side, we now have realtime data from more than 12 of these turloughs and from the flood mapping. The mapping for the whole country will be complete by the first quarter of 2019.

On the flooding at Ballycar, the turlough is included in the GSI’s flood mapping operations using the Copernicus Programme data which we demonstrated to the committee on the last occasion with slides. The turlough, as well as some other flood prone areas along the western railway corridor, is being monitored using Copernicus satellite imagery. This monitoring technique is still being developed but preliminary data for Ballycar turlough is available to the OPW and Irish Rail.

We have been invited to take part in the technical subcommittee meetings regarding the flooding and will attend the next meeting on 17 December in Ennis when we will provide an update and ensure that the data is being used.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Verbruggen for his very informative presentation, his engagement in the process and for taking the issue very seriously. The National Parks and Wildlife Service can address the risk to special areas of conservation downstream from Ballycar around Lough Gash and Newmarket-on-Fergus, down to the River Fergus and the Shannon Estuary. I call on Mr. John Fitzgerald to make his opening statement on behalf of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Mr. John Fitzgerald: I thank the committee for its invitation to attend today. Our Department has not had a central involvement in this project to date. At the committee’s meeting last May, I set out some general background for information on how certain sites of nature conservation value are protected, the role of our Minister in nature conservation and as a prescribed body under planning law and also in relation to environmental assessments. While our Department does not have a decision-making role in the technical funding and planning consents in relation to any project that might emerge in respect of Ballycar, I wish to reiterate that the Department fully appreciates the importance of this issue and is more than willing to work with the proponents of any project that may emerge in a constructive fashion on this matter.
Chairman: I understand that there is a joint statement by Clare County Council, the Office of Public Works and Irish Rail, which is responsible for maintenance of the railway. I now call on Ms Carmel Kirby to make her opening statement on behalf of three bodies.

Ms Carmel Kirby: It was agreed by the three agencies concerned, Iarnród Éireann, Clare County Council and the Office of Public Works, OPW, to deliver a joint opening statement to the committee. We welcome the opportunity to update the committee on developments since May 2018 when we previously attended.

Clare County Council was requested at that time to facilitate a process and to reconvene as a steering group to move the issue towards a resolution. Clare County Council engaged with Iarnród Éireann and the Office of Public Works over the summer months, with a formal meeting early in October and a further meeting earlier this month. The latter was attended by Clare County Council, Iarnród Éireann, OPW, Shannon Group and RPS, the consultants to Iarnród Éireann.

RPS has been engaged by Iarnród Éireann to develop a feasible engineering solution to the flooding issue at Ballycar. The consultants have been given a more wide-ranging and a broader remit to include consideration of the downstream impacts and also to develop measures to mitigate against any potential impacts in the Shannon area of any proposed solution. A technical subgroup has been set up to liaise directly with the consultants, and technical input will also be provided by the Geological Survey of Ireland.

The updated report will take account of the following, as necessary: the Shannon CFRAM study, including the Shannon Estuary North and Mal Bay River basin district hydrological study and the flood risk management plan for river basin, 27/28, Shannon Estuary North and Mal Bay; recently completed and ongoing schemes, including Ennis - The River Fergus Lower (Ennis) certified drainage scheme; the Ennis South flood relief scheme and other arterial drainage schemes and drainage districts; and any Land Commission embankments that may be in the study area.

Further meetings have been scheduled for December 2018 and February 2019. RPS is to finalise its new report and present proposals to Iarnród Éireann in the spring of 2019. From this report, the most appropriate technically feasible option to address the Ballycar flooding issue will be considered by the bodies.

This represents the joint position of the three bodies. We are committed to the concept of sustainability and to the delivery of optimum service of key strategic infrastructure and will continue to work together to resolve the problem on the rail line at Ballycar.

Chairman: I thank Ms Kirby. I welcome the progress made and the attendance of officials from the various agencies. The progress shows what can be done when State organisations work together. There is more to be done on this issue but it is satisfying to see that dates are set, meetings have been held, authorities are taking responsibility and a solution is in sight. It is important the solution is identified, funded and placed on a plan to be implemented.

I understand that a draft regional strategy is under way. It is an important document and it is important that this key improvement in the infrastructure between Ennis and Limerick is resolved.
and identified in the document and that funding is forthcoming. Will Ms Kirby confirm if Clare County Council has made a submission on this or is it its intention to do so? What is her broad view on this?

We are beginning to see momentum on this. I commend the members of the committee who have supported me, as Chairman, in shining a light on the issue and in seeking that a plan be put in place for its resolution. Given that we have made some progress, it is important we keep that momentum going. The working group has been formed and it is actively engaged. A consultant has been appointed and is putting together a report which, ultimately, will come up with a recommendation and a solution. That working group will report back to this committee once that report is published. I ask for the support of members in this regard.

Will Ms Kirby address the question I asked on the draft regional spatial and economic strategy, RESES? If other members have any comments to make, they may do so.

**Ms Carmel Kirby:** My understanding is that the draft regional spatial and economic strategy is due for public consultation at the end of next week, that it includes enhancing regional accessibility through upgrading transport infrastructure and that the transport investment priorities for the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area set out in this RESES, include the development and promotion of existing intercity rail and commuter links between Limerick and Galway, including Ennis. It does not specifically mention the infrastructure that will be needed at Ballycar to alleviate the flooding there. Mr. Jim Meade in Iarnród Éireann might wish to comment on that by making a submission to the draft RESES when it comes out at the end of next week. Clare County Council would support a submission to the RESES on that.

**Chairman:** It would be helpful if Mr. Meade came in at this point.

**Mr. Jim Meade:** We would welcome the opportunity to look for funding through that forum. We always look at any funding streams that become available to see where we can add to our current funding stream. We will make an application, as appropriate. Once we have the correct solution, we do not mind where the funding comes from if we can solve this once and for all.

**Chairman:** Do you have anything to add to the opening statement on Irish Rail’s commitment to this project?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** Irish Rail is fully committed to this project. It has been there for a long time. If there was an easy solution, it would have been done a long time ago. We are very happy to be part of the group. There is a positivity about the group to look for a solution to this. It is not Clare County Council’s, OPW’s or Irish Rail’s problem. It is our problem and that is the way we are approaching this. We will give it whatever resources it needs to get to the end result.

**Chairman:** I invite other members to contribute. Does Deputy Kenny wish to come in?

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I thank the group for its work on this. It is clear that it is going to be a combination of raising the rail line in some places and drainage, with some means of mitigating against the flooding in the other areas. Is there any idea of the costs involved or the breakdown as to where this will end up? One of the things that always jumps out at us in these things is if there is going to be a very high cost. What are the expected costs?
Mr. Jim Meade: We have just given the revised terms of reference to RPS. It is working out the scope of work with the technical team, which has a member from each of the four groups on it. The plan is to first work out the solutions and to understand what is a permanent solution and then start costing those solutions. At that stage we will review what is the most viable option. We do not want to limit the thought process around it by saying one has only €1 million, €10 million or €100 million to deal with this. Initially, we want to know what the correct solution is.

Deputy Martin Kenny: In the context of the making an application for funding, this might put the group in a difficult position.

Mr. Jim Meade: RPS is going to move quite quickly. We have looked for our report and the steering group set a date for February. Is that correct Ms Kirby?

Ms Carmel Kirby: Yes.

Mr. Jim Meade: We would expect indicative numbers back from it by then. We have not looked at the RESES report yet, but we would probably still be within the timeline of that to make a submission.

Deputy Martin Kenny: That would be good.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the group for its presentation and I have a number of questions. Mr. Verbruggen said he was going to do analysis. Has the analysis started? Is it nearly done? How long will it take? Is there agreement on the scope of work RPS is doing? Is it just to deal with the railway or with flooding as a wider issue? I know he is using the framework that has been done. At the end of the day, it is good to see a joint statement from the group and that a number of the group may be starting work together. In the context of whether there will be a requirement for planning, when will RPS be finished? In fairness to the OPW and the Minister of State, Deputy Moran, have been pro-active in trying to solve problems. Will the cost-benefit analysis that bogs down so many schemes be a problem? What I am trying to get to the nub of the issue here, and Mr. Meade said he is taking responsibility. If it means raising the line, will that be done with Iarnród Éireann’s funds or where will this funding be coming from? We are six months on and it is good to see the group members talking to each other but diggers on the railway line or on the ground are needed to get work done. When will work start to the job done? RPS, with which I have worked on bogs around the country, is only getting guidance now and it is a slow procedure. Are we going to be here this time next year wondering about this with the line flooded? I want to see dates, times and whether the money is going to be brought forward, regardless of who has to cough up with the plan.

Geological Survey of Ireland, GSI, has done monitoring in different places, but some of this monitoring goes on for two to three years. Does GSI have the data it needs now or is it starting to put it together now? Perhaps I picked Mr. Verbruggen up wrong.

Chairman: There are a number of questions there for OPW, Geological Survey of Ireland and Irish Rail.

Mr. Koen Verbruggen: As the Deputy knows from the work we are doing in Roscommon, this programme was scheduled to run for three years. The date of delivery to have those flood maps available is the first quarter of next year. That is on track. We have prioritised the Ballycar area after
this, so we will have those flood maps available for the December meeting. That analysis has been--

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** When will they be ready?

**Mr. Koen Verbruggen:** They will be available for the December meeting.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** This December. GSI will have all the data for December.

**Mr. Koen Verbruggen:** This is the data for Ballycar.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** That is good.

**Chairman:** I call on the OPW and Irish Rail to deal with the Deputy's points?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** There are a couple of questions to answer there. RPS, as the Deputy will be aware, did a study a few years ago and has a lot of data collected on this already. We have just expended some of its terms of reference. It is on the case as we speak. I would envisage that it would have the job completed in six months. That is our target timeline.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Mr. Fitzgerald may be able to come in on this. Obviously, there will be screening out and appropriate EIAs. Could Mr. Fitzgerald let me know if there is any word of IROPI stuff or anything like that? Are there any problems like that ahead of it?

**Mr. John Fitzgerald:** It is very hard to comment in the abstract without knowing what the engineering solutions that arise might be. We are happy to get involved with the proponents at the early stages to help provide information that would be needed by them and to give guidance in relation to assessments. We are happy to get involved in any discussions. In the absence of any proposals, it is difficult to comment on what might be the effect on Natura 2000 sites.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** We are waiting for the proposals. When do our guests envisage having a solution? Will it be February, March or April when funding is sought and the problem is solved?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** As already stated, we expect RPS to have finished its work in six months.

That is when we will have the solution and when we will start applying for funding. Iarnród Éireann does not have the funding to do this and it is not provided for in our current five-year financial planning. This will be supplementary funding from an area yet to be decided. We will go back to the Department and ultimately the Government with this proposal and then funding will be provided. We do not have funding for this at present.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Can Mr. Meade outline the effect of the stoppages? There have not been services for five or six weeks at a time. Any service, including the DART, is the subject of occasional problems. There are leaves on the line, all sorts of things break down, physical accidents occur and so on. We all know that any transport system has the odd one-day stoppage. It is an inconvenience but it does not affect passenger trends. Has Iarnród Éireann done any quantification of the effect of stoppages on passenger trends? In other words, do people return in the same numbers after the long stoppages or does Iarnród Éireann lose passengers in the long term? Does it take time to build up confidence in the system when these long outages take place?
My second question relates to National Parks and Wildlife Service. Mr. Meade indicates that the RPS study will be done in six months. Will that include proofing with the various agencies who will have to have an input, particularly the National Parks and Wildlife Service, so that when we get the report it is a question of funding? Alternatively, will it be a question of going around the agencies to find other ecological problems with the proposed solutions and so on? That should form part of the study. I would rather wait nine months to get an answer that is comprehensive to all the agencies and is ready for application for funding.

It is amazing how humans can make life awfully complicated. We all pay tax into a central fund called the Exchequer. I cannot understand how we have created so many streams. The sources of funding are like the Nile Delta. It all starts at one point and it all goes to one place, that is, the people. There are a million little rivers, rivulets and islands for all the funding to go through. It goes to this one and to that one. I will put a simple proposal to our guests. We should look for funding from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. That is what it is there for. All these bidding wars are manna from heaven for consultants. Ultimately, all the money will come from us, the taxpayers, through the Exchequer. Perhaps the committee could suggest to the Government that it should take the simple course. If this needs to be funded it should be done through one agency that can provide the money overnight so that Iarnród Éireann can get on with the job.

I wish to comment on the investment in the wider context of this railway line. This reminds me of the argument about the piers on Inis Mór. A small island of 1,000 people has one of the busiest ports in the country. Was it justified? The answer is that we either build a pier or we do not. It costs whatever it costs. The Atlantic does not know how many people are on the island, it just knows how to send in waves. An all-weather pier that would do the job would require a certain configuration. We have had some fantastic storms since and nothing has moved in the harbour, thanks be to God. There could be extreme weather events anywhere in the system. The same problem that was mentioned by our guests exists at Bray Head in Wicklow. It is a constant problem there. Protecting from a one-in-1,000 or one-in-10,000 storm situation will take whatever it takes and we should not be shy about spending money. Iarnród Éireann is lucky that it works on land. Things would be very different if it had to operate in the ocean.

I would not like to see us spend the money and not have the service. That relates to another issue in Iarnród Éireann's port. I am always a little puzzled by this "intercity" tag. I mentioned this to our guests previously. We keep talking about the trains from Dublin to Galway, from Dublin to Sligo and from Limerick to Galway as intercity. I would hazard a guess that the customers on some of those lines are like passengers travelling from Greystones to Dublin. A large number of them are commuters. The big growth is accounted for by commuters because a commuter tends to commute ten times a week, five times in each direction. The intercity traveller, as we conventionally understood matters, went to a city perhaps once every three weeks or once a month. Comparing one with the other, we find a 20:1 ratio in some cases.

A doubling of the track from Athenry to Galway was mentioned. Looking at the passenger figures on the Athenry to Galway------

**Chairman:** If I can come in here------
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is in the-----

Chairman: I know it is. I would like to deal with the Ballycar issue first. Then there is the issue of opportunities for investment in heavy rail-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Can I finish my point?

Chairman: Yes.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Having spent €50 million, €100 million or whatever, we then need to ensure that the line is heavily used. The numbers are growing and I thank Iarnród Éireann for that. However, we need to discuss this. I see the issue coming. I see it in discussions of rural broadband. The cost in rural Ireland is always the big issue. The questions are how much it is going to cost and whether we can afford it in rural Ireland. The answer to that is that if a heap of people travel on the line, which we can achieve by pursuing other infrastructural developments in tandem, the line will be well-used and will perform much better in a cost-benefit analysis. That is what I am saying. It is very important to Ballycar that there are a lot of passengers.

Chairman: That is a point well made. Before the officials answer Deputy Ó Cuív, I note that Deputy Fitzmaurice posed a question to the OPW and wants a response. Would the Deputy like to remind the representatives from OPW of his question?

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I refer to the cost-benefit analysis. We must be careful to note that a bigger scheme could alleviate flooding for farmland as well as the railway track. Who is the OPW working with on it? Is the OPW to any applications on this? Will it take into account the number of passengers and the value of the line if an application is submitted?

Mr. John Sydenham: The issue of cost-benefit analysis has been mentioned by previous speakers. We are in the process of developing the scheme. As members may be aware, it is a broader scheme. The original scheme involved raising the railway line. There were questions around whether that would solve the problem completely. The general consensus was that it would alleviate but not completely eradicate the issue. RPS is now looking at a broader scheme which will potentially have a far better impact, keeping the railway line in that catchment area open for longer. Due to the fact that it is a larger scheme, we logically conclude that it will be more expensive. Having said that, we have not seen the final scheme. The technical viability of the scheme is one thing, the cost is something else. Those two things can be determined reasonably quickly and are quite clear. Issues arise when the benefits are considered. Mention has been made of the rail link’s importance to the region, the spatial strategy and all of that. I do not wish to dictate how this is looked at, but it is important that all benefits, tangible and intangible, are looked at very carefully. The gap between the costs and the benefits will have to be taken in to consideration. That is the answer to Deputy Fitzmaurice’s question. We have to look seriously at the cost and the benefits. There is an issue if the gap between the two is substantial. As has been said, we are spending taxpayers’ money and we have to look very carefully at economic viability. That said, we will look at anything with an open mind and I can give that assurance. The agencies are working very well together and it is important we look at all aspects of the costs and benefits of this and then make decisions on how it will be taken forward.
Chairman: Deputy Ó Cuív made a number of points. He directed one to Irish Rail on the number of passengers lost through rail line closure. He made a very good point on whether all aspects of the proposal will be looked at by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Will the proposal be shovel-ready and ready for funding? He also made a point on the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport funding the entire scheme and I would support this. I would support anyone who can pay for it doing so.

Mr. Jim Meade: It is quite correct that when the flooding occurs, it is not just for a few days. As we all know, without going into the history of what and why, the shortest flooding was seven weeks and it has been for up to 15 or 16 weeks in some cases. The numbers trend on the line is up, which is positive. People are migrating towards public transport and we see this. When the line is closed, we put on bus services and alternative options are sought by the travelling public. When the line reopens in April or May it could take until autumn before the numbers come back fully because people do not change overnight. It could be having an impact on the overall numbers because people must keep changing. This was the point being made. If we trend it over several years, the numbers are rising. Were there no disruption to the line, it is a fair assessment that the numbers might rise even further because it would be people’s normal mode of travel. The substitutions are not as slick or clean as the train because people are chopping and changing between buses and trains.

When the report is finished it will be with the agreement of everybody. There will be nobody outside the tent stating it does not agree with it. That is our plan and it is being led by Clare County Council to ensure we all sign off on it, subject to any planning process the solution may require. When we come back with a solution to get the funding we may have to go into a planning process.

I fully welcome the support of the committee to help us get funding. We do not mind who gives it to us. We are not fussy. Once we get funding and if the committee can help us achieve it, we will take it with open arms.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee again for what has been a productive meeting. It is important that the committee is kept briefed on progress and I ask the witnesses to do this through the clerk.

We need to hold on to Mr. Meade and his team from Irish Rail for the next section of the meeting on opportunities for investment in heavy rail and I invite him to make his opening statement on this topic.

Mr. Jim Meade: As I advised the committee in May, while the national development plan details funding of €2 billion for the DART expansion programme, this refers to the physical location of these works. The benefits of the programme are national and network-wide, giving more capacity for more services on all lines through improved infrastructure and a fleet expansion of almost 50%.

Rather than reiterate the scope of that investment, I will advise the committee of developments in the meantime and how these will benefit the national heavy rail services we provide. Most importantly, the continuing improvement in our funding situation means that we may approach the steady-state funding scenario targeted under the national development plan for 2021 two years
ahead of schedule in 2019. This means we will be properly funded to maintain our network and fleet, protecting what are vital national infrastructure assets.

We will introduce an additional Dublin to Sligo service in each direction on weekdays from Monday, 10 December, which we hope will mark the beginning of a period of intercity frequency expansion. Further service expansion on the Sligo and Westport lines would be desirable, to hourly services between Dublin and Sligo and two-hourly services between Dublin and Westport. Fleet investment under the national development plan will free up some of our intercity fleet being used in the Dublin commuter area to assist in service expansion. However, further study would be required on infrastructure requirements to facilitate such frequent services.

On the Rosslare to Dublin line, there may be scope for additional daytime services to be modelled within the constraints of the existing intensively operated DART service. Strategically, we are also working with local authorities on the route to address the medium to long-term strategies required to protect the line from coastal erosion, with 45% of the route in a coastal or estuarine environment.

Iarnród Éireann also has an ambition to increase frequency of Galway to Dublin services to hourly, and the Galway transport strategy of the National Transport Authority and the Galway local authorities targets that rail services will be increased in frequency, subject to passenger demand and usage. This would encompass enhanced frequency of Galway to Athenry commuter services. Double-tracking would facilitate this, with an interim measure of a passing loop and second platform at Oranmore to give a commuter frequency of up to every 15 minutes.

This leads me to other service enhancements possible in our other regional cities. The National Transport Authority is also preparing a draft Cork transport study, which will include additional stations to be provided in tandem with development, and other measures to enhance frequency of services. We have been working closely with Waterford City and County Council on the plans for the Waterford north quays, which incorporate a relocation of Plunkett Station as part of an integrated transport hub. We are progressing signalling and station layout designs to accommodate increased service frequency, and look forward to being part of an exciting development for the city and the region and public transport services for both.

At Limerick, the transportation hub is targeted for completion, with rail services from Galway, Ennis, Limerick Junction and Dublin feeding into this. We are assisting the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the preparation of a feasibility report and business study on the development of the Athenry to Claremorris line. We are working to terms of reference established by the Department. Iarnród Éireann has advertised for, and will appoint, a consultant to undertake a financial and economic appraisal. This appointment will be made, and the appraisal will commence, by early January. The study will take 20 weeks. Thereafter, this will be subject to a peer review by the Department to complete the overall study.

Work on our new national control centre has commenced. This will see a new operations control and customer information centre established in Heuston Station to cover the entire network, and through modern technology will ensure we have a control centre equipped to enhance service performance and cater for the expansions in services planned over the coming decade and beyond.
We are also preparing plans for a comprehensive renewal of track on the Cork to Dublin route over the coming years. The objectives of the track relaying programme is to renew up to 220 miles of track so as to provide a reliable and sustainable track infrastructure to allow optimisation of the line speeds with an associated reduction in journey times where possible. This will further enhance Cork, Kerry, Limerick and west of Ireland services. A summary of the main benefits of this track relaying programme are more reliable track infrastructure, with an optimisation of line speeds to 100 mph to facilitate reductions in journey times; replacement of aged infrastructure with a minimum life cycle of 30 years; future-proofing for anticipated increased utilisation of the route in the short, medium and longer terms; and improved, sustainable and reliable infrastructure for our customers on a key commuter and intercity route.

This approach will provide a model for further asset renewal and journey time improvement around our network. This is a summary of our plans for the intercity and regional cities network, separate to the critical requirements in the greater Dublin area commuter belt. I am happy to answer any questions the Chairman and committee members may have.

Chairman: I am sorry to harp on about the Limerick to Ennis line, but it is very important. There is a possibility that a spur to Shannon Airport could be established. A feasibility study was carried out a number of years ago. Could the issue be revisited? Would it be possible to carry out another feasibility study? Such a line would make the mid-west region more attractive. Connectivity to Shannon Airport would open up County Galway and the entire mid-west, including Limerick. It is something that should be considered. Perhaps Mr. Meade might comment on it. At the last meeting I recall him making the comment that there were plans to increase the frequency of services between Ennis and Limerick. That could be done by having a passing point somewhere along the track. Have such plans been advanced?

What will the development of a transportation hub in Limerick mean? Mr. Meade has included Galway, Ennis and Cork. Will he explain what it means and indicate how advanced the plans are?

My colleague Senator Coffey cannot be here, but he has asked me to ask a question about the north quays in Waterford and the proposal to relocate Plunkett Station there. He welcomes the advancement of that project, but how far along the road is it? There has been much engagement between the city and county councils which he says is very encouraging. He understands an integrated transport hub will be created at that location. Will Mr. Meade expand on the issue?

Mr. Jim Meade: A study was carried out in the early 2000s of the feasibility of providing a spur to Shannon Airport. The result of the study identified a preferred route and Clare County Council was looked to to preserve the route in the long term as it was considered too expensive to provide the spur at the time. We can take the idea back to the Department. A study of the proposal is not a part of the current funding profile we have been given, but I am happy to raise the matter again with the Department to see if it can take another look at it.

Chairman: Is there a big difference between heavy and light rail? Would a light rail, Luas-type model be cheaper?

Mr. Jim Meade: It would potentially be cheaper. It would involve a different study because a light rail system could not be run on heavy rail infrastructure.
**Chairman:** I am thinking of ways in which it could be linked.

**Mr. Jim Meade:** It could be done. A light rail system would be less expensive, but I do not have a feel for the scale of such a project. I am, however, happy to take the idea back and discuss it with the Department. That type of study is not included in the current national development plan.

On the second question, we have not moved any further in identifying a location for a passing loop between Ennis and Limerick. It would be located on either side of or in Sixmilebridge. It is part of a long-term plan, but we have not advanced it since we last spoke about it.

When one arrives in Limerick, it is a three or four minute walk to the city centre. A three phase transportation hub plan was put in place for the site. Phase one included the front of the station, which is now the plaza. It has turned out very well. However, the bus station is not big enough. As part of the plan, a new bus station was to be built where all modes of transport would be integrated coherently. If we had a better bus station that was used more widely, people could come from north Kerry, County Clare and Cork, with which there could be direct links. It would also mean that there would be plenty of car parking spaces, as well as space for buses and even bikes. It would be a proper integrated transportation hub. We are supporting Bus Éireann in looking for funding to finish the bus station.

To respond to the reference to the quays in Waterford, I will have to double check and revert to the committee with correct dates, but the plan is moving well. The project was approved by the board recently. From memory, I believe the planning application might have been approved at this stage. I will check the exact point at which the project is at and formally respond to the committee. It is progressing well and there have been no roadblocks so far.

**Deputy Tony McLoughlin:** I welcome Mr. Meade. I am a Deputy for the constituency of Leitrim-Sligo and welcomed the announcement that more services were being added between Dublin and Sligo route from 10 December. The biggest issue I can see is with line infrastructure. What investment is to be made in Sligo in the coming years? One of my biggest complaints is the lack of carriages. It is a major issue. There is a lack of carriages every weekend and on most days of the week. The condition of some carriages is poor and would not be acceptable on the Dublin-Cork or Dublin-Belfast routes. The Sligo-Dublin service is the poor relation, which I do not think is acceptable. Mr. Meade has said the national development plan is ahead of schedule. Given the amount of money that has been invested in Iarnród Éireann, it is vitally important that serious consideration be given to the area I represent and the commuters who use the line. They are entitled to a rail service which is as good as that provided in any other part of the country, but they are not receiving it. Some commuters have to stand between Dublin and Carrick-on-Shannon, Longford and sometimes all the way to Sligo. The same is true in the opposite direction, which is not acceptable or good enough in this day and age. I am not a member of the committee, but I was told that Mr. Meade would be appearing before it this morning. I have read his report. It is vitally important that he realise he has an obligation and a responsibility to the people who use the train service on the railway line between Sligo and Dublin, including on a daily basis. The number of services on the line has increased, but we are receiving a second rate service, which is not acceptable. It takes three hours to travel from Sligo to Dublin. Is there any plan for investment? Mr. Meade has spoken about upgrading railway lines and increasing the speeds achievable in other
areas, which would reduce journey times. Are there plans to do so at our end of the country? The carriages used on the line have been called “reject carriages”. I have been a public representative for the area for many years, with Deputy Martin Kenny and other Members of the Oireachtas who are very annoyed, as are local councillors. The problem has been highlighted on numerous occasions and Mr. Meade and his officials have been made aware of it. Will he confirm that he will look at the issue very seriously, upgrade services and invest money in the line? We are entitled to it. People constantly say to me it would not be tolerated on the Dublin-Cork and Dublin-Belfast lines, or on any other line in the country for that matter. We are the poor relations. Mr. Meade must take responsibility. He should provide us with an update and tell us what he proposes to do in the next few years about the issue.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank Mr. Meade for his submission. Several Deputies have spoken recently about the train station at Castlerea. Will Mr. Meade ensure refurbishment works are carried out in order that it is presentable and attractive to those who use it? Some train stations are not being maintained very well.

Mr. Meade spoke about high-speed trains. Will 100 km/h be the maximum speed on the high-speed trains? When will that be achieved? As Deputy McLoughlin stated, people have to stand when using the train. Additional carriages are needed. When will that be provided for the Sligo, Westport and Galway trains?

I welcome Iarnród Éireann’s announcement on more services. I have been raising that issue for a long time.

I have another question on which I ask Mr. Meade to be clear in his answer. Has the western rail corridor review, which Iarnród Éireann is supposed to be doing, commenced, and when will it be finished?

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I will be mainly parochial in my remarks but before I deal with the parish, I refer to one project that is complementary to the project mentioned by the Chairman. I cannot get my head around the fact that the Government is not proceeding with it. It is to connect Dublin Airport to the main rail system. It would allow mainline trains using the tunnel to go north, south, east and west. It would also allow for a connection to the entire rail system, including the DART. Will the witness give us a short brief on the reason we are not doing that? It seems to be a no-brainer in terms of a project that would cost hundreds of millions of euro as against billions of euro for a much longer project, namely, metro north, which I am not against? Why are we not connecting the entire rail system? When we arrive in any airport abroad the first thing we do is look to see if there is a train into the city centre and if there is, we go to the train station where very good services are provided.

On the west of Ireland service to Galway, I understand what Mr. Meade is saying about trains to Galway leaving on an hourly basis. An all-day service into the late evening is needed but to go back to my hobby horse, the commuters want to get into town some time between 8 a.m. and 9.30 a.m., therefore, the trains need to arrive at a much increased frequency at that time. The requirement is more spread out in the evening, with a train leaving from 4.30 p.m. and 7 p.m. People do not
always leave town after work so the requirement is more spread out late into the evening, therefore, late evening trains are required, as we have in Dublin up to 11.30 p.m.

First, we cannot magic resources out of thin air so has Iarnród Éireann studied the potential of using existing resources to facilitate more trains at busy commuter times in and out of Galway? In terms of an obvious one, based on the population of the town we know there is a disproportionate number of commuters from Athenry to Galway. It seems to me that is based on frequency. Should more trains run, for example, from Limerick to Athenry where the commuter would change trains and, five minutes later, board the commuter Dublin to Galway train?

It seems it is an urgent requirement to get much more frequent trains into Galway. That would breed success, the success would breed investment and so on.

Second, in terms of the other obvious question that arises, Mr. Meade mentioned the passing loop. That would be a good start, although his timing is optimistic. It is a 20-minute journey to Athenry. If that is divided by two, it is ten minutes. That means there would be 20-minute intervals but even that would be better than 40 minutes. That one small piece of the network would free up things. Is it being considered as a priority? Mr. Meade referred to a passing loop somewhere around Oranmore.

The other question is about the Limerick and Galway ends of that railway line. Has consideration been given to commuter trains that would have urban stops? Galway is a rapidly growing city. I understand a large number of people travel from Oranmore to Galway. That is growing rapidly and the only constraint is the frequency of the trains. Has there been any talk of Ballyloughane serving Galway Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT, or whatever? Has there been any talk of an equivalent across the river, near the university in Limerick? It also goes very near Thomond Park and the institute of technology, IT. Rather than bringing everybody into the city centre and out again, has there been a discussion whereby they could get off near the IT and get a commuter bus to the IT or to Thomond Park?

There is a new fashion in regard to transport. People do not always use their cars or the train. Most of us are multi-modal now. We love taking the train when it is convenient. How much work has been done around that area?

That leads to an inevitable conclusion. I believe that will be successful. It will open the Claremorris line. I know Iarnród Éireann want to do that but it will open despite those who have been naysayers in that regard for a long time. I believe commuter rail is the future.

Mr. Jim Meade: To reply to Deputy McLoughlin, there is no question that the trains are crowded across the network. What his constituents in Sligo are telling him is no different from what I have been told by people in Limerick, Galway, Westport and Waterford. Our numbers have grown significantly in the past three or four years in particular. They have been growing at between 6% and 7% per year, and some segmental areas have been growing much faster than that.

We do not want to start teaching history lessons to each other but it must be remembered that we have come out of ten years of no investment. We have started the process and I am happy to say that just over a week ago, the National Transport Authority, NTA, gave us the green light to start procuring fleet because we need more capacity, particularly in the morning peak. The lead time for
brand new fleet, not just for Iarnród Éireann but for the best rail companies in the world, can be up to four years. We have a plan in-house that we have taken to the NTA, which is has signed off on, to add more carriages to the intercity trains to which we keep referring. That is a slicker process for us. There are fewer issues in terms of putting them in service because we are just lengthening existing trains. We have started that process but, realistically, we will not see those trains in service until the summer of 2021.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I understood Iarnród Éireann had 40 carriages it was refurbishing. Are they on the network now?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** They are not. The cost of refurbishing them is through the roof. The timeline is the same, and it is cheaper to do this.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** What are the new trains Iarnród Éireann is buying?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** They are intercity railcars, ICRs. They are the same as the existing-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** They are diesel.

**Mr. Jim Meade:** They will be hybrid. One of the things we are doing is converting this entire fleet to hybrid over the coming years, which will give us in excess of a 30% reduction in our diesel burn. It will also allow us run through built up areas on batteries only, so we will be eliminating some noise pollution as well. It is something we signed off on in the middle of the year when we ran a couple of test trains with Rolls Royce and MTU, the suppliers. We have done all the numbers. It will be very successful. We will be able to make that entire fleet hybrid, which is the way to go.

On the issue of the carriages, I am familiar with the early services out of Sligo. The very same trains are used for the first two services out of Cork in the morning. They are Hyundai rotems. I take one of them regularly from Clare. They are the very same trains that Sligo people get on. They are not commuting on a second class fleet.

We have probably been overtaken at this stage but some years ago we had the youngest fleet in Europe. Our trains are not second class. They are very heavily subscribed at the moment. Many people-----

**Deputy Tony McLoughlin:** I am talking about the carriages that are on the line.

**Mr. Jim Meade:** It is a state-of-the-art fleet but because it is so busy, the experience of the travelling public is not good. I accept that. We have to be honest with the travelling public and tell them that it will get worse before it gets better because more people are migrating to public transport. In many cases it is the quickest way to get between two key locations. Our patronage is growing. The morning peak for us, particularly in the greater Dublin area, is very busy. We are telling people openly and honestly that we have a plan. We are working with the NTA and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, which are putting in place the funding, but there is a lead time on that. The national development plan, NDP, programme was announced only early this year or late last year and it is only in the past couple of weeks that we have gone through the process and they have given us the green light to start procuring the intermediate cars. There is a longer-term plan to put a framework order in place for 600 new vehicles over a ten-year time period. This would all add capacity as we go. I have to be clear with the Chairman and the
committee, however, that it will get a little bit worse before it gets better in that regard because we just do not have the capacity at present.

On the issue of speeds and times, now that we have reached a fully funded state it is our intention to continue to upgrade the infrastructure. That is what we have done on other routes. The Cork line is not getting priority; it just happens to have the oldest infrastructure. The Sligo, Galway and Kerry lines were all relaid in the mid-noughties and it is all new track compared with the much older track on the southern half of the Cork line. This is why the relaying programme is going that way; it is all based on the condition of the asset not on the frequency of the line.

We will work through a plan for all the branch lines to reduce the journey times. Our long-term target is to bring the Cork services to two hours and 15 minutes in duration for all services. Currently they are two hours and 30 minutes or two hours 35 minutes in duration. The target also is to bring the duration of the Galway services to two hours and those of the likes of the Westport and Sligo services nearer two hours and 30 minutes than the current three hours. That will be done through improving works on the track and increasing line speeds. The two go hand in hand. If the condition of the asset, on which the train runs, improves and we can run at faster speeds, then we will run at faster speeds. Sometimes they can trade off. If we want to bring a key business train out of Sligo, Cork or Limerick for example, the more the train stops the more it is slowed down. When stops are added the train is slowed down. We have offered services as more frequent over time. The Maynooth line is very busy from Maynooth inwards and it is about having the slots to get everyone into the city centre in Dublin. The plan is very much to keep moving with the programme and to keep reducing journey times.

As for the refurbishment of stations, we started a programme last year to go through all of our stations. We had stopped doing this during the bad years. We were able to live without keeping up some elements there but we did keep up with the safety aspects. We have started a programme and we have put more money into station refurbishment, which we term “business facilities” this year and last year. We are investing more in that area and the programme will run for the next several years.

Reference was made to the review on the western rail corridor. Consultants are appointed - they start in January - to work on a 20-week programme, which will then go to the Department for a peer review. We will stick to those timelines.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** That means it will be done by the end of May.

**Mr. Jim Meade:** Yes, give or take.

Deputy Ó Cuív asked about a line to Dublin Airport. Currently under the NDP, there is no study to look at connecting to Dublin Airport. Our plans at the moment revolve around the aspects I have just spoken of: getting more fleet, increasing the capacity of fleet, moving to electric and electrifying the Maynooth line and across to Hazelhatch, and completing the four-tracking from Clondalkin into Heuston to unlock that side of the network, thereby giving us more capacity. We do not have anything on our books to plan for Dublin Airport at present and it is not on our radar. That is the honest answer.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Mr. Meade's predecessor mentioned it to me.

Mr. Jim Meade: It is not currently. I will be honest with the Deputy that it is not on the radar. There are many things to do under the NDP. We have more plans than we have NDP funding. If any more funding becomes available we would put our hands up and say that we could do this or that to add to the service, but currently there is no plan for it.

The Deputy's comments on Oranmore are correct. We looked at that and we have modelled it. We can do a 15-minute service by putting a loop in Oranmore and a second platform. We believe that this has to be done in stages. Nobody is going to give us the funding to build a completely new railway with four or five stations at each end, but I have taken this proposal to the NTA, which is looking at the funding. If the NTA agrees that it is a good proposal it would be the first step in significantly improving the services for Galway.

With regard to the proposed Galway ring road, it will help the Connemara people going around Galway and anybody going out west but Galway city centre would still be congested. A train being able to come right into Eyre Square is the right thing to do. That plan is still with the NTA and we will support it very strongly. We believe that it would also be right to double-track the whole line because that would allow us to keep on the train, but the first step will be to do the piece in the middle at Oranmore, where one can cross trains every 15 minutes. That would then become a self-fulfilling prophecy and we could just keep extending the two lines.

Chairman: I call Deputy Smyth.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: I asked a question. In the meantime, while Iarnród Éireann is physically limited from Athenry to Galway, in order to increase frequency into Galway in order that people from Limerick and Athlone could get more trains into Galway, was consideration given to terminating trains coming from Ennis and having them transfer to commuter trains? Increasing the commuter use of that line would mean that if a person was coming from the Ennis direction, he or she would have more options to get into Galway.

Mr. Jim Meade: We have not looked at it recently. We looked at it before, as members are probably aware. Long sections of single track make it very awkward to cross trains. It is all about timing and one would have to go as far as Gort to cross the next train. Because it is a single line, the infrastructure does not suit high frequency. We can look at the changing commuter patterns but if we take out one element then we might be delaying a Dublin train, for example, or taking out another train going in the other direction that may be giving a service all the way into Limerick. It is always a balance between serving one end more than serving the other end. It is certainly something we could look at but I think the solution is to do Oranmore. That is the first big step to proving the need for double-tracking.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: When we talk about the loop and the double platform - which is the minimum solution - is Mr. Meade saying that is possible that this may happen within two, five or ten years?
Mr. Jim Meade: Two to four years. From our perspective, once we get the green light it is not a big project for us.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Mr. Meade for his presentation. I am from the Cavan-Monaghan constituency and I waited with bated breath during Mr. Meade’s opening commentary on the national plan. We heard lots about the south of the country, about the transport hub, and about Waterford, Cork and Limerick. I am delighted for those areas that are so well facilitated with rail transport. Will Mr. Meade elaborate on or disclose some of the plans he has for north of the Galway to Dublin line? I am aware that Sligo was mentioned, and I appreciate how animated and passionate Deputy McLoughlin was about that particular line. I have a keen interest in the lines and existing lines to Navan and on to Kingscourt. We have some very heavy industry in that region such as Kingspan and Gyproc, and other industries, including indigenous industry, in east Cavan and south Monaghan. This potential and capacity to grow could be expanded if open freight rail was facilitated. Perhaps Mr. Meade could talk to us about the plans for a rail line to Navan, it second phase and the progressive reopening of the existing lines to Kingscourt in east Cavan.

The constituency is very much behind the curve in transport infrastructure. We have the M3 that stops abruptly at the Cavan-Meath border and we have no motorway into Cavan town. The N2 has still not been upgraded to motorway status. Even though we have a rail line, we have no functioning rail line. I would make the case that a freight or heavy rail line should be the first phase to Navan and then on to Kingscourt. This would be hugely significant for the area. From travelling to Dublin I can see that unfortunately our motorways are now clogged up again with cars and vans, perhaps with five lads in a van, and we are back to that boom situation again where people may have to travel to work in Dublin. The region is in single digit figures with regard to the number of IDA Ireland visits to the area and we are repeatedly told by IDA Ireland that their lack of visits and ability to bring the big companies to counties such as Cavan and Monaghan is always about the lack of infrastructure. I am sure that the big companies that consider Cavan and Monaghan look for broadband, motorways and rail. Will Mr. Meade talk to us about Iarnród Éireann’s future plans for the existing Cavan-Monaghan line to Navan and potentially to Kingscourt?

Deputy Martin Kenny: I thank Mr. Meade for his presentation and its detail on all the lines.

I live in south Leitrim, and Dromod, Longford and Carrick-on-Shannon are the main areas from where people from my part of the world are heading toward Dublin. The trains, particularly at weekends, are packed. The congestion on those lines is a significant problem for many, particularly students going back to college etc. I was happy to read that Iarnród Éireann is talking about upgrading that service to an hourly service. Is there a timescale in that respect? Mr. Meade suggested the service would be two-hourly from Westport and every hour from Sligo.

In regard to freight rail, I am conscious that there are directives in preparation in Europe on freight transport, particularly road haulage, and pressure arising from the point of view of CO2 emissions etc. Having spoken to somebody in the road haulage sector, I am aware it is something about which they are quite concerned. The European perspective is that more freight needs to go by rail, which has a lower carbon footprint. Are there any such plans? Looking from the outside, it seems as though the passenger carrying network is already chock-a-block and if there is to be expansion in the area of freight, it will become difficult to meet the requirement.
In respect of the other sectors, all of the west needs to get a grip as to what we are going to do. While everything, I suppose, in every country, orientates towards the capital city, those of us in the west would like to see something happening with the western rail corridor with some sense that there will be connectivity along the western coast. What can we do in respect of that? Are there plans in that regard? Are we seriously considering that? Ultimately, if we step back from it - we spoke earlier in the meeting in private session about economic development - it is the part of the world that has the most potential because it is the least developed. I would be happy to see that Irish Rail was considering making applications for European funding to upgrade tracks to bring us to a stage where we can compete with the rest of the country in that respect. Funding is provided nationally through the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. What plans are there, particularly through the trans-European transport networks, TEN-T, avenue of funding from Europe? There seem to be few plans, certainly with regard to the north west.

**Chairman:** On the impact of Brexit on the network, particularly the Dublin-Belfast route, has Iarnród Éireann any contingency plans? Has Iarnród Éireann considered the impact the fallout from Brexit may have on the network?

Being parochial as well, has Iarnród Éireann any plans to upgrade Ennis station? There was an issue in facilitating wheelchair users. Has Iarnród Éireann advanced plans to deal with that?

On the online booking of through-tickets, for example, from Ennis to Derry, one can go into a station to pay for it, but can one do that online? Has Iarnród Éireann any plans to address that situation?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** I got a cold shiver when I thought the Chairman would ask me could I solve Brexit. I will take the questions as I received them.

In response to Deputy Smyth, the Navan-Kingscourt line has potential. It is not in any of our current planning. It is not part of the NDP. Linking it to some of Deputy Martin Kenny’s comments on freight, we have - even my predecessor had - a policy of maintaining the lines and infrastructure we have and not doing what was done in the 1960s, where we closed, abandoned lines and then lost them. Looking to the future, we recognise that many of these lines may become highly relevant. We intend to keep these lines in our ownership and as plans develop for them, be able to move forward with them.

On Kingscourt, currently, there is no plan, either with the Department or with us, and to be honest, we have not put any plan to the Department asking can we now go to Kingscourt. I am happy to start examining it. It would go into the next phase of NDP. I take the underlying point that if we do not start planning for these projects, they will never happen.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** I ask Mr. Meade to start examining that. It is most relevant, especially in light of Brexit and the pressure in terms of CO2 emissions. It would be foolish not to be thinking that far ahead. Can Mr. Meade confirm whether that line is being maintained to Kingscourt at present?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** It is being maintained out as far as Tara Mines. Beyond that, I think a section of it is.

**Deputy Niamh Smyth:** Kingscourt in Cavan?

**Mr. Jim Meade:** As for Kingscourt, I believe it is in the care and maintenance column.
Deputy Niamh Smyth: Being familiar with the line, because I drive by it most days, I suggest it is not being maintained the way it should be. The infrastructure is there and more work could be done to ensure that it is maintained. I appreciate that such matters take time and planning and funding need to be put in place. Ultimately, the most important measure that can be taken is maintenance of the line.

Mr. Jim Meade: I take the Deputy’s point.

Freight tends to be high volume and long haul. That is the model that works well for any freight operation. That said, we have some freight operations across the network.

The board has asked me to examine the future of freight. The timing is probably good in that we are now starting to ask what opportunities could we start looking at for freight in terms of what can be moved off-road due to the environmental impact. We are re-examining our freight operation.

Freight has to wash its face. We cannot subvent it or use any public funds for it. We are starting to look at freight. The board has given us the task of determining the potential for freight, what should we be targeting in the future and how should we get there, as well as examining what the capital cost of doing that would be and what capital infrastructure would be needed. It is work in progress for us. There are no real plans beyond that.

The Taoiseach spoke only a couple of weeks ago about the Atlantic corridor almost needing to grow at double the rate of Dublin if we are to be sustainable, as Deputy Martin Kenny mentioned. All we want to do, with increased services with hourly services into the regions, is to assist that and to make all that connectivity work. It is very much our plan to continue the infrastructure investment programme and to continue, as I referenced earlier to other Deputies, reducing journeying times and improving the fleet. That is the first step for us. That is the big issue at present. We need more carrying capacity and to reduce journey times but it aligns with the aspiration to develop the Atlantic corridor.

We are looking at Brexit. The Dublin-Belfast Enterprise service is important to us. That service is probably symbolic, as much as anything else, of what has happened in our country for decades. A hard Brexit would be traumatic for the service as all the drivers would lose their licences, the safety certifications for Northern Ireland Railways to operate in the Republic would be an issue and the fleet itself would be an issue. We have a working party, together with Translink, of which Northern Ireland Railways is a subset, examining how we would manage a hard Brexit. We are working on the basis of a worst-case scenario. If there is a step back from that, all the better. We have a team examining how we would manage next April if there was a hard Brexit. The focus of the team is normal service from the customers’ point of view. Our plan is very much about whatever arrangements we need to put in place in the background so that the service is not disrupted.

The Chairman asked about the upgrade of Ennis station. I mentioned to one of the other Deputies that we have put in place a seven-year plan to start reinvesting in the stations. Ennis will be part of that, as will all stations. Through-ticketing is part of our Customer First programme. If members use the website, they will probably see that it has changed. It is much better and a much more user-friendly environment. Through-ticketing will be part of the roll-out of phases 2 and 3 of that programme.
Deputy Niamh Smyth: When Mr. Meade is putting together any plans in respect of the Kingscourt line, I ask him to look at the possibility of connecting the Drogheda line, which exists and is very busy, with Navan and then, progressing from that, with Kingscourt. I ask him to feed back into the committee in respect of the plans he will be putting together to submit to the national development plan.

Mr. Jim Meade: We will do that.

Deputy Niamh Smyth: I thank Mr. Meade.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Meade and Mr. Hedderly for their attendance, co-operation and engagement with the committee. We look forward to further engagement in the future.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.10 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 12 December 2018.
Flooding at Ballycar on Galway-Limerick Railway Line and Opportunities for Investment in Heavy Rail: Discussion (Resumed)

**Chairman:** Apologies have been received from Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív. I remind committee members, staff, witnesses and those in the Visitors Gallery to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the proceedings of the meeting. They also cause problems in broadcasting the proceedings on television and radio and in web streaming.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. However, if they are directed by the Chairman to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.
It is proposed that any opening statement, submission or other document supplied by witnesses or other bodies to the committee on the topic of this meeting be published on its website after the meeting. Is that agreed? Agreed.

We will have two sessions today, the first of which is on flooding at Ballycar on the Galway-Limerick railway line. It will be followed by a discussion on opportunities for investment in heavy rail. This is the third of our series of meetings on these topics.

The Galway-Limerick railway line is regularly under water at Ballycar. The flooding is frequent and persistent and, owing to climate change, will only get worse. It is an example of brown water flooding which also occurs elsewhere in Galway and in counties such as Roscommon, Mayo and Clare. The area is slow to flood and slow to drain. When the water inflow at Ballycar is greater than the outflow after persistent heavy rain, the turlough fills up. The water outflow could be augmented by a pipe running from the turlough, bypassing the bottleneck that is the sinkhole, draining water into Lough Ash and the Shannon Estuary. However, we need to ensure we do not increase other environmental and infrastructural risks.

Mitigating the flood risk at Ballycar requires a collaborative, multi-agency approach. We must avoid a silo mentality in that regard. While the Office of Public Works is the national lead agency for pluvial, alluvial and coastal flood risk mitigation measures, Geological Survey Ireland takes the lead in investigating brown water flooding. Clare County Council is responsible for flood risk mitigation in County Clare, while Irish Rail is the rail operator and responsible for railway infrastructure. The National Parks and Wildlife Service is concerned with special areas of conservation, SACs, while the Irish Aviation Authority has infrastructure which could be at risk from flooding. Addressing the flooding is important if confidence in the rail service is to be maintained. Passengers need to know that the service is reliable. The committee sees the Galway-Limerick railway line as phase one of the western railway corridor project which we hope to see extended to Tuam and Claremorris and eventually Sligo.

The committee is delighted to meet representatives from the various bodies represented at what is our third meeting on this subject. I thank committee members for supporting me in bringing it forward. Prior to the intervention of the committee, the agencies involved were not talking to each another and there was some passing of the parcel, for want of a better term.

In his opening statement Mr. Hedderly will highlight the collaborative efforts of the various agencies involved. I am encouraged that the deadlines put forward last November have been lived up to and that serious work has been undertaken in a joint effort by the
agencies. I invite Mr. Hedderly to make his opening statement on behalf of the various agencies involved.

**Mr. Colin Hedderly:** It was agreed by the four agencies concerned, Iarnród Éireann, Clare County Council, the Office of Public Works, OPW, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to deliver a joint opening statement to the committee. Collectively, we welcome the opportunity to update the committee on developments since November 2018 when we previously attended. As noted in November, Iarnród Éireann has engaged RPS Consulting Engineers to develop a feasible engineering solution to the flooding issue at Ballycar with an updated report due in spring 2019. A draft report has been prepared by RPS and was issued to Iarnród Éireann, Clare County Council and the OPW in early April. The report identified a preferred option for the alleviation of flooding on the Limerick to Galway railway line at Ballycar consisting of attenuation of some flows upstream of the railway line in Finn and Rosroe loughs, removal of the underground restriction between the swallow hole and spring downstream of Ballycar Lough, construction of a diversion pipeline and channel to divert excess flows around Newmarket-on-Fergus and Lough Gash, upgrading of existing stream channels and culverts, and construction of a flood protection embankment along the Irish Aviation Authority, IAA, infrastructure in Urlanmore. Following an initial review of the report, it was agreed that the option of diverting some flows to the Owengarney, or Ratty, river should be further investigated and the recommendations in the report updated as necessary. This requires the completion of additional topographical surveys and hydraulic modelling, which is being undertaken by RPS. Following the finalisation of this report, the most appropriate technically and environmentally feasible option to address the Ballycar flooding issue will be considered by the bodies and the appropriate route for the progress of the works, including funding, will be investigated.

This represents the joint position of the four bodies. We are committed to the concept of sustainability and to the delivery of optimum service of key strategic infrastructure and will continue to work together to resolve the problem on the rail line at Ballycar. We welcome any questions the committee may have.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Hedderly and invite Dr. McCormack to make his opening statement.

**Dr. Ted McCormack:** As outlined to the committee in November, Geological Survey Ireland, GSI, is a division of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment and is Ireland’s national geoscience organisation. GSI carries out its role as a key knowledge centre and data repository with a library, archives and extensive digital data holdings. It provides an extensive advisory service, particularly to local authorities, and has statutory roles as a national archive and consultee on planning in areas such as
county development plans, wind farm development and foreshore licences. In addition to supporting Government and local authorities, GSI provides data and advice to industry and research and acts as a project partner to all aspects of Irish geoscience, especially in European projects.

GSI has developed expertise in the area of groundwater flooding, especially in understanding complex karst systems, including turloughs, as they can be important pathways for pollution. The 2016 Programme for a Partnership Government, under the area of climate change and flooding, contained the following objective: “[in relation to] Turlough Systems: We will provide resources to the OPW to commission studies into individual problematic (prone to flooding) Turlough systems, if requested by a local authority or another relevant State agency.” GSI has been tasked with gathering historic and new information to deliver on this objective and initiated a new dedicated groundwater flooding project in collaboration with researchers at Trinity College Dublin and the Institute of Technology Carlow. The core objectives of the project are to establish a permanent monitoring network to provide long-term quantitative flood data as well as producing national historic and predictive groundwater flood maps.

Since the previous Oireachtas joint committee meeting, the GSI groundwater flooding programme has been focused on producing a national groundwater flood map while also installing and maintaining monitoring equipment at groundwater flood sites. A national maximum historic groundwater flood map was produced and supplied to the OPW in April this year. Work on a predictive flood map is ongoing and the map will be supplied to the OPW later this summer. The predictive map will present not just the likely extent of groundwater flooding, but also the probability of a given flood occurring at applicable sites. These maps will assist the OPW in fulfilling its obligations as required under the second implementation cycle of the EU floods directive. In addition, Geological Survey Ireland also recently had discussions with Met Éireann regarding potential groundwater flood forecasting capabilities.

In respect of Ballycar, Geological Survey Ireland has been taking part in the technical sub-committee meetings regarding the flooding in the area. Monitoring stations have been installed at Ballycar and Lough Gash turloughs. The stations record water level data at hourly intervals which are freely available upon request. In addition to these monitoring stations, Ballycar and other flood prone areas along the western railway corridor are being monitored using Copernicus satellite imagery.

**Chairman:** I want to recognise the presence of Mr. John Fitzgerald from the National Parks and Wildlife Service; from Clare County Council, Ms Carmel Kirby, director of physical development, and Mr. John Leahy, senior engineer, roads and transportation department; from the OPW, Mr. John Sydenham, commissioner, and Mr. Cian Ó Dónaill;
Mr. Colin Hedderly and Mr. Barry Kenny from Iarnród Éireann; and Dr. Ted McCormack of GSI, who has just given us his opening statement.

I am very much encouraged by today’s opening statements. The key question, once this preferred option is put together, is how it will be funded. Has there been any discussion among the groups that are working together on the question of funding? What are the next steps that need to be taken? Will there be any public consultation on the preferred option that will emerge? Is there any timeframe for construction works on this scheme? Perhaps Mr. Kenny of Iarnród Éireann could answer those very easy questions.

Mr. Barry Kenny: I might just defer to my colleagues in terms of the detail of those engagements that have been taking place, if that is okay. I hope I am not passing the buck.

Ms Carmel Kirby: I will come in on this one. I will start by saying we have had excellent collaboration between all the organisations, which has been very useful in arriving at a preferred solution. There is some survey work to be completed. It is ongoing at the moment and I suspect it will take another four or five weeks. After that, the report needs to be completed. I would prefer not to indicate what the project is likely to cost until we finalise the report. On the next steps after finalising the report, we then need to do a cost-benefit analysis, at which stage we will need to find a funding mechanism for the project. After that, Iarnród Éireann would need to commission consultants to do a detailed design, an environmental impact assessment report, EIAR, and all of that. Any public consultation will come into play once we know the solution, and we are nearly at that point. When we get into environmental planning and all of that, there will obviously be public consultation at that stage.

Chairman: On funding, without naming a figure, does Ms Kirby believe all agencies will put in an element of funding? Have the witnesses as a collective discussed how this will be funded? Are there any ideas about it? Will there be a joint application to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, for example?

Mr. Colin Hedderly: A joint application is probably the route to go. The scale of the money is quite significant for the works involved. It would have to be a major infrastructure project.

Chairman: Could the witnesses see an element being covered by Iarnród Éireann, the OPW and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport? Is it just one application? Have those discussions started at all?

Mr. Colin Hedderly: It is possibly a bit premature. Obviously we understand there is going to be significant cost. However, it may be premature to have those discussions before we have nailed down the outline design and agreed on some kind of costing. It
Report on Regional and Rural Transport Policy

does need to happen. The scale of funding for that line is something Iarnród Éireann would have to look at. We would need to make an application for those kinds of funds for that line because it does not warrant that kind of expenditure as it is. That would be the way to proceed.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome the witnesses to the meeting, which is just an update meeting as far as I can see. In November 2018 we had an in-depth discussion on the problems with the site at Ballycar and the impact it is having on national transport infrastructure. I welcome that this committee, with the Chairman driving it, has brought about collaboration between all the stakeholders involved, something we did not have prior to last year. The report is almost complete. I note that survey work will be complete within the next month or so. Then at least we will have a hard-copy report with recommendations for the best solutions. Of course, we will then have to deal with the biggest problem, which is funding.

I look forward to seeing the report. When it is published, the committee should get the opportunity to discuss it to see how we might assist in bringing forward the solution recommended. We know it will not be easy. It is a piece of national rail infrastructure. It behoves the Government and State agencies to do what they can to address the problem and this committee should work towards that. I thank the witnesses for the update. The hard work lies ahead now that the report is almost complete.

Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their attendance today and for their work on the report over recent months. We look forward to them reporting back to the committee. As Senator Coffey has said, we are here to assist. The committee will certainly come behind the report and assist in trying to draw down funding to implement it because it is badly needed. It is an issue that has been overlooked for too long. We will assist the witnesses when the report is complete and a preferred option is identified.

Ms Carmel Kirby: We very much welcome that. We are all of the opinion that this is a 6 JRCD really important piece of infrastructure. To meet the economic and social needs of the people using the rail line it is very important that we have a reliable service on that line. We welcome the committee’s support in helping us to progress it.

Sitting suspended at 2.53 p.m. and resumed at 2.54 p.m.

Chairman: We resume our discussions on opportunities for heavy rail. This is our third session with representatives from Irish Rail. Officials from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, and the National Transport Authority, as well as other stakeholders, have already appeared before the committee. Failure to invest in public transport results in poorer interchange facilities, congestion and increasing burning of carbon. A relatively
modest investment is clearly in the public interest. We must be careful to avoid analysis paralysis, always waiting for the next consultant’s report while investment is held back by a kind of glass ceiling. The committee would be delighted to hear firm investment proposals from Irish Rail. I call on Mr. Barry Kenny, Irish Rail corporate communications manager, to make his opening statement.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** I pass on the apologies of our chief executive, Mr. Jim Meade, who is unavailable to attend today. Mr. Meade has previously outlined to the committee the scale of our operations and our investment proposals. I will briefly recap on our operations, updated for the full year of 2018, and advise the committee of the developments since our November 2018 attendance, and how these will benefit the national heavy rail services we provide.

Our team of over 3,800 people maintain a network of 2,200 km; operate 4,900 train services each week; carry over 923,000 customers each week; operate 144 stations in 23 counties across the country; and transport almost 90 million tkm of freight by rail in 2018. As the port authority for Rosslare Europort, we bring 130,000 freight units, over 800,000 passengers and over 21,000 trade cars through annually. Once again over the past year, a record number of customers travelled on our services. Some 47.9 million passenger journeys were made, up from the previous high of 45.5 million journeys achieved in both 2007 and 2017.

This growth is most welcome and is set to continue but it also places acute pressure on our existing resources, across both urban and interurban services. This is why our investment plans are so crucial, both to cater for existing demand and to allow us to expand the role we play in meeting transport needs. As the chief executive has told the committee previously, we are ambitious for our rail service, for how it can deliver solutions to congestion and environmental sustainability for Ireland.

Before I address progress in our investment programme specifically, I wish to advise the committee of a significant development in the ongoing “steady state” funding for the organisation. We have previously mentioned that during the economic crisis, the company was significantly underfunded for many years. The NDP committed to resolving this shortfall by 2021. We are pleased that this year, 2019, has seen the shortfall resolved through the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, meaning we are now adequately funded to maintain the network and services we are contracted to provide. This ensures a solid foundation to play the fullest role possible in the future and exploit the investment that is planned.
Rather than reiterate previous statements, I will focus on key investment developments since we last appeared before the committee. However, I am happy to answer questions on all aspects of our investment programme.

As mentioned, we are experiencing record demand and to address this we need new trains, along with enhanced infrastructure capacity. On Monday of this week, the process to order the largest and greenest fleet in Irish public transport history began as Iarnród Éireann, supported by the National Transport Authority, NTA, sought expressions of interest from global train manufacturers for up to 600 electric or battery-electric powered carriages over a ten-year timescale.

Under DART expansion, a €2 billion investment under Project Ireland 2040, the capacity of the rail network will be transformed through investment in up to 300 new carriages, electrification of lines within the commuter belt and key infrastructure works to allow more trains to operate across the entire national network.

The ambitious tender that commenced on Monday for up to 600 carriages allows for both the planned fleet expansion and replacement of the original DART fleet, which by the end of the current national development plan in 2027 will be almost 45 years old. That indicates the benefit of any train carriage asset that we order and will ensure that a framework is in place for more carriages to be ordered if further growth in demand occurs.

The tender notice appears in the Official Journal of the European Union and on eTenders. We expect virtually every major global train manufacturer to be attracted by this, such is its scale. It will ensure customers on our rail network benefit from up-to-date facilities and technology, and that there are scale benefits in the competitive tendering for the NTA-funded investment.

While electricity-powered trains are expected to make up the overwhelming majority of train orders, the tender process also provides for a possible first tranche of battery-electric hybrid trains. This is to ensure that, should funding or planning processes delay the electrification of the first of the lines beyond 2024, new trains will be available from that date to meet the surging demand from commuters.

However, the overall order will see the entire greater Dublin area, GDA, rail fleet and up to 80% of all heavy rail journeys in Ireland set for a potentially emissions-free future with electric power, as well as generating reductions in noise and cost savings in train operations.

The full national network will benefit from this investment, with existing intercity and commuter trains currently utilised to meet GDA demand becoming available to boost frequency and capacity nationwide. We are also planning to convert the existing intercity
rail car fleet, which is 234 carriages strong, to diesel-electric hybrid to reduce emissions on our national routes.

As well as this major order, Iarnród Éireann and the NTA are progressing shorter-term options to meet the record demand we are experiencing. With 47.9 million journeys in 2018 and capacity requirements becoming acute on national and urban routes at peak times, this includes negotiations under way between Iarnród Éireann and its supplier seeking to agree an order for at least 41 extra intercity rail car carriages adding to an existing fleet of 234 vehicles to enter service from late 2021. This will allow us to increase capacity on key peak intercity and commuter services ahead of the service expansion facilitated by the major order detailed above. A tender process is under way by the NTA for the possible purchase or lease of pre-owned trains, which also would involve modifications to fleet, particularly as Ireland’s track gauge differs from that of other railways.

This month, the NTA published the Cork metropolitan area draft transport strategy, which sets out an exciting vision for sustainable transport in the Cork area. Included is a strategy for 8 JRCD

the future of Cork commuter rail, which includes eight new stations on the Mallow, Cobh and Midleton lines, double tracking of the Midleton line, DART-style frequency on all three Cork commuter lines, future electrification, through running at Kent Station, and improved integration with other modes. The strategy will now be the subject of public consultation undertaken by the NTA with which Iarnród Éireann will engage. It envisages a Cork commuter network with the capacity for 16 million journeys annually, a genuinely transformative scale of modal shift.

I have mentioned Ballycar, which is on the western rail corridor. As the committee will know, both the current programme for Government and the national development plan committed to a financial and economic appraisal of proposals to extend the western rail corridor. Working to terms of reference specified by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, Iarnród Éireann has appointed consultants EY-DKM to undertake the independent appraisal and public and stakeholder consultation. The purpose of the appraisal is to establish if the proposed extension from Athenry to Tuam - phase 2 - and from Tuam to Claremorris - phase 3 - represents value for money. We expect to commence the public consultation process next week and will invite members of the public and interested organisations to participate in this process. We will seek information and views on current transport usage and current transport services, views on the extension of the western rail corridor to phases 2 and 3 and any other comments or observations. EY-DKM is due to complete the appraisal and present the report, including findings and recommendations, to Iarnród Éireann and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport by the end of September 2019. The Department will then undertake an independent
peer review of the report and its findings and recommendations to advise and inform policy decisions arising.

Iarnród Éireann has continued to liaise with Waterford City and County Council on the plans for the Waterford north quays, which incorporate a relocated Plunkett Station as part of an integrated transport hub. As well as progressing our own signalling and station layout design to accommodate increased service frequency, and freight operations, we are facilitating all necessary site investigation and studies for the wider north quays project.

Beyond this, the infrastructure studies necessary for detailed design to enhance capacity in the central Dublin area and thus overall national capacity are progressing, and plans for station facilities, including but not limited to additional car parking, accessibility and customer information, are being reviewed in co-operation with the NTA. It is clear that as a country and a society, the sustainability of our economy into the future and the impacts on our environment are becoming a greater concern for our citizens and our customers. As the most sustainable public transport mode, we see an investment programme that will not only effect modal shift from private to public transport but minimise further the impact on the environment of each journey made with us. With an accelerated electrification programme, this will also have cost benefits to our operations, thus yielding a return to our economy and society by all measures. I welcome the committee’s continuing support for these goals and am happy to take any questions members may have.

**Senator Maura Hopkins:** I thank Mr. Kenny for his presentation. It is very clear that Irish Rail is doing a significant amount in terms of investment in infrastructure with a particular emphasis on environmental sustainability. This is very positive. There appears to be significant investment, which we were starved of for many years. I wish to raise the issue of the western rail corridor, which was mentioned by Mr. Kenny, with regard to an appraisal involving value for money. I would like further comments regarding services for the west, both freight and commuter. I am especially familiar with the Westport line and believe there is definite under-utilisation of that line. We must also take the Galway and Sligo lines into account. What are the plans in terms of increasing the number of customers on that line and Irish Rail’s significant focus on environmental sustainability with regard to freight? Commentary on those two issues would be helpful.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** In terms of the western rail corridor, we are working to terms of reference established by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. I think people probably worry when they hear the phrase “value for money” and wonder whether it is a narrow financial assessment. It is not a narrow financial assessment at all. Infrastructure requires public support. It requires something that does not just mention the bottom line of an individual organisation. It looks at the economic return, the benefits to society and the connectivity it provides. They are the terms of reference to which EY-DKM will work.
when looking at the financial and wider economic benefits the extension would yield. The public consultation will allow people to express their opinions freely. We know there are many opinions on the topic. That opportunity will be there. We will advertise that extensively and ensure people in the region and beyond are fully aware that this consultation is taking place. Ultimately, after the Department’s independent peer review, it will become a policy decision because, obviously, public funding will be required if the line is reinstated based on the outputs of that. That will be a decision at Department or political level but it will be a comprehensive and independent study. The terms of reference have been set out and EY-DKM will work to them and report to us and the Department.

Regarding wider services for the west, thankfully, the passenger growth I mentioned has continued in the west as well. Looking at last year as an example, the Dublin to Westport line grew further. It was relatively modest at 570,000 to 582,000 in the year. The Dublin to Galway line grew up to 1.4 million journeys through the year. With the various suite of figures, it would be 1.4 million journeys on the Dublin to Sligo line. The figure was 577,000 for the Westport to Ballina line. I got the Galway figure wrong. It was just two million journeys during 2018.

The growth we are seeing is spreading nationally. In the early days when passenger growth was coming back to us, it was driven at an urban level primarily but now it is growing nationally. Overall on intercity journeys, it outstripped DART and commuter growth last year by 8.5%. There is probably more capacity within the existing services on the intercity lines versus how it would be on the DART or commuter lines, but nonetheless we are coming up against the same constraints we have. That 41-carriage order, which is the shorter-term measure, will benefit both intercity and commuter routes. We will be looking at heavily loaded services in the peaks to provide additional capacity in the first instance on individual services. When we proceed to the bigger order, the trains start to come through and we increase our overall pool of trains, and with the works on infrastructure in areas closer to the city where infrastructural capacity is more at a premium, we will be allowed to operate more trains at the time in question. The first wave is about longer trains and the second about more trains. It will be late 2021 to 2022 when the longer trains become available. It will be 2024 and later before the expansion of services. In short, that is how we are working.

We have increased services. It is not long since there were three trains each way per day on the Dublin–Sligo line. There are now eight. The number on the Westport line has increased from three to five. We would like the frequency to increase further. We are updating our overall strategy on intercity services to ensure there is clarity and direction to service frequency improvement. As evident from the Dublin-Cork line, which moved to
an hourly service all day, we genuinely believe there is a genuine step change in the number of people who travel with us.10 JRCD

The Westport line, for example, has a connection off the Dublin–Galway line. With a mix of direct and changing services, there is no reason the Dublin–Galway and Dublin–Westport services could not be hourly, which would be transformative. Frequency is not just about more trains; it gives customers more flexibility and makes the overall service more attractive. While Sligo has more of its existing infrastructural capacity utilised, it is a matter of determining how we can grow it further. We see potential in this regard right around the network as the investment funding comes into play.

With regard to freight services, we have recently increased the volume of the Ballina–Dublin Port freight services. We continue to work with the likes of the Irish Exporters Association and freight forwarders to identify opportunities. Many of them tend to be linked to significant investment programmes. I refer to identifying traffic best suited to rail freight, tying in with planning processes. We have a number of options in this regard. We are probably in non-disclosure territory as we discuss the matter with potential customers. We are confident, however, that the scale of rail freight operation can continue to grow in the coming years. In the past couple of months, the Ballina–Dublin operation has increased. I hope that addresses the points made.

Senator Maura Hopkins: I thank Mr. Kenny for that. I am mindful that circumstances have improved. The last train to Westport from Heuston Station is at 6.15 p.m. The last to Cork leaves at 9 p.m. Mr. Kenny has acknowledged that the number of customers using that service has increased. We believe there is a lot more potential. Many have raised this issue with me because they are commuting. As he rightly said, service users need flexibility. Could Irish Rail be more mindful of the capacity of greater frequency to increase flexibility, particularly in terms of the service to the west?

Mr. Barry Kenny: On that point, after a prolonged recruitment embargo, we have a new intake of drivers. Driver training classes are taking place. As the driver pool grows, it will address one capacity limitation we have. It is an obvious next step. There are a number of routes, not only the Westport route, on which there is certainly an appetite for a later last service. One has to establish whether there is a firm business case but there is an appetite for later services. We will certainly consider this openly with the NTA.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I welcome the opportunity for the committee to engage with Irish Rail executives. I acknowledge the progress being made with the company. I acknowledge it has been through a number of difficult years but now business is growing. I need not tell the delegates that, with the increasing population and increase in tourism, Irish Rail has to be fit for purpose as a national transport provider. I know it is planning
for this. On top of this, there is a greater appetite for sustainable travel. Rail is one of the most comfortable and sustainable types of travel. We need to support it.

Reference was made to the rolling stock and its renewal. I presume that much of the existing stock comprises diesel engines and that the company will make an investment to replace them with electric vehicles. Could we have some more detail on that and the plans over the next two to five years? It is a matter of public interest.

The NTA has a role. The frequency and timing of train travel to meet the needs of service users, be they workers or college students, need to be reviewed to ensure service provision meets demand. What are Irish Rail’s plans in this regard? Most important, how does it intend to attract new service users? There is great potential for Irish rail to exploit. People are becoming more conscious of the environment and sustainable travel. There are now opportunities for Irish Rail to attract new generations to using rail. Mr. Kenny might refer to that.

What I want to speak about next might seem a little parochial but it is a national issue. I refer to Plunkett Station, Waterford, and Waterford Port. The witnesses will be aware of the ambitious growth plans for Waterford city under Project Ireland 2040. They will also be aware of the importance of regional development, which is set down by Government policy, and the importance of regional access and connectivity. Taking all these into account, it is critical that we review where Waterford city and its rail services are currently and where they need to be over the next five to 20 years.

As we speak, even without Project Ireland 2040 and the demands of an increasing population, there are issues with Plunkett Station. There has been flooding on the track. From time to time, the station has to be closed. There is a cliff face above the station that makes it vulnerable. Remediation works had to be carried out. There is a serious disconnect with other modes of transport. The train station is not beside a bus station. Passengers who use the Waterford–Dublin service or Waterford-Limerick service have to walk across the bridge to avail themselves of other services. That is also unacceptable. The witnesses will be well aware of these. Even without increasing demand, all these issues have to be addressed.

The good news for Irish Rail - it is a challenge also but good news because there is an opportunity - is that with the arrival of the strategic development zone at the North Quays, there is an exciting development plan now being presented by Waterford City and County Council. The relocation of Plunkett Station is critical to the development plan. Much work has been done on an integrated transport hub for the North Quays. This could enhance rail services and connect them to all other modes of transport while eradicating many of the
difficulties with the existing station. It is critical that Irish Rail be fully engaged in this project. It has the backing of the Government and the local authority.

It was said in the contribution that Irish Rail is liaising with Waterford City and County Council. Is Irish Rail working on the development plans? A planning application is to be made shortly. Without disputing it or interfering with that in any way, I make reference to the fact that there is a strategic development zone with the support of the local authority. It is critical that Irish Rail be supportive of the relocation plan for Plunkett Station. How deep is the engagement? Can further information on that be provided to the committee?

With regard to the frequency and timing of rail services, the Waterford–Limerick rail service is not as used as much as we would like and as it should be but there is still potential for it if we can sell it and time trains to match work and college hours. The N24 is probably one of the worst national roads in the country. I often hear people who support rail travel complaining about how the good road is taking business away. This is ironic given that the Waterford-Limerick is one of the worst. I am sitting beside my colleague from Limerick. There should be increased use of the rail service. What is Irish Rail doing to sell that or to make it more attractive to rail users?

On heavy freight transport, as Mr. Kenny will know, the Port of Waterford has a railway service directly to the port with a lift-on lift-off service, which is important for the sustainability and viability of the port and getting business to the port because lorries are not needed, the ships can berth and the cranes can lift directly from the ships onto the heavy freight train. Again, that is an asset that we are under-utilising. For the information of the committee, of all the freight transport that comes into Ireland through the UK landbridge from mainland Europe, over 80% of that goes through Dublin Port. There is potential for both Rosslare Europort and the Port of 12 JRCD Waterford, especially with the onset of Brexit where we will have to have more direct links with mainland Europe. There are opportunities for these ports to expand and grow their services. The infrastructure is already there and the railway is already there and the Port of Waterford is on side in trying to develop that business. I am interested to know if Irish Rail has any deep engagements with the Port of Waterford to exploit those opportunities to increase its business and to increase the business of the Port of Waterford. The Port of Waterford estimated that there is the potential to treble or even quadruple the current business by using the lift-on lift-off rail service at the Port of Waterford if we can get direct access from the EU and access through the UK landbridge.

I know I have raised a lot of issues but most of them are about improving and enhancing rail services in the south east of the country, which is identified for substantial growth
under Project Ireland 2040. I want to see infrastructure being put in place ahead of that growth and to attract new users. I am interested to hear the responses of the witnesses.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** On the change of the fleet, outside of the Dublin-Cork and Dublin-Belfast routes, on the national network we predominantly operate our passenger services with diesel railcars. They are not locomotive-hauled, they have integral diesel engines in each carriage. That is a relatively young fleet. Thankfully, before the economic crisis hit we were in a position to replace the old orange trains which members will remember, which dated from the 1960s to the early 1980s, with these trains. We have 234 carriages in that fleet, which is our largest single fleet and that is the fleet to which we will be adding 41 carriages with those negotiations at the moment with the supplier. I alluded to the point earlier that as an asset, a train lasts a long time. It is not like a car or other vehicles in terms of their renewal. It is a good 30-year-plus asset in any circumstance.

We are working with Rolls-Royce MTU in trialling a hybrid unit on those trains in order that they would become diesel hybrid trains in due course. That would allow us to both reduce the cost of fuel and to reduce the emissions by a third. Those trials are ongoing. Ultimately, we are using some of those trains in the commuter belt because it is answering a need that we have right now, whereas they are more suited to intercity travel overall. As new trains come into our fleet, it will allow us to make sure they get to their more natural service and it will allow us to increase the frequency and capacity of individual services.

We also need to look at the line speeds around the network. It is fair to say that while we have competitive times, when the motorway network was developed it eroded the competitiveness. We are carrying out certain works and in recent years we have done much work on the main Dublin-Cork route, off which branch the Waterford, Limerick and Tralee routes, so it is the route that impacts more directly on most intercity customers. That has given us some moderate benefits in journey time by addressing the trackbed. It is something we need to move on with and we need to start re-railing on those lines. As well as that being a necessary safety investment, we could also yield journey time improvements from that.

Speed and frequency will be huge in attracting new users but we must also make the service easier to use. I am probably pre-empting Senator Kieran O'Donnell because I know he is a regular customer of ours. I refer to issues such as Wi-Fi and the ease of doing business on board. We are in the process of renewing the Wi-Fi equipment on board the services because it can be a productive time when customers are on board.

We have completely recast our promotional fares and our booking system, which gives alternatives in flexibility. We all know that when we are looking at airline websites some people will just go for the low fare and the limited flexibility that they must travel on that
service. Some people, business people in particular, need greater flexibility so we have three major ticketing types now to meet those different markets, namely, low fare; semi-flexible and fully flexible. We will soon begin the process of introducing barcode ticketing. Thankfully, after the under-investment we will now be able to do these things such as moving on from the collection of tickets at machines by having tickets on mobile phones.

On Waterford station, I have in-laws in Tramore so I hope for the usual dry days because they always tell me to walk across the bridge before they collect me at the far side because of the access into Plunkett Station so I am well familiar with the point the Senator is making there. We are very much engaged with the north quays development. It is not a matter of us answering when asked. We see the huge benefit that is there. Right now, as the Senator knows, post the rockfall which was experienced, we have a single track and a single platform operational. We have quite an old signalling system and that will need to be upgraded over the next five to ten years as well. We are looking at having double track alignments with two new platforms into the north quays site, which would integrate bus transport as well. That track layout would also provide for improved connectivity for rail freight to the Port of Waterford.

In Rosslare Europort, we are a roll-on roll-off port. The Senator mentioned that the Port of Waterford is a lift-on lift-off port so we can be complimentary to each other and Rosslare Europort, the Port of Waterford and New Ross Port Company have been working together. Brexit is obviously key. I am sure we would all agree that it seems there is a great amount of doubt again about what the ultimate outcome of that will be. We already have the various agencies operational at Rosslare Europort and they were ready for March 29 and there will be improved road access to Rosslare Europort for roll-on, roll-off.

We had a Ballina-Waterford container business but unfortunately the operator of that discontinued it. The volumes were not resulting for the operator but we continue to operate wood pulp from the west of Ireland to Waterford. While we have scope to grow now and are working with the exporters and others to identify those opportunities, for Plunkett Station the works and investments associated with the north quays site will allow for greater exploitation of that again into the future. We will be deepening our co-operation with the Port of Waterford and New Ross Port Company because the three ports effectively mean there is a network of ports in the south east that can meet the needs of business and the needs of those business operating through our ports, for whom connectivity to both mainland Europe and to Britain is so crucial.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I thank Mr. Kenny for his comprehensive response. On the north quays, it is such a critical piece and an opportunity to develop infrastructure, not just for the city but for the entire south-east region. I understand that planning permission is due to be sorted in the next few months and a private developer is working with the council to
develop the site as well. This is something that is going to happen in a number of months, it is not just a plan or something that is sitting out there. Aside from Irish Rail’s liaison and co-operation, is there a funding ask from Irish Rail on this or is it something with which it will be approaching the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport separately? As I said, if the north quays project was not happening, Irish Rail would have to invest in Plunkett Station anyway due to the issues that are there with the track in its current location because of the rockfall from the cliff and the fact that it is only a one-platform station, as Mr. Kenny said. Investment is required there anyway. Will Irish Rail be setting aside the proposed investment and putting it along with additional investment to relocate the station? It is a substantial ask and is a substantial project.

I do not want it being said that Irish Rail is a problem when the others are moving on. It is important that all stakeholders work together. This is an opportunity for Irish Rail. There will be growth in the population. We expect growth in tourism in the south east. I believe we can attract far more users to that service once we have an adequate train station and an adequate integrated transport hub, which is the plan. That will happen in a number of months rather than years. I am keen to hear as much as Mr. Kenny can tell me about the plans for the funding of that project.

Mr. Barry Kenny: There is significant private funding for the wider development. It has been indicated that it would cover the integrated transport hub, as well as including railway facilities. We have been setting out what our current operations are and what the benefits will be. As the Senator has said, there is considerable benefit to us. Ultimately, we will seek the funding source if it is the case that it is not within the footprint of the North Quays development. Clearly it is and this is probably on account of good planning heretofore. It is something we have seen in other parts of the country. Where public transport infrastructure is provided, it benefits the development materially. In turn, the development significantly helps to fund that situation. That is certainly the basis on which we are progressing as we recognise the benefit to our services from that integration.

We are looking at all aspects of it. I mentioned the track layout, platforms, freight access, signalling and rock cutting in terms any necessary stabilisation that needs to take place there, as well as the alleviation of flooding. We have done some works, thankfully. In recent years we have seen a reduction in flooding but with climate issues we have to stay ahead of it. We know that from Ballycar. That is an area where we have increased the track level in years past. Yet, only a short number of years ago, notwithstanding repeated increases in the track level, we had our worst-ever flooding. We have to stay ahead of that.
**Chairman:** I want to pose some observations and questions. I wish to compliment Irish Rail on putting out that expression of interest to the global manufacturers of trains. It is ambitious and I wish to compliment Irish Rail on that. It is encouraging to hear that the expression has been made to help move into a greener form of transport in the country.

My next comment is on ticketing. Is it possible to get a through ticket using Luas and the bus services? Is that an area where Irish Rail could do more work, especially if we include through tickets to Northern Ireland?

I welcome the improvement works in Ennis. They will improve accessibility, especially for people with disabilities. Planning permission was recently granted by Clare County Council to Irish Rail to improve services at Ennis Station. This is very much welcomed. Can Mr. Barry give an overview of the works planned? Can he outline a timeframe for the delivery of this important project?

I have raised the issue of the need for a rail spur to Shannon Airport. I have put forward the suggestion that a light rail service would be beneficial for Shannon Airport and for the region. It would also provide connectivity to the national rail line. A short light rail service should be looked at between Shannon Airport and Sixmilebridge. A total of 10,000 people work in the industrial estate in Shannon. It is a major location for people and there is a great deal of employment there. Sixmilebridge is an expanding population centre too. There are opportunities there. Would Irish Rail give consideration to putting together a feasibility study on that? Mr. Kenny might come back to me on that.

Irish Rail had some difficulties yesterday in Heuston Station with signalling. Can Mr. Kenny give an update on that issue?

I thank Mr. Kenny, the Irish Rail chief executive, Jim Meade, and Mr. Hedderly for their continuous engagement with this committee. I look forward to Mr. Kenny answering the questions that I posed.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** We have through ticketing and cross-route ticketing available on our services. We also have the city centre add-on, as it is known. This covers the Luas and Dublin Bus services into the city. There is a wider Northern Ireland ticketing option. It does not only operate through the Enterprise service. There is through ticketing there. We do not have the full suite in some ticketing machines but we are expanding the number of tickets through our machines that are available at all times. Full integration is a different question. In urban areas, Leap has been established and it covers all modes. The investment and further expansion of Leap is the responsibility of the National Transport Authority.

**Chairman:** It is possible to book online too and everyone is moving to that kind of platform. Does Irish Rail have ideas to try to improve the service there?
Mr. Barry Kenny: Definitely. We are increasing the scope of the ticketing available. Certainly, our most popular cross-route tickets are available. Ultimately we want to get to a situation where point A to point B anywhere on the rail network will be covered.

The question of buses would probably need the involvement of the National Transport Authority, as would the question of all-mode ticketing, in particular because we have a range of licensed non-commercial services and licensed commercial services. Not all operate under the same model. The authority would need to ensure that where Luas or other bus operators come into play there is fair allocation. A considerable amount of back-office work would have to take place. That is why the NTA is the lead agency on that question.

We have worked and successfully delivered in several parts of the country with the through-ticketing option. Anyway, I certainly take the point in terms of making website ticketing more comprehensive to cover all those cross routes and routes into Northern Ireland.

The stations in Ennis and Carlow have been in our investment programme for accessibility improvements needed on the national network. They have been top of our list for some time. Again, the NTA has provided for increased funding for accessibility works. The planning permission is there. I will get the precise timescales of the work but it will start later this year. We will see improvement delivered. It is crucial that as we invest generally, the service is accessible to everyone in society as much as possible. We had considerable progress in this area up to 2007 and 2008, but unfortunately the progress has not been what we would have wanted in the interim. Anyway, it is coming through again and it being done on a prioritised basis. We target the stations where the works were not done before and where we have the highest throughput. Ennis and Carlow are progressing this year.

The suggestion for Shannon is not included in the current national development plan. The NDP provides for several studies, including the western rail corridor, which we have mentioned. The plan also provides for Navan to be assessed. The commitment is in place for 2021 there. It also provides for an examination of high-speed rail options rather than upgrading the existing lines. The last major study for a Shannon link was probably ten years ago. It did not approach the cost-benefits needed. Ultimately, for there to be another study it would need to be funded. Sometimes there is a view that we have a discretionary pot and we can choose to pursue certain projects, but we would need funding to be specifically provided or it would have 16 JRCD to be required of us to do such a study. It was a long way from being viable at the time, at the height of the Celtic tiger. I do not have anything more explicitly positive to offer the committee in that regard, but I will engage with our strategic planning manager and provide updated information on the issue.
On the issues at Heuston Station yesterday, first I must apologise to those affected. We experienced very significant disruption. We do a lot of ongoing maintenance work and upgrades of our existing signalling equipment. Investment will be made in a major national train control centre. The problem occurred at 5.38 a.m. yesterday. As morning peak services start to ramp up, it is one of the worst times of the day to lose signalling control on all lines to Heuston Station. There was a software issue. Upgrades of the equipment used were being carried out and there was a software fault. The company with which we are working in installing the new equipment brought in specialists. On the issue of resilience, we were able to have our back-up local control panels staffed by 7.40 a.m. I do not want to say there is necessarily anything positive about what occurred, but it tested our resilience. The issue was resolved yesterday afternoon. We kept the local control panel staff on standby yesterday evening and this morning to ensure we would have people to deal with any recurrence of the issue. We are satisfied that it was resolved yesterday afternoon. All I can do is apologise to those who were affected by it.

Senator Kieran O’Donnell: I welcome Mr. Kenny and Mr. Hedderly. Mr. Kenny knows me well as I have contacted him many times. I regularly travel to Dublin on the Limerick to Dublin railway line. I am a great believer in rail, which is my favourite mode of transport. I will begin with the positives.

Irish Rail has improved through the years I have used it. Punctuality is exemplary; staff service is very good and value for money and the range of tickets available have improved considerably, particularly if one books online in advance. Broadband coverage has improved but not sufficiently. Mobile coverage is disastrous, as I have mentioned to Mr. Kenny many times. I cannot understand why we do not have proper mobile coverage on trains. One cannot hold a telephone call that lasts more than two or three minutes. That is unacceptable in the modern age. One could survive with the current broadband service, but one cannot function with the current level of mobile coverage. If there was proper mobile coverage and enhanced broadband, rail would become the preferred mode of transport. Irish Rail offers first class tickets, but it could offer business class tickets, of which there would be a significant take-up. Travellers would be able to get work done during the journey. However, business travellers cannot use the train because the mobile coverage is so poor.

Another issue I have raised with Mr. Kenny is that the offering of food is not broad enough. The same food that was available on trains 20 years ago is offered - a sandwich and a cup of tea. A little diversity is required. Travelling by train is not conducive to maintaining a healthy diet.

What has Irish Rail done to enhance mobile coverage? The frequency of service is excellent and I have no issues in that regard. The number of people using trains has increased
considerably in recent times. The big issue for me is mobile coverage, which is disastrous. We talk about bringing in various features on trains. If the mobile coverage issue is sorted out, the demand for investment will follow because many more people will want to use train services. What is the story on mobile coverage? I have raised the issue on many occasions with Mr. Kenny, sometimes out of frustration while I am on the train.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** It is welcome that the Senator uses our service so frequently that he can speak quite authoritatively about his experiences. I am grateful that he has noted the improvements in service. Our on-board Wi-Fi which the Senator noted has improved is based on an aggregation of mobile signals. I will not ask who is the Senator’s mobile provider or whether there is any issue-----

**Senator Kieran O’Donnell:** It is O2.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** The coverage is improving. We will improve the equipment on trains to enhance the Wi-Fi, but, ultimately, mobile coverage on trains is based on the mobile networks.

**Senator Kieran O’Donnell:** It may seem simplistic, but, surely, the coverage on trains can be improved. In many cases, I know where mobile coverage will drop. If one is going through hills or valleys, it will disappear, but once one gets into an open area it is fine. If I have to make a phone call, I know where to make it to avoid being cut off. It is a hobby horse of mine because I passionately believe proper mobile coverage along the Dublin to Limerick line which is also the Cork line between Limerick Junction and Dublin would revolutionise the train as the preferred mode of transport. On some trains, I get from Colbert Station in Limerick to Heuston Station in two hours, which is phenomenal. One could not do that by car. Has Irish Rail looked at this issue? Could it link up with the mobile operators to investigate what must be done to sort out the problem of mobile coverage? Will Mr. Kenny commit to Irish Rail doing so?

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** I will raise the issue with my colleagues on the infrastructure side. The understanding of all other aspects of what-----

**Senator Kieran O’Donnell:** I ask that Irish Rail go further and engage with mobile operators on possible technical solutions. Can Mr. Kenny give me that commitment?

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** I commit to providing a technical note on the issues for the Senator and the committee.

On catering, new products have been offered on board for the past couple of weeks.

**Senator Kieran O’Donnell:** That is good to hear.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** They include yoghurt, granola and------
Senator Kieran O'Donnell: I do not need anything that fancy. I ask Mr. Kenny to send me the menu.

Mr. Barry Kenny: There is a more diverse offering. We are engaged in a tender process for on-board catering services. They are clever businesses. They live and die by satisfying demand within the constraints of finite space and wastage issues.

Senator Kieran O'Donnell: I accept that. There are many positives. I am just pointing to some of the issues.

Mr. Barry Kenny: The companies have undertaken a lot of research, given us feedback and are trialling new menu products. The Senator will see something a little different being offered on trains. The service has evolved.

Senator Kieran O'Donnell: Deputy Carey who is from County Clare and Senator Coffey who is from County Waterford are familiar with the Waterford to Limerick railway line. I acknowledge the commitment Mr. Kenny gave to my colleague, which I welcome. The Shannon to Limerick railway line has long been in the offing. Deputy Carey and I were members of the 18 JRCD mid-west regional authority together and pushed this matter at the time. A feasibility study of the line was carried out by the authority in the mid-2000s. Mr. Kenny is probably aware of it and I am assuming it is purely an inadvertent oversight in his statement. He referred to Cork and Waterford. However, Limerick currently has a Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transportation plan under way and I hope that as part of that when Irish Rail makes its contribution it would speak about it. Apart from the commuting aspect, and there is already a rail line in Sixmilebridge and Cratloe, having a rail line from Shannon to Limerick would allow Shannon Airport to enhance the offering with regard to both Galway and Limerick. There would be spur from a line. Perhaps Irish Rail would examine that. I believe it is a major element of infrastructure that is being missed. If one flies on any of the Ryanair flights worldwide the airports might be an hour from the destination but there is a rail link into the city. We would like to have the same for Limerick. Galway would benefit as well. Can we take it that Mr. Kenny might consider that? Jacobs Engineering Ireland Limited has been appointed consultants on it by Limerick City and County Council, which is the lead authority along with Clare County Council. It is the first time Limerick and Shannon have been linked as a metropolitan area. I assume Mr. Kenny is aware of that so can we take it-----

Mr. Barry Kenny: Yes, we would engage. The reason Cork was mentioned specifically was that it had been published since our previous appearance before the committee. We are very clear that there is a greater role for rail not only in Dublin, because people focus on congestion in Dublin, but in all our cities, as well as interlinking. That is why the
CMADTS and its equivalents will be so important in terms of development of services. Ours is one of the agencies that will be statutorily required to be consulted. We will outline where the opportunities are, which is everything from additional passing loops to allow for more frequency on services to whether there are opportunities for new stations-----

**Senator Kieran O’Donnell:** Limerick to Shannon.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** I am sure Limerick to Shannon is something that would be studied as part-----

**Senator Kieran O’Donnell:** I wish to expand from that. Mr. Kenny spoke about balanced regional development. There is a need for a high speed rail line from Limerick to Dublin. There is no reason that one should not be able to get from Limerick to Dublin in an hour. What would be involved in the infrastructure for something like that to happen? If we are talking about proper and balanced regional development, we do not want Dublin to be so congested. I do not have a problem with people living in Limerick and commuting to Dublin to work. I get the train from Limerick and I see many people are commuting, particularly from Thurles. Limerick is just a little further away. It is about linking the regions. Where does a high speed rail service between Limerick and Dublin fit within Irish Rail’s strategic plan?

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** To deal first with facts, a study of high speed rail for Dublin to Cork and Dublin to Belfast is provided for in the NDP. That study will take place.

**Senator Kieran O’Donnell:** Limerick is not in it.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** No. High speed as it is understood in Europe, such as TGV in France, AVE in Spain and ICE in Germany, tend to have very significant urban centres as anchors at either end, at a scale we do not have in Ireland, which obviously-----

**Senator Kieran O’Donnell:** When Mr. Kenny refers to a high speed rail link from Cork to Dublin, it is a relatively short spur from Limerick Junction to Limerick. We can meet that connection.

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** Our focus is on upgrading the existing network to ensure that it operates at optimum times. There is no reason that an upgraded Dublin to Cork line could not be a journey of under two hours. That gets one to a one hour and 30 minutes or one hour and 40 minutes journey to Limerick.

**Senator Kieran O’Donnell:** Would that involve possibly a stop at the junction that will allow Limerick passengers-----

**Mr. Barry Kenny:** Absolutely. That is existing infrastructure. High speed rail as it is understood is the equivalent of upgrading the dual carriageway to building a brand new motorway. We are going to upgrade the dual carriageway.
Senator Kieran O’Donnell: Okay. When will the train fleet be emission free?

Mr. Barry Kenny: The intercity rail car fleet was bought between 2000 and 2010 and one would expect it to have a 30 year life cycle, at a minimum. One is talking about 2040 to be completely emission free. However, if that full order of electric trains comes in by the end of the national development plan, 80% of journeys on our network would be on electric power trains. Ultimately it is what is generating the electricity. The trend in electricity providers is towards more sustainable and emissions free generation but the direct emissions on 80% of journeys at that time will be gone. We will also have reduced the emissions of intercity journeys by a third because we are going to make those trains hybrid as well. Once we get the very urgent short-term extra intercity rail cars our strategy is that they are the last diesel trains we ever order.

Senator Kieran O’Donnell: To finish my question about the high speed rail link, when Irish Rail is doing the upgrade of the rail line will that involve upgrading the rail link between Limerick Junction and Limerick? I always look at speeds. One can get the 5 p.m. train from Dublin on Thursday and it gets one to Limerick in under two hours. If it was cut down to an hour and a half that brings it within daily commuting times. What is the timeframe for getting to the dual carriageway with the rail lines? Will that include the Limerick Junction rail link?

Mr. Barry Kenny: We are putting forward the business case for the Dublin to Cork renewal because-----

Senator Kieran O’Donnell: That is substantively the Limerick to Dublin line as well.

Mr. Barry Kenny: Exactly. Incidentally, the Limerick Junction second platform is going to be very significant in terms of improving connection times there.

Senator Kieran O’Donnell: Would Irish Rail consider putting a roof over it?

Mr. Barry Kenny: There will be a very convenient-----

Senator Kieran O’Donnell: One would want it on a winter’s night.

Mr. Barry Kenny: -----lift and footbridge from the waiting areas. That will improve journey times as well.

Senator Kieran O’Donnell: That is currently under construction.20 JRCD

Mr. Barry Kenny: Yes, it is. It is bit by bit but one is getting much more bang for one’s buck by doing Dublin to Cork because Limerick, Kerry and, to a shorter extent, Waterford-----

Senator Kieran O’Donnell: When will that happen? What is the timescale for it?

Mr. Barry Kenny: The full renewal could take place over a seven year timescale.
Senator Kieran O’Donnell: Would the upgrade of the Limerick to Limerick Junction line be included in that renewal?

Mr. Barry Kenny: We will be putting forward that business case in terms of ensuring that the funding is available for it. I will not make promises like that but I will check the status of Limerick to Limerick Junction for the Senator.

Senator Paudie Coffey: On foot of that, we are not seeking to have high speed rail to every parish in the country, only serious interconnectivity between the regional cities that have been identified for growth. Obviously, Dublin to Cork is vital but the other axis from Limerick to Waterford would also be vital. We should not give up on that. There is great potential for that in the future, even using the Limerick Junction platforms as Mr. Kenny mentioned.

Chairman: On behalf of the committee I thank Mr. Kenny and Mr. Hedderly for attending the meeting today and making their presentation in such a forthright manner. Give our best regards to the CEO, Mr. Jim Meade, who is a very good friend to this committee.

Mr. Barry Kenny: Thank you, Chairman.

The joint committee went into private session at 4 p.m. and adjourned at 4.05 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 12 June 2019.
Orders of Reference

18. Orders of Reference of the Joint Committee

18.1. Functions of the Departmental Select Committee

[DSO\textsuperscript{34} 84A; SSO\textsuperscript{35} 71]

1) The Dáil may appoint a Select Committee to consider and report to the Dáil on—
   a) such aspects of the expenditure, administration and policy of a Government
      Department or Departments and associated public bodies as the Committee
      may select, and
   b) European Union matters within the remit of the relevant Department or
      Departments.

2) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may be joined with
   a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann for the purposes of the functions
   set out in this Standing Order, other than at paragraph (3), and to report thereon
   to both Houses of the Oireachtas.

3) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), a Select Committee appointed
   pursuant to this Standing Order shall consider, in respect of the relevant
   Department or Departments, such—
   a) Bills,
   b) proposals contained in any motion, including any motion within the meaning of
      Standing Order 187,
   c) Estimates for Public Services, and
   d) other matters
   as shall be referred to the Select Committee by the Dáil, and

   e) Annual Output Statements including performance, efficiency and effectiveness
      in the use of public moneys, and
   f) such Value for Money and Policy Reviews as the Select Committee may select.

\textsuperscript{34} Dáil Standing Orders 2017

\textsuperscript{35} Seanad Standing Orders 2017
4) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), a Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may consider the following matters in respect of the relevant Department or Departments and associated public bodies:

a) matters of policy and governance for which the Minister is officially responsible,
b) public affairs administered by the Department,
c) policy issues arising from Value for Money and Policy Reviews conducted or commissioned by the Department,
d) Government policy and governance in respect of bodies under the aegis of the Department,
e) policy and governance issues concerning bodies which are partly or wholly funded by the State or which are established or appointed by a member of the Government or the Oireachtas,
f) the general scheme or draft heads of any Bill,
g) any post-enactment report laid before either House or both Houses by a member of the Government or Minister of State on any Bill enacted by the Houses of the Oireachtas,
h) statutory instruments, including those laid or laid in draft before either House or both Houses and those made under the European Communities Acts 1972 to 2009,
i) strategy statements laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas pursuant to the Public Service Management Act 1997,
j) annual reports or annual reports and accounts, required by law, and laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas, of the Department or bodies referred to in subparagraphs (d) and (e) and the overall performance and operational results, statements of strategy and corporate plans of such bodies, and
k) such other matters as may be referred to it by the Dáil from time to time.
5) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), a Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall consider, in respect of the relevant Department or Departments—
   a) EU draft legislative acts standing referred to the Select Committee under Standing Order 114, including the compliance of such acts with the principle of subsidiarity,
   b) other proposals for EU legislation and related policy issues, including programmes and guidelines prepared by the European Commission as a basis of possible legislative action,
   c) non-legislative documents published by any EU institution in relation to EU policy matters, and
   d) matters listed for consideration on the agenda for meetings of the relevant EU Council of Ministers and the outcome of such meetings.

6) Where a Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order has been joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann, the Chairman of the Dáil Select Committee shall also be the Chairman of the Joint Committee.

7) The following may attend meetings of a Select or Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order, for the purposes of the functions set out in paragraph (5) and may take part in proceedings without having a right to vote or to move motions and amendments:
   a) members of the European Parliament elected from constituencies in Ireland, including Northern Ireland,
   b) members of the Irish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and
   c) at the invitation of the Committee, other members of the European Parliament.

8) A Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may, in respect of any Ombudsman charged with oversight of public services within the policy remit of the relevant Department or Departments, consider—
   a) such motions relating to the appointment of an Ombudsman as may be referred to the Committee, and
   b) such Ombudsman reports laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas as the Committee may select: Provided that the provisions of Standing Order 111F apply where the Select Committee has not considered the Ombudsman report, or a portion or portions thereof, within two months (excluding Christmas, Easter or summer recess periods) of the report being laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas.
18.2. **Scope and Context of Activities of Committees [DSO 84; SSO 70]**

1) The Joint Committee may only consider such matters, engage in such activities, exercise such powers and discharge such functions as are specifically authorised under its orders of reference and under Standing Orders.

2) Such matters, activities, powers and functions shall be relevant to, and shall arise only in the context of, the preparation of a report to the Dáil and/or Seanad.

3) The Joint Committee shall not consider any matter which is being considered, or of which notice has been given of a proposal to consider, by the Committee of Public Accounts pursuant to Standing Order 186 and/or the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993.

4) The Joint Committee shall refrain from inquiring into in public session or publishing confidential information regarding any matter if so requested, for stated reasons given in writing, by—

   a) a member of the Government or a Minister of State, or

   b) the principal office-holder of a body under the aegis of a Department or which is partly or wholly funded by the State or established or appointed by a member of the Government or by the Oireachtas:

   Provided that the Chairman may appeal any such request made to the Ceann Comhairle / Cathaoirleach whose decision shall be final.

5) It shall be an instruction to all Select Committees to which Bills are referred that they shall ensure that not more than two Select Committees shall meet to consider a Bill on any given day, unless the Dáil, after due notice given by the Chairman of the Select Committee, waives this instruction on motion made by the Taoiseach pursuant to Dáil Standing Order 28. The Chairmen of Select Committees shall have responsibility for compliance with this instruction.
18.3. Orders of the Dáil and Seanad

18.3.1. Order of the Dáil 16 June 2016\(^{36}\) (Establishment of Select Committees)

1) That Select Committees as set out in column (1) of the Schedule\(^{37}\) hereto are hereby appointed pursuant to Standing Order 84A.

2) Each Select Committee shall perform the functions set out in Standing Order 84A in respect of the Government Department or Departments listed in column (2) opposite each Committee (in anticipation of the coming into effect of the necessary Government Orders in relation to names of Departments and titles of Ministers and transfer of Departmental Administration and Ministerial Functions).

3) The number of members appointed to each Select Committee shall be seven.

4) Each Select Committee shall have the powers defined in Standing Order 85 (1), (2) and (3).

5) Each Select Committee shall be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann to form a Joint Committee to carry out the functions set out in Standing Order 84A, other than at paragraph (3) thereof.

6) Each Joint Committee shall have the powers defined in Standing Orders 85 (other than paragraph (2A) thereof), 114 and 116.

7) The Select Committee on Justice and Equality shall have the powers defined in Standing Order 115(1)(b).

8) The Order of the Dáil of 10th March, 2016 in relation to the Standing Order 112 Select Committee is hereby rescinded and the Committee is accordingly dissolved.

18.3.2. Order of the Dáil 26 September 2017 (Establishment of Committee)

That:

a) the Select Committee on Rural and Community Development is hereby appointed—
   i. pursuant to, and to perform the functions set out in, Standing Order 84A, in respect of the Department of Rural and Community Development, and
   ii. with the Orders of Reference of Select Committees contained in the Order of the Dáil of 16 June 2016;

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\(^{36}\) Dáil Éireann Debate, Vol. 913 No. 3

18.3.3. **Order of the Dáil 7 November 2017 (Number of Members)**

That, notwithstanding anything in the Orders of the Dáil of 26th September 2017 or 16th June 2016, the number of members appointed to the Select Committee on Rural and Community Development shall be nine, and that Dáil Éireann:

a) approves the Fourteenth Report of the Standing Committee of Selection in accordance with Standing Order 27F, copies of which were laid before Dáil Éireann on 26th October 2017, and discharges and appoints members to Committees accordingly; ...

18.3.4. **Order of the Seanad 21 July 2016 (Establishment of Select Committees)**

Seanad Éireann Debate, Vol. 247 No. 5 (Order of the Seanad 21 July 2016)

1) That Select Committees as set out in column (1) of the Schedule hereto are hereby appointed pursuant to Standing Order 70A.

2) Each Select Committee shall perform the functions set out in Standing Order 70A in respect of the Government Departments listed in column (2) opposite each Committee (in anticipation of the coming into effect of the necessary Government Orders in relation to names of Departments and titles of Ministers and transfer of Departmental Administration and Ministerial Functions).

3) The number of members appointed to each Select Committee shall be four.

4) Each Select Committee shall have the powers defined in Standing Order 71 (1), (2) and (3).

5) Each Select Committee shall be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Dáil Éireann to form a Joint Committee to carry out the functions set out in Standing Order 70A.

6) Each Joint Committee shall have the powers defined in Standing Orders 71 (other than paragraph (2A) thereof), 107 and 109.

7) The Select Committee on Justice and Equality shall have the powers defined in Standing Order 108(1)(b).

18.3.5. **Order of the Seanad 16 November 2017 Schedule (Extract)**

- Committee: Select Committee on Rural and Community Development
- Department: Rural and Community Development.
18.4. Powers of the Select Committee

18.4.1. Powers of Committees (DSO 85 (Extract))

85. Without prejudice to the generality of Standing Order 84, the Dáil may confer any or all of the following powers on a Select Committee:

1) power to take oral and written evidence and to print and publish from time to time minutes of such evidence taken in public before the Select Committee together with such related documents as the Select Committee thinks fit;

2) power to invite and accept oral presentations and written submissions from interested persons or bodies;

(2A) power to send for persons, papers and records

3) power to appoint sub-Committees and to refer to such sub-Committees any matter comprehended by its orders of reference and to delegate any of its powers to such sub-Committees, including power to report directly to the Dáil;

38 See also S.O. 88

39 This power is not included in the Committee’s orders of reference
18.5. Powers of the Joint Committee

18.5.1. Powers of Committees (DSO 85)

85. Without prejudice to the generality of Standing Order 84, the Dáil may confer any or all of the following powers on a Select Committee:

1) power to take oral and written evidence and to print and publish from time to time minutes of such evidence taken in public before the Select Committee together with such related documents as the Select Committee thinks fit;

2) power to invite and accept oral presentations and written submissions from interested persons or bodies;

(2A) power to send for persons, papers and records

3) power to appoint sub-Committees and to refer to such sub-Committees any matter comprehended by its orders of reference and to delegate any of its powers to such sub-Committees, including power to report directly to the Dáil;

4) power to draft recommendations for legislative change and for new legislation;

(4A) power to examine any statutory instrument, including those laid or laid in draft before either House or both Houses and those made under the European Communities Acts 1972 to 2009, and to recommend, where it considers that such action is warranted, whether the instrument should be annulled or amended;

(4B) for the purposes of paragraph (4A), power to require any Government Department or instrument-making authority concerned to submit a Memorandum to the Select Committee explaining any statutory instrument under consideration or to attend a meeting of the Select Committee for the purpose of explaining any such statutory instrument: Provided that such Department or authority may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil;

5) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Select Committee to discuss policy for which he or she is officially responsible: Provided that a member of the Government or Minister of State may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil: and provided further that a member of the Government or Minister of State may request to attend a meeting of the Select Committee to enable him or her to discuss such policy;

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40 See also S.O. 88

41 This power is not included in the Committee’s orders of reference
6) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Select Committee to discuss proposed primary or secondary legislation (prior to such legislation being published) for which he or she is officially responsible: Provided that a member of the Government or Minister of State may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil: and provided further that a member of the Government or Minister of State may request to attend a meeting of the Select Committee to enable him or her to discuss such proposed legislation;

(6A) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State shall attend before the Select Committee and provide, in private session if so requested by the member of the Government or Minister of State, oral briefings in advance of meetings of the relevant EU Council of Ministers to enable the Select Committee to make known its views: Provided that the Committee may also require such attendance following such meetings;

(6B) power to require that the Chairperson designate of a body or agency under the aegis of a Department shall, prior to his or her appointment, attend before the Select Committee to discuss his or her strategic priorities for the role;

(6C) power to require that a member of the Government or Minister of State who is officially responsible for the implementation of an Act shall attend before a Select Committee in relation to the consideration of a report under Standing Order 164A;

7) subject to any constraints otherwise prescribed by law, power to require that principal office-holders in bodies in the State which are partly or wholly funded by the State or which are established or appointed by members of the Government or by the Oireachtas shall attend meetings of the Select Committee, as appropriate, to discuss issues for which they are officially responsible: Provided that such an office-holder may decline to attend for stated reasons given in writing to the Select Committee, which may report thereon to the Dáil;

8) power to engage, subject to the consent of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, the services of persons with specialist or technical knowledge, to assist it or any of its sub-Committees in considering particular matters; and

9) power to undertake travel, subject to—
   i. such recommendations as may be made by the Working Group of Committee Chairmen under Standing Order 108(4)(a); and
   ii. the consent of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission, and normal accounting procedures.
18.5.2. Draft legislative acts: eight week limit to express opinion on infringement of subsidiarity (“yellow and orange card”) (DSO 114)

1) In accordance with Article 6 of Protocol No. 2 to the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Protocol on the Application of the Principles of Subsidiarity and Proportionality) as applied by section 7(3) of the European Union Act 2009, the Dáil may empower a Select Committee to form a reasoned opinion that a draft legislative act (within the meaning of Article 3 of the said Protocol) does not comply with the principle of subsidiarity.

2) All draft legislative acts forwarded to the Dáil under Article 4 of the said Protocol shall stand referred to a Select Committee empowered under this Standing Order.

3) It shall be an instruction to a Select Committee empowered under this Standing Order that—

   a) in forming a reasoned opinion on whether a draft legislative act complies with the principle of subsidiarity, the Committee shall consult with such other Committees and such stakeholders as it considers appropriate;

   b) where the Committee is of the opinion that a draft legislative act does not comply with the principle of subsidiarity, it shall submit a reasoned opinion to this effect by way of a report which shall be laid before the Dáil; and

   c) where a report has been laid by the Committee under paragraph (3)(b) of this Standing Order, the Chairman shall forthwith table a motion thereon under section 7(3) of the European Union Act 2009, and such motion shall be given priority on the Order Paper in accordance with Standing Order 30;

Provided that the Dáil may substitute, add to or otherwise vary, the reasoned opinion set out in the Committee’s report by way of amendment to the motion tabled by the Chairman under this paragraph.

4) Where the Dáil agrees a motion tabled pursuant to paragraph (3)(c) of this Standing Order, either with or without amendment, the Ceann Comhairle shall cause a copy of—

   a) the Resolution agreed by the Dáil,

   b) the reasoned opinion agreed by the Dáil, and

   c) the report of the Committee referred to in paragraph (3)(c),

to be sent to the Presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission.
18.5.3. Legislative acts: infringement of subsidiarity: request for review by EU Court of Justice (DSO 116)

1) In accordance with Article 8 of Protocol No. 2 to the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Protocol on the Application of the Principles of Subsidiarity and Proportionality) as applied by section 7(4) of the European Union Act 2009, the Dáil may empower a Select Committee to consider whether any act of an institution of the European Union infringes the principle of subsidiarity.

2) It shall be an instruction to a Select Committee empowered under this Standing Order that—
   a) in considering whether an act of an institution of the European Union infringes the principle of subsidiarity, the Committee shall consult with such other Committees and such stakeholders as it considers appropriate;
   b) where the Committee is—
      i. of the opinion that an act of an institution of the European Union infringes the principle of subsidiarity; and
      ii. wishes that proceedings seeking a review of the act concerned be brought to the Court of Justice of the European Union, it shall lay a report to this effect before the Dáil; and
   c) where a report has been laid by the Committee under paragraph (2)(b) of this Standing Order, the Chairman shall forthwith table a motion thereon under section 7(4) of the European Union Act 2009, which shall be given priority on the Order Paper in accordance with Standing Order 30.

3) The Ceann Comhairle shall cause a copy of all Resolutions made by the Dáil in accordance with paragraph (2)(c) of this Standing Order to be sent to the relevant Minister.

18.5.4. Post-enactment Report (DSO 164A)

Twelve months following the enactment of a Bill, save in the case of the Finance Bill and the Appropriation Bill, the member of the Government or Minister of State who is officially responsible for implementation of the Act shall provide a report which shall review the functioning of the Act and which shall be laid in the Parliamentary Library.
18.6. **Functions of the Joint Committee**

18.6.1. **Oversight of the Department**

The joint committee shadows the Department of Rural and Community Development, bodies under its aegis, and associated bodies.

The joint committee will also carry out ex ante, current year, and ex post scrutiny of the performance of the department, including output measures and financial indicators.

18.6.2. **Policy**

The committee may also on its own initiative, initiate a review of policy of any area within its remit, or may also carry out a policy review combined with one or more other joint committees.

18.6.3. **Pre Legislative Scrutiny**

The committee may carry out prelegislative scrutiny of any legislative proposals from the Minister, including a public consultation exercise.

18.6.4. **EU Scrutiny**

The Committee also plays a role in the consideration of legislative proposals from the European Union. When the Committee is unsatisfied with a legislative proposal, it can make its observations known to the European Commission through either a reasoned opinion or a political contribution.

Further information on European Union legislative proposals can be found on the following Web sites:

- [European Commission](http://ec.europa.eu)
- [IPEX (EU Interparliamentary Exchange)](http://ipex.eu)

Proposals under consideration by the Committee will be published on the committee's Web site.

18.6.5. **Role of the Select Committee**

The Dáil Select Committee mainly deals with bills and estimates referred by the Dáil.

18.6.6. **Public Service Management Act, 1997**

*Appearance before committees of Houses of Oireachas.*

10.—The Secretary General of a Department or Head of a Scheduled Office or any other officer of the Department or Scheduled Office who is designated for the purposes of this section by the aforesaid Secretary General or Head and to whom
the relevant responsibility for the performance of functions has been assigned, shall, when requested to do so in writing by a committee of either or both of the Houses of the Oireachtas authorised in that behalf to make the request in connection with the subject-matter before the committee, appear before the committee in relation to any strategy statement that has been laid before each House of the Oireachtas under section 5 (2) in respect of the Department or Scheduled Office.

18.6.7. Engagement with Chairmen Designate of State Bodies

*Engagement with chairmen designate of State bodies under the aegis of the Department*

The Government decision of May 2011 put new arrangements in place for the appointment of persons to State Boards and bodies.

Reference to this arrangement is also made in the [Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Guidelines on Appointments to State Boards](#) of November 2014.

The 2016 Programme for Government suggests that nominees for Chairs of State Boards will be required to have their nominations ratified by the relevant Oireachtas Committee prior to their appointment.

This is also covered by Dáil Standing orders:

*Powers of Select Committees.*

85. Without prejudice to the generality of Standing Order 84, the Dáil may confer any or all of the following powers on a Select Committee: ...

(6B) power to require that the Chairperson designate of a body or agency under the aegis of a Department shall, prior to his or her appointment, attend before the Select Committee to discuss his or her strategic priorities for the role; ...
18.6.8. Oversight of Bodies under the aegis of the Department

Charities Regulator

“The Charities Regulator is Ireland’s national statutory regulator for charitable organisations. The Charities Regulator is an independent authority and was established in October 2014 under the Charities Act 2009.

The key functions of the Regulator are to establish and maintain a public register of charitable organisations operating in Ireland and ensure their compliance with the Charities Acts.

The Regulator also engages in the provision of services to charities including the authorising of appointments of new charitable trustees, the framing of schemes of incorporation, authorisation of Cy-près schemes and disposition of lands held upon charitable trusts.” [www.charitiesregulator.ie/en](http://www.charitiesregulator.ie/en)

Irish Water Safety

The “The statutory, voluntary body and registered charity established to promote water safety and reduce drownings in Ireland.

Our focus is on Public Awareness and Education. Tragically, an average of 133 people drown in Ireland each year, eleven every month. We strive to reduce these fatalities by increasing water safety awareness and by changing attitudes and behaviours so that our aquatic environments can be enjoyed with confidence and safety.” [www.iws.ie](http://www.iws.ie)

POBAL

Pobal is a not-for-profit company that manages programmes on behalf of the Irish Government and the EU.

We are an intermediary that works on behalf of Government to support communities and local agencies toward achieving social inclusion, reconciliation and equality. We do this by managing funding and providing resources for suitable programmes. In 2016, we provided management and support services to circa 24 programmes for four different Government departments and EU bodies. [www.pobal.ie/](http://www.pobal.ie/)

Western Development Commission

The Western Development Commission is a state body set up to develop the Western Region by:

Ensuring that government policy is directed at improving the social and economic situation in the Western Region from Donegal to Clare. Developing projects on a regional basis in
sectors such as tourism, industry, marine, renewable energy, technology and organic agri-food.

Operating a €32 million Western Investment Fund that provides loans and equity to business and local communities in the Western Region. This Fund operates on a commercial basis and aims to become revolving, re-investing monies back into the Region.

[www.wdc.ie/](http://www.wdc.ie/)
Membership of the Committee

19. Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development (Oct 2017 —)

19.1. Dáil Select Committee (Deputies / Teachtaí Dála)

Joe Carey (Chairman) (Fine Gael) / Seosamh Ó Ciardha
Peter Burke (Fine Gael) / Peadar de Búrca
Seán Canney (Independent\(^\text{42}\)) / Seán Ó Ceannaigh
Michael Collins (Rural Independent Group) / Micheál Ó Coileáin
Martin Kenny (Sinn Féin)
Michael Fitzmaurice (Independent\(^\text{43}\)) / Micheál Mac Muiris
Éamon Ó Cuív (Fianna Fáil) / Éamon Ó Cuív
Willie Penrose (The Labour Party) / Liam Peanrós
Niamh Smyth (Fianna Fáil) / Niamh Nic Gabhann

19.2. Seanad Select Committee (Senators / Seanadóirí)

Paudie Coffey (Fine Gael)
Maura Hopkins (Fine Gael)
Grace O’Sullivan (Civil Engagement Group / Green Party)
Vacancy (The Labour Party)

\(^{42}\) Not aligned with any party or group.
\(^{43}\) Not aligned with any party or group.
19.3. Dáil Select Committee on Rural and Community Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peter Burke TD</td>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seán Canney TD</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Carey TD (Chairman)</td>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Collins TD</td>
<td>Rural Independent Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Fitzmaurice TD</td>
<td>Independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin Kenny TD</td>
<td>Sinn Féin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Éamon Ó Cuív TD</td>
<td>Fianna Fáil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willie Penrose TD</td>
<td>The Labour Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niamh Smyth TD</td>
<td>Fianna Fáil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
19.4. **Seanad Select Committee on Rural and Community Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Senator Paudie Coffey</th>
<th>Senator Maura Hopkins</th>
<th>Senator Grace O’Sullivan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>Fine Gael</td>
<td>Civil Engagement Group</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(The Green Party)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Vacancy               |                       |
|                       | (The Labour Party)    |
19.5. **Membership Changes**

1. The Dáil appointed the following members to the select committee (nominated by the Committee of Selection) on 3 October 2017: Deputies Seán Canney, Joe Carey, Michael Fitzmaurice, Carol Nolan, Éamon Ó Cuív, Willie Penrose and Niamh Smyth Na Teachtaí Seán Ó Ceannaigh, Seosamh Ó Ciardha, Micheál Mac Muiris, Caral Uí Nualláin, Éamon Ó Cuív, Liam Peanróis agus Niamh Nic Gabhann

2. The Dáil Committee of Selection nominated Deputies Peter Burke and Michael Collins on 26 October 2017.


5. Senator Martin Conway was discharged from the Committee at his own request and Senator Paudie Coffey was appointed with effect from 13 February 2018.

6. Deputy Carol Nolan was discharged from the Committee and the Dáil appointed Deputy Martin Kenny with effect from 17 April 2018.

7. Senator Grace O'Sullivan ceased being a member of the Committee following her election to the European Parliament with effect from 01 July 2019.

8. Deputy Martin Kenny was discharged from the Committee and the Dáil appointed Deputy Brian Stanley with effect from 11 July 2019.

## 19.6. Committee Contact Details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leo Bollins</th>
<th>Leo Bollins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clerk to the Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development</td>
<td>Cléireach an Chomhchoiste um Fhordanach agus Pobail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Houses of the Oireachtas,</td>
<td>Tithe an Oireachtais,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leinster House,</td>
<td>Teach Laighean,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kildare Street,</td>
<td>Sráid Chill Dara,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dublin 2,</td>
<td>Baile Átha Cliath 2,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D02 XR20</td>
<td>D02 XR20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Éire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fón Phone** + 353 1 618 3054 | + 353 1 618 3000 |
**Fón póca Mob** + 353 86 045 4204

**rphost e** jcrcd@oireachtas.ie | Leo.Bollins@oireachtas.ie

[Suíomh Gréasáin an Choiste | Committee’s Web site](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/committees/32/rural-and-community-development/)

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk.