

Minister's Opening Statement

JOC Wednesday 31 May - Bus Éireann

In relation to Bus Éireann, we are obviously in a better place than when we last spoke on the issue.

Industrial action has ended, services have resumed and employees and management have both accepted the Recommendation issued by the Labour Court.

I'd like to once again put on record my appreciation of the efforts of the WRC and the Labour Court during this difficult dispute. Their expertise, knowledge and important role in our industrial relations landscape should not be underestimated, or, indeed, undermined.

This Committee is aware of my strongly expressed views that this dispute would only be resolved through the offices of the WRC and Labour Court. I was always clear that the State would intervene in resolving this dispute but that such intervention needed to be led by the appropriate State body at the appropriate time.

I don't underestimate for one minute the difficult situation employees faced when they considered the implications of the Labour Court's Recommendation. Implications for themselves, their families and their Company.

Those difficulties were evident through the very careful consideration the Recommendation was given by all employees. Following that careful consideration, they voted in favour and voted for what I believe will be a successful and sustainable future for Bus Éireann.

During the dispute, I made a number of commitments and promises in relation to areas which I have always recognised as being ones where it is appropriate for a Minister to play a role.

The first area is of course the funding of PSO services. I committed toward building upon the increases I have already provided for in terms of taxpayer funding of PSO services. I will work to again secure further increases for PSO funding in Budget 2018.

The second area is Free Travel and here I committed toward working with the Minister for Social Protection in examining the level of funding of the Scheme. That examination is on-going, but an important principle has been already agreed that all commercial operators, including Expressway, should be treated and compensated in the same manner under the Scheme. I expect that this agreed principle will be reflected in Budget 2018 allocations.

The third area relates to consulting with stakeholders on matters of policy. I promised that once the industrial dispute was fully resolved, I would meet with trade unions in order to hear first-hand their issues of concern. That promise is something I will act upon within the next few weeks and will provide unions with an opportunity to voice their views to me directly in relation to any issues of policy concern they might have.

That promise to meet trade unions is additional to my announcement to hold a dialogue with all public transport stakeholders later in the year. I believe that this broad dialogue will allow for all stakeholders, including trade unions, a chance to inform the development of public transport policy in Ireland.

The Committee is aware that the Programme for a Partnership Government commits toward a review of public transport policy and that commitment is another upon which I will act to deliver.

I think our exchanges at this Committee over the course of recent months have shown that while there are divergent views on some public transport issues, there is broad agreement upon many of the key principles:

- We all agree upon the importance of public transport.
- We all agree upon the need to adequately fund PSO services.
- We all agree with the need to ensure value for money in relation to funding provided by the taxpayer.
- We all agree with the objective of encouraging more people to make the switch to public transport.
- We all agree that public transport has both social and economic benefits.

Obviously our exchanges here in recent months have been dominated by the difficult industrial relations environment. But that has now turned a corner: there is now agreement within Bus Éireann on how best to approach the future.

So, as we talk at today's Committee, let's move our discussion on towards the medium and long-term. About the type of public transport services and infrastructure 21st Century Ireland needs and deserves.

There are a number of important initiatives underway which will influence that.

There's the development of the National Planning Framework which will have a vital role in shaping the Ireland of tomorrow. It will be fundamentally important as regards how our transport system and services will develop over the long-term. Sustainable transport requires the type of sustainable development choices the National Planning Framework can facilitate.

There's the mid-term review of the Capital Plan which will be announced later this year. It will provide an infrastructural road-map in terms of what the transport network will look like over the short and medium term.

The NTA are finalising their consideration of submissions received on the Rail Review, a review which considered the challenges and opportunities facing our rail network today.

In the Greater Dublin Area, we have the NTA's statutory transport strategy in place for the period 2016 to 2035 which sets out how the GDA's transport system will look like in 20-years' time and the NTA are now working on the implementation plan for the first six-year period.

And on Monday I launched BusConnects which seeks to transform city bus services so that journeys by bus will be fast, reliable, punctual, convenient and affordable.

These are all important initiatives, which together have the possibility to fundamentally transform public transport in Ireland.

I believe that we're at an exciting time in terms of considering our public transport future and that's why I think the dialogue with stakeholders will be a valuable input into shaping that future.

I also think this Committee has a role to play in shaping that future and I hope that today we can start that discussion.

Thank you.