

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport 30th May 2018

Introduction

Chairman, thank you for the invitation to address the Joint Oireachtas Committee today in relation to the recently announced new evening and night-time rural transport services.

By way of background to the new services, I would like to begin by setting out how services in rural areas, funded by my Department under the Rural Transport Programme (RTP), have developed and expanded.

Background to Rural Transport Programme 'Local Link' Services

The RTP was launched in 2007, following an earlier pilot which ran from 2002 to 2006, specifically to address social exclusion in rural areas arising from unmet public transport needs. At that time, 35 community transport groups around the country were funded under the Programme to deliver the services. While services are open to the general public, older people and people with disabilities have traditionally formed the core customer base of the Programme.

In 2012 the National Transport Authority (NTA) was assigned responsibility for management of the RTP as part of new arrangements for integrated local and rural transport approved by Government that year. A restructuring of the Programme was announced in 2013. The aim of the restructuring which followed a Value for Money and Policy Review of the Programme, was to ensure a more efficient and effective delivery structure that maximises integration with other state funded transport services and by making the Programme a sustainable part of the public transport system.

As part of the restructuring the RTP, which now operates under the 'Local Link' brand, 17 Local Link Offices were established from the 35 rural transport groups previously delivering the services under the Programme. The NTA contracts the services and the 17 Local Link

Offices manage the services in their respective areas on behalf of the NTA. The NTA with its national remit to secure the provision of public passenger transport services is best placed to ensure that the Local Link services are developed and integrated with other public transport services.

Expansion of Local Link Services

Since the organisational restructuring was completed in 2015, the focus has turned to optimising the services provided within the available funding. In 2016 the Local Link Offices began a review of services, in conjunction with the NTA. The review is looking to ensure that services are meeting the needs of communities in rural areas and identifying gaps in the provision of services across the country.

Arising out of the review and with an increase in my Department's funding for Local Link services since 2016, 50 new services have been introduced to the network, these include regular 5/6/7 day per week bus services, as well as demand responsive services. Key features of these services include greater integration with existing public transport services and better linkage of services between and within towns and villages.

The review also identified the need for community transport services targeting the needs of specific service users from a social inclusion perspective. Accordingly, the NTA has provided funding to Local Link Offices in 2016 and 2017 for once-off community transport services across a number of categories viz. Age-related, Youth, Integration & Culture and Education.

New Evening and Night-time Services

I am aware of how important the Local Link services are to people living in rural areas. The difficulties in accessing social activities in rural areas in the evening and night-time, has been a particular concern for me and the government.

I therefore set about bringing together key stakeholders to explore the issues involved and to try to come up with practical proposals. I hosted meetings in September and November last year, attended by representatives from the Vintners Federation of Ireland, Insurance Ireland, Irish Countywomen's Association, Irish Farmers Association, Irish Rural Link and the

NTA, among others. Arising from that dialogue, I tasked the NTA to examine the potential to extend existing Local Link services and proposals I received in this regard from Deputy Martin Heydon.

The NTA sought the views of the 17 Local Link Offices in terms of the various ways that the RTP is currently seeking to address unmet transport needs in rural areas during evening and night time hours. Proposals were also sought in terms of addressing these unmet transport needs going forward.

The NTA on 27 February 2018, issued a funding call for applications from all 17 Local Link Offices to deliver a range of trial evening and night time services. The deadline for receipt of applications was Friday 16th March 2018. The NTA received proposals for 50 such services from 12 of the Local Link Offices by the deadline. No applications were received from the 5 Local Link Offices for Galway, Sligo/Leitrim/Roscommon, Mayo, Clare and Limerick.

Having appraised the applications received, the NTA approved funding for all 50 new services on a 6 month trial basis. The services comprise 20 extensions to existing regular public transport services and 30 demand responsive services, across 19 counties. They will add 188 new trips per week to the network of rural transport services nationally, and will run on average from 6pm to 11pm typically on Friday and Saturday evenings.

While a public procurement process must be undertaken for the 30 new demand responsive services, the NTA plans to have all 50 services operational by end June 2018, running until December 2018 on a trial basis. The total cost of funding these services for the 6 month period in 2018 is €450,000. The NTA will monitor usage patterns/trends on the services over the trial period. The results of the trial will be assessed and the continuation of these services will be considered in the light of those results and the availability of funding in 2019.

I should add that the NTA has engaged with the 5 Local Link Offices which did not submit applications for funding and has invited them to submit applications with a revised closing date of Friday 1st June 2018 on the same terms and conditions as applied previously.

I want to acknowledge the help I received from Deputy Heydon and my colleague and Minister of State, Brendan Griffin, TD, in getting this initiative off the ground. I also want to thank the NTA and the Local Link Offices for their work in developing the new services.