

Chathaoirleach, Members of the Committee,

I thank you for your invitation to attend this mornings hearing on access to Public Transport for people with disabilities.

Any decent society, particularly a first world Country such as ours, should be measured on how we treat the most vulnerable among us, both those with visible ailments that are easily recognisable and those that outwardly at least, look full bodied and able minded, but are carrying some burden that afflicts their everyday lives.

Accessibility

As General Secretary of the NBRU, the foremost frontline transport Trade Union in Ireland, I am committed to ensuring that nobody is treated in a manner less favourable to any fellow Citizen.

However, our national infrastructure and the provisions made for people with disabilities falls far short of what is required and casts those with responsibility for such facilities in an extremely bad light.

While Dublin Bus are 100% wheelchair accessible, Bus Eireann PSO fleet 100% and almost all its Commercial fleet similarly so, the ability of delivering people with disabilities to their location/stop of choice is severely restricted by the shameful condition of some of footpaths and hardstands across the Country.

The responsibility for this lies with both National and Local authorities, the NTA have previously stated that the local councils have jurisdiction over the providing the infrastructure to facilitate the provision of disabled accessibility and embarkation onto our Bus Transport system.

This is a copout and the so-called Authority which is master of all they survey in terms of transport provision should not be allowed to get away with such mealy-mouthed responses, this crowd now have so much of a stranglehold over funding and revenue streams that they can even charge for advertising on Bus Shelters across the Bus Network.

Ironic surely, given that those same shelters are located adjacent to the very locations that do not have adequate infrastructural facilities for disability access?

Surely it is not much of a stretch to suggest that some of this income stream could be directed towards providing wheelchair accessibility across the Country?

Stripping much needed subvention over recent years from the three CIE Companies has also had a direct impact on accessibility.

There have been reports in the media for example, in relation to people being stranded on trains. This is not a reflection on the hardworking frontline staff, rather it is reflective of the attitude of successive Governments that have cut funding for public transport.

What is not mentioned of course is the fact that over 3000 jobs have been shed in Irish Rail over the last 15 years, quite a number of those were shed to enable the Company to 'cut its cloth' in terms of State subvention, leading directly to the recent problems at that Company in relation to disability access, e.g. the number of unmanned stations has mushroomed over recent years.

It has been a source of great disappointment to all of us at the NBRU that some commentary around the accessibility issue has sought to lay the blame at the door of frontline Bus and Rail workers, nothing, but nothing could be further from the truth.

I want to take this opportunity to make it abundantly clear to the committee that there is absolutely no Industrial Relations impediments to accessibility for any of our fellow Citizens across the CIE Companies Bus and Train services.

Our members will fully cooperate with any initiative which will assist towards making all locations 100% accessible.

Free Travel Scheme

The NBRU has also, over the last number of years, been campaigning for sufficient funding for the three CIE Companies for the so-called Free Travel Scheme.

There has been quite an amount of discourse across many media platforms on this issue, particularly during the unfortunate Bus Eireann dispute last year, a

lot of it unfortunately centred on the notion that it is a 'Free Pass', this is for us at the NBRU is fundamentally wrong on a number of levels.

It is long since passed time that we changed the emphasis and perhaps the title of such travel into something which supports the entitlement of our most vulnerable, perhaps the Committee might lend its support to changing it to something more appropriate and potentially less stigmatising, such as the 'Social Mobility Card'?

Conclusion:

- The entire bus and rail fleet, both private and state-owned, PSO and commercial, should be compulsorily required to be mobility friendly.
- Engineering infrastructural solutions need to be advanced to provide persons with difficulties to have access to all Buses and trains.
- Frontline staff should be fully trained to assist those with disabilities.

All the above of course requires funding. The onus is on the Government to commit to such funding, no excuses should be offered or tolerated.