



Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Committee of Public Accounts on 27th January 2022

Cathaoirleach, Committee members, thank you for the invitation to appear before the Committee today to assist you in your examination of the National Transport Authority's Financial Statements for 2020. As requested by the Committee's Secretariat we have furnished some information in advance.

To assist in answering your questions I am accompanied by three Directors from the National Transport Authority – Hugh Creegan, Deputy CEO, Tim Gaston, Director of Public Transport Services, and Philip L'Estrange, Director of Finance and Corporate Services.

The remit of the NTA is primarily concerned with the planning, development, regulation, funding and provision of **sustainable transport**.

Within the Greater Dublin Area the Authority has a greater depth of functions. The Authority's role covers not only public transport capital investment and provision of services but also securing greater integration between land use and transport planning. The Authority's statutory Transport Strategy for the GDA sets out the key transport projects that are required to be delivered to provide for the growth in travel demand by sustainable modes and meet the carbon emission targets agreed by Government. The Authority is obliged to review the Transport Strategy for the GDA every six years and the first review was completed last year and published in November for public consultation. That consultation closed on January 10th and the Authority is now reviewing those submissions and preparing a final draft for approval by the Minister for Transport.

The Government published its long-term investment programme, the National Development Plan 2021 – 2030 which continues to support BusConnects Programme, MetroLink and the DART + Programme, as well as other important public transport projects which will assist in meeting the demand for sustainable transport as well as our obligations to reduce carbon emissions. The Authority manages the capital investment programme for public transport,

cycling and walking on behalf of the Department of Transport and funds the transport operators and local authorities for approved projects.

Planning and public consultations for three major capital projects i.e. BusConnects, Metrolink and the DART+ Programme, continued during the pandemic and the preliminary business cases for all three were submitted to the Government for approval in 2021. It should be noted that in accordance with the Public Spending Code, the NTA has been appointed as the Approving Authority for all three of these programmes in addition to being the Sponsoring Agency for BusConnects. Transport Infrastructure Ireland are the Sponsoring Agency for Metrolink plus any other Luas projects and Iarnród Éireann are the Sponsoring Agency for the DART+ Programme. A robust governance structure is in place to manage these projects through the planning and design plus construction phases.

The Authority is also managing a very significant increase in Active Travel funding to local authorities which sees €289m allocated in 2022 for over 1000 projects which are at different stages of delivery across the State.

Following a very successful year in 2019 which saw a very significant growth in public transport usage, the impact of the Covid pandemic was dramatic. The health measures necessitated by the pandemic saw capacity on public transport services reduced by up to 75% at various stages throughout that year resulting in a 50% reduction in passenger numbers by year end. Despite these challenges, the NTA along with its operating partners managed to keep public transport services going so that key workers could get to their place of work and make essential journeys. In that context, I would just like to thank all the operators and their staff for continuing their work in keeping our public transport services operating in a safe and efficient manner. This continued throughout 2021 and while there was recovery at times in the public transport numbers, it was still well below pre-pandemic levels. We are particularly grateful that the Government supported the NTA with increased funding to offset the fare revenue shortfall due to the pandemic. As a result, public transport operators suffered no commercial loss for the operation of services contracted by the NTA. Government financial support was also extended to the Authority in July 2020 to support the re-introduction and/or the continued provision of a number of public transport services normally provided under licence by commercial bus operators without state subsidy. This funding has been extended up until the end of March 2022.

Despite the emergency crisis brought about by the pandemic, there are a number of key achievements to note in 2020 and 2021. We saw a significant number of new and improved services delivered in a short timeframe under the Government's July 2020 stimulus funding package in that year. Two phases of BusConnects Dublin network have been successfully delivered and there are plans to deliver three more phases this year.

We have recently concluded consultation on our Connecting Ireland plan for improving connectivity for people living outside our major cities and towns. With Connecting Ireland we are proposing an overall increase of approximately 25% in rural bus services as part of five-year plan, starting this year.

Since the beginning of 2020, we have invested substantially in town bus networks in Drogheda and Navan and this year, we will progress the delivery of services in Carlow and Portlaoise.

Proposals on redesigning the bus network in Cork city have already gone out for public consultation as part of CMATS, and we are now looking to do something similar for Galway and Limerick.

We also saw the first deliveries of the electric hybrid double-deck bus fleet in 2020 which marks the start of a process which will see carbon emissions dramatically reduced on our subsidised bus services and help us to achieve a reduction in transport emission as set out in the Climate Action Plan. The Authority has purchased three hydrogen fuelled zero emission vehicles which are now in operation by Bus Éireann. The Authority has also ordered 34 single deck battery electric buses for delivery commencing late this year as well as completing the tendering process of up to 800 double-deck electric buses, all of which allows us to meet our target of having zero emission vehicles operating on all state subsidised urban bus services by 2035.

In respect of the small public service vehicle sector, the amount of vehicles that are now wheelchair accessible grew to 17% of the total fleet by end 2021. A number of supports for the SPSV sector were introduced to help mitigate the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis. In addition, the NTA opened a new grant scheme for SPSV licence holders who wished to switch their vehicles to electric or electric hybrid vehicles.

Since its establishment the Authority has been significantly under-resourced. Our staffing complement in particular had been well below what we require in order to effectively undertake our statutory and non-statutory functions. A great deal of work was undertaken

during the last three years on the development of a strategic resourcing plan to identify the needs in that regard and consultations with our parent Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. I am pleased that this culminated in approval for the filling of a significant number of key posts in 2020 and 2021, which has assisted greatly in building our capacity to deliver our mandate.

In terms of our funding and expenditure I wish to say that the Authority has been strongly focussed from the outset on ensuring that we have robust financial and audit controls bearing in mind the scale and range of the Authority's financial activities.

This concludes my opening remarks and I welcome any questions that members of the committee may have.