

Introductory Statement from Hugh Creegan, Deputy Chief Executive, National Transport Authority (NTA)

Chairperson and members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to attend. I understand that the Committee wishes to focus upon *“Accessibility in planning and delivery of transport projects nationally, with a focus on rural transport planning and regional BusConnects projects”*. I will be joined shortly by Anne Graham, Chief Executive Officer of the Authority.

The importance of public transport for people with disabilities is fully acknowledged by the Authority. Recognising that importance, we are committed to ensuring that the transport infrastructure across Ireland, covering rail and bus services, inclusive of fleet and stations, are fully accessible. All new public transport infrastructure and public transport fleet are designed and constructed to be fully accessible. However, because parts of our public transport infrastructure date back many decades, we also have to address legacy elements of the existing system that were not designed with accessibility in mind.

In relation to rural transport, TFI Local Link bus services connect communities throughout rural Ireland, operating both scheduled bus services and door-to-door on-demand services. Currently about 90% of these bus services are wheelchair accessible and since October 2019 all vehicles contracted for the delivery of these services must now be wheelchair accessible.

Other regional bus services are operated under Public Service Obligation contracts with Bus Eireann, Go-Ahead Ireland and other operators. New low-floor coach vehicles have been introduced on many of these routes to allow wheelchair access via door ramps, replacing high floor coaches which required a wheelchair lift arrangement and the prior removal of up to four passenger seats.

Connecting Ireland is the Authority's public transport plan designed to increase travel connectivity across rural Ireland. It aims to provide better connections between villages and towns by linking these with an enhanced public transport network, which also connects to cities and regional centres nationwide. It proposes enhancing existing services, adding new bus routes and new services, in addition to expanding the demand responsive local bus network. Public consultation on the proposals is expected to commence later this year – the format and arrangements for those consultations are currently being developed. However,

the rollout of the Connecting Ireland proposals will require additional funding to operate the increased level of services.

In relation to BusConnects, this is a programme to transform bus transport in each of our main cities, to make the overall bus system operate better and become more useful to more people. It encompasses the revamping of all aspects of the bus system: from the ticketing technology to the road infrastructure; from the bus stops to the network of routes; and from the fare structure to the vehicle livery.

Accessibility has been a key theme in the development of the BusConnects proposals. This has included the bus fleet, the bus services network, the infrastructure design which promotes enhanced pedestrian movement particularly at junctions, in addition to the other elements of the programme.

Significant levels of public consultation have been undertaken in relation to the BusConnects Dublin proposals to date and it is intended that this engagement will be replicated in the other cities.

Attached to this statement is an appendix setting out various details of the status of accessibility arrangements across the spectrum of public transport in Ireland.

That concludes my introductory statement. I trust that I can answer any queries that may arise.

Appendix to NTA Opening Statement

Accessibility of Current Public Transport Infrastructure

City Bus Fleet

Nationally, the city bus fleets are 100% low-floor wheelchair accessible. Approximately 64% of the bus fleet in the Dublin region have a separate wheelchair space and buggy space - this percentage will increase as older fleet is replaced.

The Authority has ordered 280 diesel-electric hybrid double deck buses for delivery during 2021. These vehicles will have a back-up manual ramp installed at the centre doorway (in addition to the motorised ramp at the front doorway) plus an additional passenger information display facing the wheelchair space. An induction loop system is also being installed for the hard-of-hearing.

Regional Bus Fleet

Regional bus services on Public Service Obligation (PSO) routes are primarily delivered by single deck or double deck coaches. Coaches differ from buses as they are designed to carry seated passengers only (no standing passengers) and to operate at higher speeds plus over longer distances.

Up until 2019, all of the wheelchair accessible single deck coaches operated by Bus Eireann required an external wheelchair lift to lift the passenger onto the high floor of the coach, in addition to the prior removal of up to four passenger seats.

Since 2019, the Authority has purchased 102 new low-entry single deck regional commuter coaches for use on PSO services, to replace high floor coaches. These new vehicles have a low floor entrance with about half of the available seating at the low floor level, allowing step-free access to seats for mobility impaired and elderly passengers. These vehicles are accessible for wheelchairs through a fold-out ramp at the front door, and have a permanent wheelchair space so that there is no requirement for the removal of seats.

The double deck coaches are also low floor vehicles which are accessible by wheelchair door ramp, but require the removal of seats in order to provide the wheelchair space and the required restraint.

Due to the fleet investments over recent years all of the coaches on the Bus Eireann PSO routes are now wheelchair accessible.

Bus Stops

All city bus stops are fully accessible as they can be served by wheelchair ramp and kneeling suspension on buses from normal footpath levels.

In relation to regional and inter-urban coach services, the operation of a wheelchair lift from a high floor coach requires a hard standing, generally a footpath, with a width in excess of 3 metres. It can be very difficult to achieve these widths on the footpaths of many of the streets across Ireland's towns.

The Authority has been working with local authorities to arrange the installation of accessible bus stops suitable for high floor coaches in the larger towns across Ireland and at other locations where the relevant local authority identifies a specific need. To date these wheelchair bays have been constructed or are in construction in 11 towns with a further 8 towns in design and planned to be completed this year. Other routes have been converted to low floor routes while several other locations are the subject of discussions with the relevant local authorities.

Bus Stations

The bus stations nationally have varying levels of accessibility for people with disabilities. Bus Éireann have carried out Accessibility Audits on 18 of their bus stations nationwide and the Authority is working with the company to address the identified deficiencies. The works are being listed and prioritised as funding becomes available.

The Authority has provided funding to install wheelchair accessible bays for coaches with wheelchair lifts and other external improvements in Bus Éireann stations. To date, 12 stations have been completed and 4 other stations are under construction. Design works are progressing in another 7 stations this year to install wheelchair accessible bays.

Heavy Rail Services and Stations

All of the train sets operated by Iarnród Éireann are accessible internally. The main issue with accessibility for wheelchairs is that a ramp is required to be placed between the platform and carriage by a member of staff which requires advance notice and booking. In addition, not all rail stations are wheelchair accessible.

Iarnród Éireann have reduced the 24-hour notice for assistance on their trains down to 4-hour notice on their DART, Northern Commuter and Maynooth lines, and on the Cork/Cobh/Midleton route. An App is under development to assist passengers booking assistance.

It is planned that a Customer Service Agent will be on each of Iarnród Éireann's Inter City services to assist all passengers, including those with disabilities, on those services. To date, the majority of the total planned complement of 120 personnel have been hired.

Iarnród Éireann have 144 stations across the rail network and in 2014 a total of 54 stations were identified as requiring accessibility enhancements. Works have been ongoing since then at various stations in line with available funding. Typical of the type of works required, footbridges over the railway tracks and lifts were installed at Carlow and Ennis stations last year. Work on the construction of a footbridge and lifts at Edgeworthstown station is almost complete. Planning and design work is proceeding for the installation of new footbridges and lifts in Dalkey, Gormanstown and Little Island rail stations.

Internal Accessibility Audits are being carried out at present in 18 rail stations nationwide to assemble information on required internal accessibility works. A "Changing Places" toilet facility opened at Connolly Station earlier this year, providing fully accessible toilets, with sufficient space and equipment for people who are not able to use toilets independently, and including features such as changing benches, hoists and privacy screens. It is planned to install another "Changing Places" toilet facility in Heuston Station and also in Waterford Station during renovation works.

Improved Wayfinding and Signage has been installed in 10 railway stations during 2020 and planned to be installed in a further 37 railway stations around Ireland over the coming months. The same design will also be used for the upgrade of the signage in bus stations.

The Authority is funding a major programme of investment in lift and escalator replacement and upgrade, which will see lift replacements or system upgrades at 22 railway stations during 2021, building on the replacement/renovation of lifts at 14 rail stations during 2020. This is the second year of a multi-annual programme to improve lift performance and reliability across the rail network, which will particularly benefit passengers with reduced mobility.

In a complementary programme, significant capital investment has been allocated to ensure that the lifts are operational for all passengers in the rail stations nationwide. A Lift Call System has been installed to try to minimise the damage caused to lifts due to vandalism. To date 28 stations have been completed and it is planned to do nine stations from Fonthill to Portlaoise during 2021.

[Light Rail Services](#)

All of the Luas services have been designed to be fully accessible. The vehicles all have low floor areas with level boarding from the stop platforms, facilitating easy wheelchair access.

[Taxi Regulation](#)

Since 2010 all new licenses are for wheelchair accessible vehicles. The Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle (WAV) grant scheme has been operated by the Authority since 2014 and has resulted in the number of WAVs in the small public service vehicle (SPSV) fleet increasing from 850 in June 2014 to 3,083 WAVs at the end of April 2021, which now represents 17% of the total SPSV fleet.

A list of the wheelchair accessible vehicles and their contact details, are listed per county on the TFI website, to facilitate easier booking. It is the Authority's aim to continue to increase the percentage of wheelchair accessible vehicles in the SPSV fleet.

[Rural Transport Programme](#)

TFI Local Link, the Rural Transport Programme managed by the Authority through 15 Local Link offices across the country, provides approximately 90% of its services using wheelchair accessible vehicles. Since October 2019, all vehicles contracted for the delivery of rural transport services must now be wheelchair accessible.

TFI Local Link operate two different types of service: Regular Rural Bus Services and Door-to-Door Bus Services. In particular, the door-to-door services are very suitable for those who have a disability or are elderly. These were also used extensively during the Covid pandemic to bring medicines and groceries to residents in rural locations.

Evening services have been developed by all of the 15 local units, which have been successful in facilitating access to local services, district towns and social events. Six pilot Community Car Schemes were approved for 2020 and five of them commenced. One of them was delayed due to Covid but will start again soon.

[Service Information](#)

Real-time arrival information is available for each stop/station on bus and rail services on web, smartphone app and sms messaging service.

There are just over 800 Passenger Information Displays installed at bus stops on street to date. These show if the vehicles are wheelchair accessible by having the wheelchair symbol included.

The National Journey Planner features a wheelchair symbol for transport services that are known to be accessible. The Authority has improved its websites to make them more accessible to passengers and is working with the transport operators to transition their websites in a similar manner.

Visual and audible next stop announcements are currently available on all bus services provided by Go-Ahead and Dublin Bus.

Visual and audio announcements are currently available on just over 50% of the stops serviced by Bus Éireann. The Authority will continue to work with Bus Éireann to expand that provision with the aim of providing audio/visual information for all of their stops. As part of that work, the Authority is working with Bus Éireann on the naming conventions for each stop and on the upgrading of the technology systems.

Next stop announcements, both visual and audible, are available on all intercity and commuter rail services. An investment programme is in place to upgrade the DART audio/visual system due to reliability and compatibility issues with the existing system. A tender has recently been awarded to undertake this upgrade work which will continue into 2022.

[JAM Card](#)

In November 2019, the Authority launched the JAM Card scheme, which allows people with a learning difficulty, autism or communication barrier to discreetly and easily communicate their need for 'Just A Minute' when using public transport services.

In advance of the launch, frontline staff in Iarnród Éireann, Luas, Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann, Go-Ahead Ireland and Local Link received appropriate training in the operation of the JAM card.

Approximately 13,500 JAM cards had been issued by the Authority.

[Travel Assistance Programme](#)

The Authority continues to support the Travel Assistance Scheme, which is managed by Dublin Bus. The scheme aims to give people with disabilities confidence to use public transport. Under the scheme an assistant can accompany people who need help using public transport on Dublin Bus, Luas and DART services in the Greater Dublin Area, and help them to plan and familiarise the journey. Over 1,000 individuals availed of the scheme yearly prior to the Covid pandemic.

The Travel Assistance Programme now has three full time and one part time staff member, which will provide the necessary resources to assist passengers relearn their routes as the first of the eight Bus Connects spines in the Dublin region comes on line in the coming weeks. The team are reaching out to Disability User Groups in the area to explain the new route and offer assistance in familiarising people with it.

Training and Support

Disability Awareness training is provided by all transport operators. On the recent renewal of contracts it is a condition that the Disability Awareness Training is to be renewed every three years to staff and is to include training for hidden disabilities.

Disability User groups have been established by all public transport providers and an accessibility officer has been appointed across all operators.

Commercial Operations

Approximately 18% of the vehicles provided by the licensed commercial operators are wheelchair accessible. Prior to the Covid pandemic, the Authority held a public consultation in relation to proposals for the incorporation of wheelchair accessibility conditions on commercial licensed services, specifically the regular category of licensed services. Due to the severe impact of Covid 19 on commercial operators, the finalisation of proposals in this area has been delayed. However, it is intended that the Authority will publish its proposals in due course which will set out minimum accessibility standards and timelines for fleet operating public transport services for new licences and on renewal of existing licences.

Connecting Ireland

Connecting Ireland is the Authority's public transport plan designed to increase travel connectivity across rural Ireland. It aims to provide better connections between villages and towns by linking these with an enhanced public transport network, which also connects to cities and regional centres nationwide. It will be particularly beneficial to the mobility impaired and elderly, offering them linkages to locations, people and services that are not available to them at present.

Connecting Ireland proposes enhancing existing services, adding new bus routes and new services, in addition to expanding the demand responsive local bus network. It will build on both the TFI Local Link network and on the bus network operated by Bus Eireann and other operators.

Public consultation on the proposals is expected to commence later this year – the format and arrangements for those consultations are currently being developed. However, the rollout of the Connecting Ireland proposals is subject to additional funding to operate the increased level of services.