



## Opening Statement

### Anne Graham, Chief Executive, National Transport Authority

Chairperson and members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to attend. I understand that the Committee wishes to ***discuss UNCRPD at a local level – transport***. I am joined by Wendy Thompson, Director of Transport Regulation and Jeremy Ryan, Director of Public Transport Services with the Authority.

The importance of public transport for people with disabilities is fully acknowledged by the Authority. As such, we are committed to ensuring that the public transport services that we contract directly and regulate on behalf of the government, are fully accessible. Those public transport services are supported by sustainable transport infrastructure and public transport fleet which 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. However we believe that significant progress has been made in a number of areas.

All of our town and city bus services are served by low floor accessible fleet with ramps to the kerb for boarding at stops. Other regional bus services are operated under Public Service Obligation contracts with Bus Éireann, 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. In conjunction with the low-floor access double-deck coach with a permanent wheelchair space which we have purchased for Bus Éireann and GoAhead Ireland, the Authority can now identify a significant proportion services as low-floor wheelchair-accessible across the country. This will increase as more of this fleet is purchased.

The public bus passenger services provided by the commercial sector without a subsidy are licensed by the NTA. The Public Transport Regulation Act 2009 which governs this sector allows the Authority to place conditions on the licences related to minimum accessibility standards. This sector in the main operates long-distance intercity services, airport services, tour services and services to/from events and are generally served by high-floor coaches with luggage capacity below floor level. Low-floor front entry coaches are not readily available in the market and the wheelchair accessibility requirements are being met in the main by high-floor coaches with an external wheelchair lift.

The NTA carried out a detailed exercise in 2019 including a public consultation on proposals to place conditions on those licences for the provision of the accessible services. These proposals were completed in early 2020 just as the Covid pandemic hit the country. The implementation of the proposals was paused due to the crisis; a crisis which heavily impacted the commercial bus sector such that grants were provided to the industry by the government in 2020 and 2021 to protect as many services as possible through to recovery. The Authority is now re-examining the proposals to ensure they fit the current environment and will carry out a further public consultation in Q2 2024 with a view to setting minimum accessibility standards for such services in late 2024.

TFI Local Link, the Rural Transport Programme managed by the Authority through 15 Local Link offices across the country, provides approximately 95% of its Regular Rural Bus services using wheelchair accessible vehicles. TFI Local Link also operate Door-to- Door Bus Services and the level of wheelchair accessibility is at 90%. In particular, the door-to-door services are very suitable for those who have a disability or are elderly and on some services, passenger assistance is provided. In some locations across the country, no operator came forward through tenders to offer an accessible service. Work continues on finding solutions to ensure that the remaining Local Link services are fully accessible.

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.

Leitrim Integrated Transport 3-year Pilot Project was launched with the HSE in June 2021. The objective of this project is to support the use of public transport for people attending medical appointments. Feedback from stakeholders and passengers has been very positive with passenger numbers increasing significantly.

### **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 centers 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.

Since the launch in 2022, over 120 new and enhanced services have been delivered across rural Ireland with phenomenal response from the public in terms of passenger growth.

New and enhanced town services have been delivered in Navan, Drogheda, Kilkenny, Sligo and Carlow with more planned this year and in future years again with great response from the public.

### **Taxi Regulation**

Since 2010 all new taxi and hackney licences are granted only for wheelchair accessible vehicles. To support the industry in the delivery of a higher proportion of wheelchair-accessible vehicles, the Authority introduced the Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle (WAV) grant scheme in 2014 supported by government funding. This has resulted in the number of WAVs in the small public service vehicle (SPSV) fleet increasing from 850 in June 2014 to 3,818 WAVs at the end of last week (12 April), which represents 19% of the total SPSV fleet and over 21% of the taxi fleet.

A list of the wheelchair accessible vehicle service providers and their contact details, per county, is on the TFI website, to facilitate easier booking. There is also a link on that register to the Authority's complaints page for ease of access in case anyone is unhappy with the service provided by those WAV licence holders. It is the Authority's aim to continue to increase the percentage of wheelchair accessible vehicles in the SPSV fleet. All successful WAV grant

scheme applicants or their drivers, where relevant, must complete disability awareness training with the Irish Wheelchair Association, including a lived experience section and a practical training section.

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