

**Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications Networks**

**Re: Review to Renew; the public consultation element of the National Development Plan**

**Stephen Kent, CEO, Bus Éireann**

Thank you Chair and to all of the Members of the Committee for today's invitation.

Currently Bus Éireann provides more than 220 State supported, or Public Service Obligation (PSO) routes nationwide, a fully commercial intercity service Expressway, and we also operate the School Transport Scheme on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/2020 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to schools throughout the country as part of this Scheme, which is unparalleled in its scale throughout Europe.

We are in our 35<sup>th</sup> year this year and while the last year has been one of the most challenging in our history because of the impact of Covid-19, we are delighted late last year to have introduced the single most significant enhancement of PSO services, with the support of funding from the National Transport Authority through the July Stimulus. The link between investment, improved services, higher levels of customer satisfaction, leading to increased usage is clear and this initiative demonstrates a commitment to maintaining growth in public transport, notwithstanding the current challenges we face during Covid-19.

Our 2,700 employees have been at work throughout this pandemic, ensuring essential services continued to be delivered for those who depend on them most. I would like to pay tribute to the dedication of our employees and to the many who deliver services on our behalf who were steadfast in demonstrating the strong public service ethos which is associated with Bus Éireann. The Board and management are also very thankful for the ongoing support from the Departments of Transport and Education, the NTA and CIE, and also for the very constructive engagements we have with the Trade Unions who represent many of our staff, to ensure safety continues to be at the forefront of everything we do.

In 2019 Bus Éireann carried 89.4m passenger journeys which was our highest level since 2008 and the company also saw a return to profit for the first time in five years. In 2020 however Covid-19 related drops in passenger demand and public transport capacity restrictions created financial challenges for Bus Éireann and forced us to take some difficult decisions on a number of our commercial services, in order to protect the remaining network longer term and continue serving over 150 communities which rely on our Expressway services. Our Commercial services are

currently relying on temporary support for the next three months under the Commercial Bus Operator Direct Award but every route needs to be sustainable in the longer term and where any issues of connectivity arise, we liaise very closely with the NTA who have the ultimate responsibility to assess demand and provide connectivity if it is needed.

We believe that Bus Éireann has a central role to play in many of the 10 strategic outcomes outlined in the NDP, so for the convenience of committee members I'll make my comments under some of the headings outlined in the Plan.

### **Compact Growth / Strengthening Rural Economies and Communities / Enhanced Regional Accessibility**

While the NTA is responsible for overall connectivity nationwide, we work closely with them to ensure integration of services across our nationwide network. Bus Éireann has the reach and transport skills to participate in any plan which connects Ireland, and to support sustainable urban and rural development, both efficiently and effectively.

In recent years, we have experienced significant growth in regional cities and towns in particular with investment in additional fleet and increased frequency. For example, in 2019, we grew city passenger numbers by 50% in Waterford, by 70% on Route 220 in Cork, and by 60% in Drogheda, with a doubling in frequency.

Having the right infrastructure in place for buses to operate efficiently and on time, such as bus priority measures, real time information, and ongoing investment in regional roads and motorways is key to incentivizing people to make the shift from car to bus. Where infrastructure is in place, the impact is clear. We look forward to planned Bus Connects projects as we see it as a key enabler in transforming bus transport in our cities.

It is essential that sustainable funding is in place for all routes that have a public service obligation and that supply and demand is also carefully considered and balanced for routes which require a commercial licence, to ensure that these services can become sustainable again when the recovery begins.

We also provide services to one million people through our Free Travel Scheme and as our population continues to age, and continues to grow more generally, demand for our services will increase. Equally, the demand-led School Transport Scheme that we operate on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills, continues to grow and we look forward to actively participating in the Department of Education review of the needs of the Scheme, including sustainable transport plans for Schools for the future over the coming months.

### **Sustainable Mobility / Transition to a Low-Carbon and Climate-Resilient Society**

This year we have confirmed orders for 204 new vehicles and we are making considerable improvements in the transition of our fleet to greener, cleaner, more accessible vehicles. We will

not be introducing any new diesel-only buses to our city and town fleets. We are beginning the process of switching to hybrid vehicles in our city and town services soon – starting in Galway in Q2 of this year- and for longer routes we are exploring hydrogen fuel cell power and investing in Euro VI diesel vehicles. In 2020 we were the first transport company to operate Ireland's first Hydrogen fuel cell vehicle in a unique trial between Dublin and Meath, led by Hydrogen Mobility Ireland, and we plan to add three hydrogen buses on route 103 in Meath in Q2 of this year. We are also leading on a project to roll out the electrification of Athlone town services in partnership with the NTA and our company car and van fleet will be fully electric by 2025. By 2030, half of our fleet will be zero emissions and all diesel vehicles will be at least of Euro VI engine emission standard, with up to 90% lower emissions than some of our current diesel fleet. Multi-annual funding commitments are critical to ensure that we can deliver on these targets.

### **In summary**

Bus and coach transport is highly flexible, safe and demand-responsive, produces much less carbon dioxide per passenger kilometre than the private car and can increase passenger numbers more rapidly than any other public transport option – within a year to 18 months of investment approval.

The current NDP includes ambitious plans to grow and 'green' public transport nationally, helping to deliver economic recovery post-Covid-19. Bus Éireann is looking forward to the opportunity presented by both.

Thank you for your time.