

## **Connacht Tribune**

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### **Light rail system proposed for Galway**

The notion of a light rail system for Galway in view of climate change mitigation commitments was raised in the Dáil by Independent Deputy Catherine Connolly.

Speaking during Question Time, she said Galway has a population of 80,000 and is one of the five cities destined to grow to a population of up to 120,000. “In the words of Conor Faughnan, AA Ireland's director of consumer affairs, traffic congestion problems in a modestly sized city like Galway are embarrassingly bad,” she said. “He has also spoken of the provision of light rail being an important part of the solution. Some 176 cities throughout Europe have embraced light rail or tram services. I ask the Minister to go back to his imagination and determination and to comment on the provision of a light rail service as the most sustainable solution to traffic congestion in Galway, while allowing us to comply with our commitments under climate change.”

“I am asking Deputy Ross, as Minister with responsibility for this area, and as a man with imagination and determination, to consider the provision of light rail for Galway as the most imaginative and sustainable solution to the traffic mess there, in addition to park-and-ride facilities and an integrated public transport system,” Deputy Connolly added.

In response, Transport Minister Shane Ross said he understood that the issue of light rail was considered in the preparation of the transport strategy for Galway city, where it was concluded that there is insufficient demand to justify the significant additional cost of developing a light rail system and that bus-based public transport represents the most appropriate system for Galway over the period considered in this transport strategy.

“Accordingly, light rail was not taken forward for economic appraisal in the context of a cost-benefit analysis for this mode of transport,” he said. “The transport strategy for Galway city also concluded that a high-quality bus-based public transport service will cater for the forecasted passenger demand and will provide significant flexibility in terms of network options and the ability to integrate with other modes. The implementation of this strategy is primarily a matter for the local authority to pursue.”

He said the National Planning Framework is being developed at present under the leadership of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

### **Government providing €14m to Irish organisations abroad each year**

Through the emigrant support programme, the Department of Foreign Affairs provides almost €12 million to Irish organisations abroad each year, which is a tangible expression of the strong and enduring commitment of the Government and the Irish public to the global Irish, Minister of State Ciaran Cannon told the Seanad.

“Our priority continues to be supporting the most vulnerable members of our community abroad, with 70% of funding going to organisations which provide front-line welfare services,” he said. “I have seen the real difference that this funding makes in the lives of our people abroad,” he said. “Recently in London I met representatives of the very impressive array of organisations across Britain who receive emigrant support programme funding. I would like to take the opportunity once again to commend the contribution of such organisations, their workers and volunteers in sustaining and supporting vibrant Irish communities across the world. Our relationship with the diaspora goes far beyond welfare. We also provide support for the many other aspects of Irish culture that bind us, including music, sport, business and cultural networks and the Irish language.”

Minister Cannon told senators the emigrant support programme also nurtures a wider sense of connection to home and reaffirms the sense among Irish people abroad that we really value them.

“In this regard, I was extremely concerned at incorrect suggestions recently that the Government had somehow cut our funding to the Irish abroad in the Budget,” he said. “It is important that I highlight the correct position to confirm that the Department's overall current expenditure budget for Programme A: Our People, which covers the diaspora and the emigrant support programme in general, has actually increased by €2.2 million from €69.6 million in 2017 to €71.8 million in 2018. Not only has the Government not cut funding for our diaspora this year but also we are delivering better, more innovative services that benefit our citizens at home and abroad.”

For example, since March, he said most of this year citizens can renew their passports online. In the case of citizens abroad, this has reduced processing time from a number of weeks to ten days plus postage time to wherever the applicant is located. “At the moment the average processing time is four to five days and more than 100,000 passports and passport cards have been already delivered,” he said. “This commitment to innovation in the delivery of improved customer service was recognised in last week's customer experience insights, CXI, survey which placed the passport service as the top ranked Irish public sector in terms of customer experience.”

Voting rights is an issue many Senators are interested in and active on, he added. “Together with the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, I am strongly committed to extending the right to vote in presidential elections to citizens outside the State,” he said. “This will be another tangible expression of our commitment to ongoing engagement with the global Irish.”