

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM CHUNTAIS PHOIBLÍ

COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

Déardaoin, 27 Eanáir 2022

Thursday, 27 January 2022

The Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Colm Burke,	Deputy Paul McAuliffe,
Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill,	Deputy Imelda Munster,
Deputy Matt Carthy,	Deputy Catherine Murphy,
Deputy Cormac Devlin,	Deputy Verona Murphy,
Deputy Alan Dillon,	Deputy James O'Connor,
Deputy Neasa Hourigan,	Deputy Sean Sherlock.

DEPUTY BRIAN STANLEY IN THE CHAIR.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy (*An tArd Reachtaire Cuntas agus Ciste*) called and examined.

National Transport Authority: Financial Statements 2020

Ms Anne Graham (*Chief Executive Officer, National Transport Authority*) called and examined.

Chairman: I welcome everyone to the meeting. As Covid-19 restrictions have receded, it is again open to Members and witnesses to attend committee meetings in person. I ask those present to continue to wear face coverings when not addressing the committee and when moving about the room. Members of the committee attending remotely must continue to do so from within the precincts of Leinster House. This is due to the constitutional requirement that, in order to participate in public meetings, Members must be physically present within the confines of the Parliament. The Comptroller and Auditor General, Mr. Seamus McCarthy, is a permanent witness and is present.

This morning we engage with officials from the National Transport Authority, NTA, to examine its 2020 financial statements. The NTA has been advised that the committee may wish to examine the following matters during the course of the engagement: the transport strategy for the greater Dublin area; expenditure on MetroLink, BusConnects and DART expansion and underground; bus transport infrastructure and the selection process for the location of bus stops; public private partnerships; and the purchase of buses by the State for private operators.

We are joined in the committee room by the following officials from the NTA: Ms Anne Graham, CEO; Mr. Hugh Creegan, deputy chief executive officer and director of transport planning and investment; and Mr. Tim Gaston, director of public transport services. Attending remotely from within the precincts of Leinster House are Mr. Philip L'Estrange, director of finance and corporate services, and Mr. David O'Flynn, financial controller. Attending remotely from outside the precincts of Leinster House are the following officials from the Department of Transport: Ms Ethna Brogan, assistant secretary, and Mr. Garret Doocey, principal officer. All of our guests are very welcome.

When we begin to engage, I ask Members and witnesses to mute themselves when not contributing so we do not pick up any background noise or feedback. As usual, I remind all those in attendance to ensure that mobile phones are on silent or switched off.

I wish to explain some of the limitations to parliamentary privilege as well as the practice of the Houses in respect of reference witnesses may make to other persons in their evidence. The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence from within the precincts of the Parliament is protected, pursuant to both the Constitution and statute, by absolute privilege. A number of today's witnesses, however, are to give their evidence remotely, from a place outside the parliamentary precincts, and, as such, may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as witnesses physically present do. Such witnesses have already been advised that they may think it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

Members are reminded of the provisions of Standing Order 218 to the effect that the committee shall refrain from enquiring into the merits of a policy or policies of the Government, or a Minister of the Government, or the merits of the objectives of such policies. Members are also reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not comment on,

criticise or make charges against a person outside of the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

To assist our broadcasting and debates services, I ask that members direct their questions to specific witnesses. If a question has not been directed to a specific witness, I ask each witness to state his or her name the first time he or she contributes.

I now call on Mr. Seamus McCarthy, the Comptroller and Auditor General, to make his opening statement.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: The NTA was established in 2008 and has evolved since then to undertake a wide range of statutory responsibilities, mainly related to public transport planning and funding. The authority's income in 2020 amounted to €1.085 billion, up from €661 million in 2019. The majority of the income comes from Exchequer grant funding. The authority's expenditure in 2020 amounted to €1.043 billion. More than half of this, €579 million, was in respect of public service obligation, PSO, payments. These payments are made to the operators of public transport in respect of public services that otherwise would not be financially viable. Significant additional PSO payments were provided in 2020 as a result of the severe impact of Covid-19-related travel restrictions on the viability of public transport services. In addition, the authority introduced a support scheme in 2020 to offer temporary financial supports to commercial bus operators at a cost of €32.6 million in the year. The second largest area of spending by the authority in 2020 was in respect of the provision of capital investment grants to a wide range of bodies. This amounted to just under €350 million in the year. In addition to the investment funding provided to other bodies, the authority invested €65 million in the purchase of buses that were added to its own bus fleet, which is made available to public transport operators. The carrying value of the whole bus fleet in the statement of financial position was €227 million at the end of 2020.

I certified the financial statements on 24 June 2021 and issued a clear audit opinion. However, I drew attention to a disclosure in the statement on internal financial controls regarding non-effective expenditure of about €400,000 incurred in respect of the development of a new grant management system. After the project commenced, growth in the authority's capital programme meant that enhanced oversight, control and reporting were required. Following an assessment, a management decision was made in 2020 to terminate the project and instead to redevelop the authority's existing grant management system.

Chairman: I thank Mr. McCarthy. Ms Graham is very welcome. As detailed in the letter of invitation, I ask her to keep her opening statement to within five minutes.

Ms Anne Graham: I thank the Cathaoirleach and the committee members for the invitation to appear before the committee to assist it in its examination of the NTA's financial statements for 2020. As requested by the committee's secretariat, we have furnished some information in advance. To assist in answering the committee's questions, I am accompanied by three directors from the NTA: Mr. Hugh Creegan, deputy CEO; Mr. Tim Gaston, director of public transport services; and Mr. 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 to meet the carbon emission targets agreed by the 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 10 January and the authority is now reviewing those submissions and preparing a final draft for approval by the Minister for Transport.

The Government has published its long-term investment programme, the National Development Plan 2021-2030, which continues to support the 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 and 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, namely, 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, TII, is the sponsoring agency for MetroLink and any other Luas projects, and Iarnród Éireann is the sponsoring agency for the DART+ programme. A robust governance structure is in place to manage these projects through the planning, design and construction phases. The authority is also managing a significant increase in active travel funding to local authorities, which saw €280 million allocated in 2022 for more than 1,000 projects in different stages of delivery across the State.

Following a successful year in 2019, which saw 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 reduce 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 in order that key workers could get to their places of work and make essential journeys. In that context, I 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 through 2021, and while there was recovery at times in the public transport numbers, they were still well below pre-pandemic levels. We are particularly grateful 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 or continued provision or both of a number of public transport services normally provided under licence by commercial bus operators without State subsidy. This funding has been extended to the end of March 2022.

Despite the emergency crisis brought about by the pandemic, there were 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 time frame under the Government's July 2020 stimulus funding package in that year. Two phases of the 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 liv-

ing 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 a 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 gone out for public consultation as part of the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy, CMATS, and we are 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 that will see carbon emissions dramatically reduce on our subsidised bus services and help us to achieve a reduction in transport emissions, 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. We have also ordered 34 single-deck battery electric buses for delivery commencing later this year, as well as completing the tendering process for 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, SPSV, sector, the number of vehicles that are now wheelchair accessible grew to 17% of the total fleet by the end of 2021. A number of supports for the SPSV sector were introduced to mitigate the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis. In addition, with the support of the Department of Transport, the NTA opened a new grant scheme for SPSV licence holders who wish 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, was below what we require to effectively undertake our statutory and non-statutory functions. A great deal of work was undertaken during the past three years on the development of a strategic resourcing plan to identify the needs in that regard through consultations with our parent Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. I am pleased 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 on our mandate. As for our funding and expenditure, the authority has been strongly focused from the outset on ensuring we have robust financial and audit controls, bearing in mind the scale and range of the authority's financial activities.

I welcome any questions members of the committee may have.

Chairman: I thank Ms Graham. I ask members of the committee to stick to their allocated time and we might have time for a second round of questions.

Deputy Colm Burke: I thank our guests for their presentation and for the work they have done, in particular over the past two years. It has been a difficult time for those involved in public transport, involving the giving of back-up support.

The authority was initially set up as the transport authority for the greater Dublin area and was then expanded to encompass the entire country. Something like €86 million has been spent on MetroLink between 2016 and 2021. What was that money spent on and what progress has been made on the project? Is there a timeline for its full delivery?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: The expenditure over the past four years on the MetroLink project was €88 million. Most of that expenditure has been on design and planning work and a substantial

part was on investigative work, be that ecology surveys, ground investigation surveys or similar exercises such as traffic surveys and so on. It is an extremely large project and that level of expenditure is what we would expect for a project of this magnitude to develop it to a sufficient level in order that it can confidently be brought into construction.

Deputy Colm Burke: Were clear budgets set out for the project over, say, a five-year period? We have spent €86 million to date. Has a budget been set out for the next five years? How will the NTA seek to maintain the costs within the budget as planned?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: The preliminary business case for the project contains all that detail, where we have set out the estimated expenditure on a year-by-year basis. That now has to go to the Government for a decision to be made. The detail will, presumably, be available after that, but it is all contained in the business case.

As for managing the expenditure, there are tight controls and governance arrangements in place on the MetroLink project. There is a project board in place, which comprises the NTA and TII officials, and TII's own board monitors what that agency does. Similarly, the NTA's board monitors what the NTA does in that area. There is an expert advisory panel, which provides expert advice, including from a lot of international experts in the area of tunnelling, metros and various other disciplines. On top of that, there is oversight by the Department of Transport, which has a major-projects governance oversight group in place. Within the governance framework, a lot of tools are in place to ensure the expenditure on the project is properly monitored and tracked.

Deputy Colm Burke: Over the next five years, has a clear budget for the expenditure been set out? I accept the NTA has put the proposal to the Government, but does it contain a clear plan for the expenditure over the next five years? Is the NTA satisfied there are specific controls to ensure the project stays within that budget?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: The plan has to be flexible in terms of time because it is subject to a couple of things outside of our control. The Government has to make its decision to allow the project to go into the planning process and we do not know how long the planning process will then take. It has taken different time periods in various projects across Ireland. There is then the issue of potential judicial challenges at the end of that process. While there are indicative budgets, we can only fix the budget when we come out the other side of the planning process and know exactly when we can start the construction. Everything else is a plan that may have to change depending on what those external factors dictate.

Deputy Colm Burke: I might move on to the issue of passenger vehicles and the purchase of them. I understand the Government decided in 2019 that no further diesel-fuelled vehicles would be purchased, yet 33 such vehicles were purchased in 2020. My understanding is down payments were made on 109 buses and that the vehicles will be provided for companies that are tendering for contracts. What will the arrangement be? Will these buses be arranged to these companies? What will be the arrangement for providing these buses to non-State companies?

Ms Anne Graham: Mr. Creegan might also respond to that.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: First, it is important to clarify that the Government decision was for the non-purchase of diesel buses for urban use. Unfortunately, electric technology has not got to the stage to which we can run coaches from here to Letterkenny and back again. That provision related to buses for urban use. We are trialling hydrogen coaches but until the technology

develops, we still have to buy diesel buses and coaches for the longer-distance routes outside of the urban areas.

The fleet the Deputy referred to from 2020 were a carryover order from one we had placed in 2019 and some of them might have been ordered in 2018. Unfortunately, the coach builder, which was Wrightbus in Ballymena in Northern Ireland, went into administration and then may have gone into receivership afterwards. The delivery of those vehicles took considerable sorting out. They were ordered previous to that deadline. Unfortunately, due to administration and that company's problems, they were not delivered until subsequent to that date.

Deputy Colm Burke: Were penalties imposed for not being able to deliver on time?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: From recollection, we did impose some penalties, but we can only impose penalties related to our losses. I forget the exact number, but I believe some penalties were levied.

Deputy Colm Burke: Will it be possible to furnish the committee with that information?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It will be possible.

Deputy Colm Burke: With regard to the order for 109 buses, my understanding is the whole plan is approximately 800 vehicles over a certain time period. An order has gone in for 109 vehicles at this stage and down payments have been made on them. What is the delivery time period for those?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I am not sure which vehicles the Deputy is referring to, but the general delivery period on bus and coach fleets is nine to 12 months after the order is placed, before the fleet comes in. Some types of fleets, such as double-deck coaches, can take even longer. Depending on what type of vehicle it is, that is the kind of time period we are talking about.

Deputy Colm Burke: Mr. Creegan outlined that electric vehicles could not be used on long runs. With regard to development of technology, have targets been set out to try move more towards electric vehicles? What is the timeframe for moving in that direction?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: In the urban areas where the technology is now well developed, we initially purchased plug-in diesel electric hybrid double-deck buses. We purchased 256 of them last year. The battery technology had moved on and we became more confident that the double-deck fleet had sufficient capacity and we could now purchase a fully-electric double-deck fleet. From this year, the only bus types we will buy for the urban areas will be fully-electric vehicles. We placed an order for a certain number of single-deck electric vehicles and we are about to finalise a contract award for 120 fully-electric double-deck vehicles. From here on, our plan is to transition the whole fleet to zero emissions. In the case of Dublin, the entire fleet will either be hybrid or electric by 2030 and fully electric by 2035.

Deputy Colm Burke: My understanding is that buses purchased are then made available to private operators who have tendered for public contracts. What is the arrangement for those operators? Are the buses given on a leasing basis? Who is responsible for maintenance and upkeep?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It may be worth knowing the reason we moved to centralised purchasing for all of the fleet was that we are a small country. The orders for purchase were quite small by international comparison and it made sense to centralise purchase into one large order which

we could manage.

Ms Anne Graham: Does Mr. Gaston know the arrangement with regard to the contract?

Mr. Tim Gaston: We have a contract, as a result of----

Chairman: I ask Mr. Gaston to remove his mask when he is speaking.

Mr. Tim Gaston: One would nearly forget one was wearing it. We have a contract as a result of the tender competition and if a private operator wins it, we provide that operator the vehicles on exactly the same basis we would provide them to Bus Éireann or Dublin Bus. The contract has terms and conditions and the operator has obligations to meet against the maintenance and upkeep of those vehicles. We inspect those vehicles on a regular basis to make sure the operator maintains those contractual obligations and at the end of the contract, those vehicles return to the authority to move on to whoever is successful in the subsequent competition.

Deputy Colm Burke: Is the contract a leasing contract or is there an annual charge for the use of that vehicle?

Mr. Tim Gaston: There is no charge for the use of the vehicle because it is a requirement by the operator to operate the service we require of them. In contractual terms and as part of the tender competition, the bidders are aware they will receive the vehicles to run the service. It puts them on a level playing field with other operators and we have a good competition for the provision of the drivers and the maintenance and operating of those vehicles. However, the vehicles remain within the ownership of the NTA. They are made available to the operator and we withdraw them at the end of the contract period.

Deputy Colm Burke: Is it correct that the cost of the vehicle is absorbed by the NTA?

Mr. Tim Gaston: The cost is absorbed by the authority, from State funding.

Chairman: The Deputy has three minutes left.

Deputy Colm Burke: My final point relates to my city of Cork. The presentation during which we received the briefing was very much focused on the greater Dublin area and I fully understand that because the authority was originally set up for the greater Dublin area. However, is additional focus needed outside of Dublin? I am not satisfied with the focus on Cork, Cork city, Limerick and Galway. What focus is there on developing comprehensive public transport for places in Cork such as Carrigaline, Ballincollig, Blarney and Glanmire? I have not seen the evidence of that on the ground.

Ms Anne Graham: The authority, in partnership with the Cork local authorities, published the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy, CMATS. We are taking responsibility for Cork BusConnects in terms of the design of both a new network of services in Cork and the infrastructure to support them.

Deputy Colm Burke: What is the timeframe for that to be put in place?

Ms Anne Graham: Last year, we published for consultation a proposed new network for Cork bus services and the design work is under way on the infrastructure, which is the bus priority and improved walking and cycling to support that infrastructure. We are about to go for consultation on the concepts around that in the coming weeks. That work is ongoing. We are very much focused, not just on the Dublin area, but the regional cities, as well as rural Ireland,

in terms of connecting Ireland.

Deputy Colm Burke: What is the timeframe for delivery in Cork?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: We want to roll out the network redesign in 2024. A big investment is going on in active travel throughout the whole of Cork. We will produce proposals for BusConnects infrastructure next month, I hope, for Cork. Work is well under way on the Cork commuter rail project where there will be an increase in services on the existing commuter line, electrification, resignalling, twin-tracking and various other things.

Deputy Colm Burke: What timeframe are the witnesses talking about in terms of producing a plan for light rail?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: There will be a public consultation on an emerging preferred route in a number of months. I am not sure if it will be three months, but it will be something of that order. Later this year there will be a public consultation on an emerging preferred route for Luas Cork, as we call it. After that, TII and the NTA will take the feedback. The route will only be finalised then after the feedback is given.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I welcome our guests and thank them for being here this morning. I wish to get a sense of this. What was the total figure for the PSO in 2021?

Ms Anne Graham: Mr. L'Estrange might have that figure

Deputy Matt Carthy: I would also like to get the projected PSO for this year please.

Ms Anne Graham: We will get those figures in a second.

Mr. Philip L'Estrange: The total PSO expenditure for 2020 was €576 million.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Does Mr. L'Estrange Have the figures for 2021?

Mr. Philip L'Estrange: I will have those in a moment.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Does Mr. L'Estrange have the projected figures for 2022?

Mr. Philip L'Estrange: Yes, we can get those in a moment.

Deputy Matt Carthy: What portion of the 2022 amount will be allocated to reducing fares for 19- to 23-year-olds as announced in the budget?

Ms Anne Graham: Mr. Gaston might be able to give us a figure on the young adult cost.

Mr. Tim Gaston: The allocation in the budget was €25 million for the young adult card for the part of the year it will operate.

Deputy Matt Carthy: When does Mr. Gaston expect that will be introduced and be operational?

Mr. Tim Gaston: We have indicated to the Department that we hope to do it in the first half of 2022. We are working on that project at present

Deputy Matt Carthy: Will it be sometime before the end of June?

Mr. Tim Gaston: That is our plan, yes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Will young people travelling on commercial services also be able to avail of that? How will it operate?

Mr. Tim Gaston: The first phase of the project will be PSO subsidised services. The main reason for that is that we can use the Leap card scheme to facilitate a 50% discount. We have already got that network across almost all PSO services. For the commercial operators, it is a completely different situation. Many of them do not have the electronic ticketing equipment that is integrated into our systems. There is a parallel project under way, and discussions are taking place with the Department on the timeline and the process for implementing the 50% discount for commercial operators.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Mr. Gaston says it is parallel.

Mr. Tim Gaston: It is parallel, but it is going to take-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Does that mean it is happening at the same time?

Mr. Tim Gaston: To be fair, it is going to take a lot longer than it will do for the State-subsidised services. We have a mechanism in hand we can use for the State-subsidised ones. We do not have a mechanism for commercial operators.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Mr. Gaston has suggested that this will be available for State-subsidised ones by the end of June.

Mr. Tim Gaston: Before the end of June, we would hope to have it up and running.

Deputy Matt Carthy: When Mr. Gaston says much longer, will that be weeks or months?

Mr. Tim Gaston: It is certainly months, but I have not got a timeline yet on the project. We are still trying to develop it.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Essentially, there will be young people taking transport unable to avail of this Government scheme.

Mr. Tim Gaston: They will avail of whatever discount. Some operators already provide a discount, but that is self-funded by them.

Deputy Matt Carthy: That is done by the operators. In terms of the Government provision-----

Mr. Tim Gaston: The Government scheme would be available on subsidised services first. Subsequently, we will work out how to do it for commercial operators.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I return to the operation of buses. Ms Graham told Deputy Colm Burke that there are transport routes that are established by the NTA. Are they both urban and rural?

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Does the NTA tender for those?

Ms Anne Graham: We tender for some of those. The majority of services that are operating currently are done by the State operators, Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann. They are contracted. We are in a position under EU law that we can directly award services to a State operator.

The majority of services are currently provided by Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann under contract which is renewed every five years.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In some instances, the NTA decides to actually tender these out.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Bus Éireann or Dublin Bus can tender for them, but so too can private operators.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Whoever wins the award is provided with the bus.

Ms Anne Graham: In general, they are, particularly with the urban services. In some cases, in our earlier procurements, we allowed the bus operator to provide the bus. That was part of the contract because we had not got into the procurement of the fleet at that time.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am talking about the situation now. Is it fair to say that in the majority of those cases into the future the NTA will actually be providing the buses?

Ms Anne Graham: Yes, because we want to standardise the provision of the bus fleet, as well as all the information and ticketing associated with that. We feel in order to ensure we maintain the integration between the services that it is appropriate that we provide the fleet.

Deputy Matt Carthy: With the contracts that are being awarded, the NTA has determined the frequency and location of services. It sets out the route, the location of the stops and the times at which the service is to be available. It then provides a bus.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The only distinction between the tenders that come in will actually be cost for which they offering to provide the service.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes, it is what they are going to charge for the provision of the drivers,-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is what they are going to charge the NTA.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes, what they are going to charge us.

Deputy Matt Carthy: The fares will be the same.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes, the fares will be the same.

Deputy Matt Carthy: In essence, whoever can manage to get staff at a cheaper rate will win the NTA award.

Ms Anne Graham: Not necessarily. It is whoever provides the most efficient operation in terms of cost and resources, but there are other factors. Obviously, when we are tendering for any service there is a quality price allocation. There is always an assessment of the quality of the tenderer as part of our tendering process.

Deputy Matt Carthy: What does that mean? Is it their track record?

Ms Anne Graham: It is different. Their proposal in how they are going to manage the services in future, how they are going to manage the maintenance and different criteria would be part of the procurement.

Deputy Matt Carthy: However, the route is set down.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Deputy Matt Carthy: As a result, there is no distinction regarding the frequency or the number of stops on the different tenders. The bus will be provided by the NTA. I presume there is a standard for servicing. The tenderer will not get an award without committing to bring the bus in for regular servicing. Ultimately, the only distinction is how much profit the company intends to make and how much it will pay in wages.

Ms Anne Graham: Part of the tender process is when we are putting a service out for tender, we look for the most economically advantageous tender, as with any service provision. A tenderer will look at the specification and the requirements and put their best foot forward for the tender.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Ms Graham will acknowledge-----

Ms Anne Graham: What we are obliged to do, as an authority, is to provide an integrated network of services right across the State. From a customer point of view, they should not see any difference in a service that is operated by a private operator or a State operator.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is it fair to say that if I get on one bus versus another bus the only difference will be the terms and condition of the person driving the bus?

Ms Anne Graham: Not necessarily. Mr. Gaston may want to add to that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Perhaps Mr. Gaston could outline if the NTA has actually examined the terms and conditions of the different operators' staff and compared them with those for the State-owned operators.

Mr. Tim Gaston: When we tender competitions currently, we require bidders to provide us with a range of different quality criteria as well as their price. Clearly, the price is a significant part of the overall award. We ask them how they are going to set themselves up to maintain the vehicles, how they are going to handle customer complaints, how they are going to handle lost property, how they are going to make sure they adhere to the timetable and what sorts of backup systems they will have for their operational areas. Those are assessed as well as the price element.

During the term of the contract, we carry out mystery shopping and we use our own information that we receive from the ticketing equipment and from the automatic vehicle location equipment to hold operators to the standard that they said they would achieve. If they achieve that standard and they beat it, they can have an additional reward. If they do not achieve that standard, they face a deduction. Those awards and deductions are exactly the same on the State-subsidised operators as they would be on the tendered services.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I would appreciate a further briefing on that if it could be provided in writing. It appears that we have privatised and are continuing to privatise an increasing number of routes, and the only real impact has been on the terms and conditions of the people who are employed.

Ms Anne Graham: We do not accept that. The routes are not privatised. As Deputy Carthy said, we set out the routes and we set out the fares that are going to be assigned to those routes. We provide the fleet for those routes. The only difference is that one is a State operator and one may be a private operator. That is why we want to ensure that there is an integrated network of services.

Deputy Matt Carthy: To clarify my position, if you have a service that was previously operated by a State-owned company and it is subsequently operated by a private company, that is the de facto definition of privatisation.

Ms Anne Graham: No, it is not. That is where you hand over-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am outlining what I consider to be privatisation.

Ms Anne Graham: What I consider to be privatisation is where you completely hand over the operation of the service without setting out what the specification is or what the fares are. That is what privatisation is in terms of the delivery of a public transport service.

Deputy Matt Carthy: This is actually worse, because we are going so far as to provide the bus. Everything is the same. The only difference is in how the company makes a profit and how the staff are being remunerated.

Ms Anne Graham: It is fully managed and controlled by the NTA in terms of the routes, fares, etc.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the witnesses for their attendance. It is good to have the engagement today. My colleague, Deputy McAuliffe, had requested an engagement with the NTA specifically on MetroLink. As he will engage on that in a little while, I will not refer to it myself.

I welcome the fact that the NTA has given us an update on the DART+ coastal south as well as the DART+ tunnel and the underground. On the DART+ coastal, I understand that Merrion Gates was mentioned. The NTA previously put forward a plan on that. I note in the update that the NTA is revising the plan. Does the plan include the flyover opposite St. Vincent's church? Is that still the same idea? What is the thinking around the closure of the Merrion Gates? Could the witnesses share that with us at this point?

Ms Anne Graham: Mr. Creegan might respond to that.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Irish Rail is still at an early stage of development, and it has not settled on what the final solution will be at the Merrion Gates, but I think that is the best option that is available given that we looked at it very thoroughly before.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I accept that there are limited options.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: There are very limited options, so I think it is likely. In fairness to Irish Rail, it needs to go through a process and determine the position for itself.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: That is fine. I know it is at an early stage. I welcome the update on BusConnects, albeit limited. There are several other routes and the network of spines to be rolled out. I would welcome an update on when routes 13 and 15 are proposed to be implemented and, equally, some information on the E spine. In the documentation provided to the committee it was mentioned that a total of 12 applications will be made for core bus corridors.

However, my understanding is that there were 16 corridors in the initial consultation. Where have the other four gone or have they been amalgamated?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: We have not lost any, they were just amalgamated. We joined the Blackrock to Merrion route to the route coming along the Merrion Road from Belfield. We just put those together.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: That is the route 13. In effect, 15 has become 13.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Exactly. We have just combined them. That is all.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank Mr. Creegan for that clarity. I will turn to more localised issues in terms of the complaints procedure. Probably all Deputies on this committee are aware that there is quite a volume of complaints specifically about some of the private operators. In my case, the issue relates to Go-Ahead. I am aware of relentless and continuous complaints about bus services, between cancellations, late arrivals, and buses disappearing from schedules. It is really unacceptable. People cannot rely on the services, specifically the routes 17, 63, and 175. This is not isolated. This is practically daily. The response from the NTA has been quite poor. If I am being honest, I think that the response should have been more robust, because as Ms Graham said to previous Deputies about the PSO, there is an agreement in place and the contractors are meant to be adhering to what they say and that is not being done. What else can we see from the NTA in terms of improvements to those services?

Ms Anne Graham: I might ask Mr. Gaston to respond.

Mr. Tim Gaston: Yes, there is no doubt the last few months have been very difficult for all public transport, including Go-Ahead, Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann, Irish Rail and the Luas. In particular, from the October-November timeline and over the Christmas period, we had what could only be described as exponential growth in staff absences. The biggest challenge for operators is that staff were not in a position to give forward notice that they were pinged as a close contact or that they had a positive test result themselves.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I will just cut across Mr. Gaston there. I am sorry, but this is not isolated to Covid. This is pre-Covid and it has continued. I am familiar with the 63 route. We could take this offline, but I can send Mr. Gaston a slew of complaints I have received specifically in respect of that route. The reason I raise the matter is because I and my constituents have constantly been sent the same response to our correspondence with the NTA. It is just not acceptable.

Mr. Tim Gaston: Regarding the performance, I spoke earlier about the obligations on the providers in the contract. Go-Ahead, after an initial bedding in period, became our best operator in Dublin in terms of both reliability and punctuality. The tracking that we were doing showed it was achieving very-----

Deputy Cormac Devlin: But it has a lot fewer routes.

Mr. Tim Gaston: In percentage terms. It was providing a very reliable and punctual service. Other operators have improved over the contract period. The biggest issues have definitely related to Covid. I guarantee Deputy Devlin that is the case. Prior to that we had a really good performance, and we were seeing right across the board that punctuality and reliability was improving.

The biggest single factor is congestion and the uncertainty of congestion, even at the present time. It is very difficult for operators and for us to predict what the congestion levels will be going forward and therefore what the running times are and how a bus or bus operators know how long a journey will take.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I am sorry, but I have limited time on this. I just want to say to Mr. Gaston that this is not due to traffic, because the bus never appears. The bus is not in traffic. The bus never runs. The 7.15 bus on the 63 route does not appear. I have corresponded with the NTA and the response is not good. The response to constituents is even worse. At times, they do not get responses. I am just asking the NTA to have a look at Go-Ahead's 63 route. It is not acceptable. It is not working. People cannot get to work.

The second issue I wish to raise is the service for students going to school. We have three routes locally – the 111, 59, 75 and at times the 75A. Could we look at synchronising those to service the students who are going to the educational facilities that ultimately those routes serve, be it going to school or coming home from school? Again, we have corresponded with the NTA. It is our only opportunity to engage on this. I ask the NTA to look at the timetable again, specifically in the afternoon for the 111 and the 59, because there are two or three primary and secondary schools that could avail of the service if it were a few minutes later. I ask the NTA to do that.

In terms of the overall complaints, the NTA's report did not cover it, but Ms Graham touched on it earlier. Could the NTA please send a note to the committee on the volume of complaints, broken down by type of service, be it bus, rail or whatever? That will be of interest to me and it is something we need to be aware of. Does Ms Graham have any information on that right now?

Ms Anne Graham: I think I have it to hand, but it might be better to provide it in writing.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Could Ms Graham give a flavour of what kind of numbers we are talking about?

Ms Anne Graham: I have the performance report for 2020. If I have the time, I will access that. The Dublin Bus direct award contract complaint rate per 100,000 in the first quarter of 2020 was 9.8. It increased to 14.8 in the second quarter and went down to-----

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Does Ms Graham have actual figures? Are there numbers?

Ms Anne Graham: That is the complaint rate per 100,000 passengers, which is what we track in terms of the contract. In the equivalent time period the rates for Go-Ahead in the outer Dublin metropolitan area were 9, 9.3, 9.4 and 10.5.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: That seems-----

Ms Anne Graham: In the second quarter in the Dublin commuter outer metropolitan area it was higher. It was 38.1 reducing to 17.8 and then up to 28.6 in the fourth quarter.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I ask Ms Graham to furnish the information to the committee, perhaps with actual numbers. I appreciate they are calculated per 100,000. It would be good to get the raw numbers. Several internal reviews were done and with the exception of July 2020 when it was done by McCann FitzGerald and November 2021 when it was done by KPMG, a total of 19 other internal reports were conducted by RSM. Is there a particular reason one

company does the vast majority of the internal reviews?

Ms Anne Graham: It was appointed as our internal auditor.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: By the Department?

Ms Anne Graham: No, by us.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: By the NTA.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes, the board and the audit and risk committee.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank the witnesses.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee. I have just come from the committee on gender equality so I missed a little bit of this meeting and I apologise if I repeat anything. With regard to gender balance, I see from the annual report that at the end of 2020 the board had two female members, 22%, and seven male members with three positions vacant. I would like a progress update on this.

Ms Anne Graham: The Minister appointed three new board members at the end of last year, two of whom are women. Women account for 33%.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There is still a way to go.

Ms Anne Graham: It is for the Department and the Minister to appoint them.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is but it is no harm to highlight it here either.

I want to ask about the green school travel and active school travel projects the NTA has been engaged in. There has been significant funding from the NTA for local authorities. Will the witnesses give an outline of this and how they think it is going in terms of efficiency?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Green-Schools is a programme run by An Taisce for us and the Department to encourage more sustainable travel patterns. Within this is the safe routes to school programme, which was rolled out last year or perhaps the year before. We are trying to do further infrastructure work, mainly in front of schools, to encourage sustainable travel for pupils and parents alike. On our behalf An Taisce sought expressions of interest from schools throughout the country. We were overwhelmed by the enormous interest in it. Funding is being provided by the Department of Transport to allow what needs to be done to be done. The challenge is that local authorities have to do a lot of the work outside the school gate. They are being resourced gradually to be able to take on more of it. It is a very good programme with a lot happening. There is a lot more to do but it has been contingent upon local authority resources mainly.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Is that distinct from the active travel project?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: They are tied in together. They are parallel programmes. A school is focused on the school environment and connections to the school. Active travel is wider than this but we can see they immediately cross over. There is a connection between the two in the environment of the school. If we come up with a need to put in a cycle track for a kilometre either side of a school entrance to connect to another cycle facility, clearly it is the local authority that needs to do this. While it is funded through the safe routes to school programme it is also part of active travel at the same time.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: What is the funding amount that has been spent?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I do not want to mislead the Deputy by giving her the wrong figure. Can we send it to her afterwards?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Can the witnesses give me an approximate figure?

Mr. Philip L'Estrange: Perhaps I can help. It was €1.465 million in 2020 and the figure for 2021 is similar.

Ms Anne Graham: I would like to clarify whether that is the figure for the Green-Schools programme.

Mr. Philip L'Estrange: Yes, that is the Green-Schools programme.

Ms Anne Graham: The spend on the active travel programme is approximately €200 million.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: There is a €289 million targeted spend for active travel for 2022.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: What was spent in 2021?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It was in the region of €185 million.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the witnesses. So much is caught up in this with the climate agenda and with making life easier for parents and children. In my area I have seen huge infrastructural improvements with more to come. I am not asking for problems but what is the relationship with the local authorities in terms of governance, efficiency and oversight? Will the witnesses describe it to me, please?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Even though the projects are of a smaller-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am not trying to frame it in terms of-----

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I know.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am really asking about governance.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Even though the projects are of a smaller scale than some of the larger projects mentioned earlier, they are still subject to the public spending code. Therefore, the same arrangements fall into place. We act as a approving authority for all of the projects. We have processes and procedures in place to give oversight to the projects to try to make sure the design is right, the funding is properly expended and we get the quality of project we need to get at the end of them. They are mini-versions of the larger projects with strong procedures in place to deliver them.

Ms Anne Graham: A portion of them are audited every year by our internal auditors with regard to the local authorities to ensure appropriate expenditure on the projects and that proper procurement has taken place.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I can see at every level that huge effort is going into this and that is fantastic. I want to go back down to the broader read-across of other supports for public transport in schools. I will highlight the example of the 59 and 111 bus routes in Dublin. This is where a review of the routes and timetables is necessary to support schoolchildren and

their families. At 3.43 p.m. a 59 bus leaves Dalkey, where the school finishes at 3.45 p.m. It gets to the next school at 3.48 p.m. That school also finishes at 3.45 p.m. They are both girls' schools. The next bus from Dalkey is at 4.30 p.m. This is a local example but it shows how the schoolchildren in two secondary schools should be able to depend, particularly in the winter, on not waiting around for public transport and access it easily. With my colleague, I urge a review to make sure the timetables are consistent with the needs of the people who need them. It is aligned with the NTA's other policy.

The witnesses spoke briefly about DART+ coastal and I do not want to repeat what has been said. My colleague touched on the issue of the Merrion Gates. There is provision for a new DART station at Woodbrook, which is great to see. In response to an earlier question, we were told the project is at the early stages of planning. Will the witnesses give me a timeline for where this is going? It is a hugely populated part of Dublin. What is the timeline? If it is at the early stages now where are we overall?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Later this year there will be a round of public consultation on proposals for DART+ coastal south. This will consider issues such as level crossing closures, which we know will be difficult, and what will need to be done south of Bray to increase the level of service to Greystones.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There is an opportunity in this to explain the difficulties with it. People are frustrated that the DART is not more regular. Obviously level crossings are a big part of this. Will the witnesses take this opportunity to explain the reasons for this and what is driving it?

Ms Anne Graham: The DART operates with a frequency of every ten minutes, which would be considered quite a frequent service. With DART+ we want to increase the frequency. One of the reasons the fleet is being purchased is to be able to improve service frequency along these lines and build capacity on the service.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: We would like it to be more regular than every ten minutes, particularly at rush hour. A frequency of every ten minutes is okay.

Ms Anne Graham: A frequency of every ten minutes is significant on a rail service.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Ms Graham should get on at Glenageary at 8.10 a.m. and tell me how she gets on. We would like it to be more regular. I am asking about the practical problems that impede this because people would like to know.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Level crossings are a real constraint on the rail system. They are an area in which there is a safety issue. I will not go into it because we can imagine what it is. They are also in areas where accidents occur when people strike the barriers or something of that nature. The rail system effectively has to be shut down while that is being investigated and sorted out.

Chairman: The Deputy has two minutes left.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: The biggest constraints on increasing services involve things like removing level crossings, potentially upgrading some of the signalling works, which will also be considered as part of this work, and then there is the matter of additional fleet vehicles. The last aspect is to ensure that we have sufficient turnaround areas at terminal points, including platforms, etc., to accommodate additional services.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The briefing material refers to additional turning points. Where are they likely to be?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: We envisage some additional turn backs being put in place at Dún Laoghaire station. I am not sure about Bray. There may be some more to go in there, but Dún Laoghaire is certain.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: If that could be done in Dún Laoghaire, would it then be possible to have a service going from Bray and Greystones, or further, and increase the frequency of the service in more heavily populated areas in that way?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It would be possible to have more concentrated services in a shorter section once there was a turn-back facility installed somewhere like Dún Laoghaire station. It would be possible to start more services there-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Is it possible to estimate the costs that might be involved?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: We would only be speculating at this stage.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: It is commercially sensitive anyway.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: No, it is just that we do not have the information at that level, so I am not in a position to give a clear answer now.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Would Mr. Creegan like to add anything else on the DART+ coastal south programme?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: From our perspective, it is an important project at several levels, and especially at the southern end. Increasing the frequency of services between Bray and Greystones is a fundamental part of this endeavour. The current DART service operates half-hourly, but we want it to be every 20 minutes, because that is much more useful to people. It is a challenging project. There will be issues that we will have to deal with, but for us it is an important part of the DART+ coastal south programme

Chairman: I ask Mr. Creegan to respond to the two Deputies who asked about joining up the dots in respect of the timing of school transport. There is an issue in that regard.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: There is an issue. This is an unusual place to raise it, but constituents have been corresponding with me for some time on this matter. It is a practical problem for two girls' secondary schools.

Chairman: The Deputy has so far not got a resolution to the issue and would like to get an update regarding progress.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Chair.

Chairman: I call Deputy Verona Murphy.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I welcome our guests. I support my colleagues in saying that, from the perspective of school transport and buses, we also have a significant issue in this regard in rural Ireland. Children cannot be delivered to or collected from the bus by their parents. Every year, there seems to be a growing need for a parent who is working to be able to take a child to the school bus. We are having the same difficulties in that regard. It is paramount,

given what we have seen of late, that we keep our children as safe as possible and that we do what we can to ensure that they can be delivered to their doors. There are many instances where the bus passed less than 200 m or 500 m from a door, but it will not go down that route. The bus operators never have a difficulty. When I speak to them, they never have an issue with doing that. Bus Éireann is preventing it from happening. We must have a forum where an explanation is given to public representatives concerning why this is the case, because it comes up year after year and costs a fortune over time. It is preventing people from going back to work. I ask that we look at that in future, because it is not a part of what we are discussing today.

I am baffled by the climate policy that has been developed and how it has no regard, it would appear, for rural Ireland and its requirements. Undoubtedly, those travelling in rural Ireland are disproportionately affected by the rising cost of fuel. I refer to the costs of having to travel to work in rural Ireland, with no alternatives being put in place. The intention in the climate action plan was that the alternative means of travel would be in place before costs would rise. The costs are rising exponentially, however, and no alternatives are in place. The Connecting Ireland rural mobility plan only has a €50 million budget allocated over five years, with €5.5 million of that for this year. It is going nowhere and will do nothing for the services. We are experiencing exponential increases in fuel costs, while Local Link contractors have entered into a tendering process where the price of fuel is not considered. They do not get anything, but they have suffered the consequences of these fuel increases. I ask Ms Graham, Mr. Creegan or Mr. Gaston to comment on whether any proposal has been made to examine this issue or to compensate those affected, because many of our Local Link operators are no longer viable. Before the witnesses answer, the Connecting Ireland policy went out for public consultation in November. The closing date for contributions was December. How close are we to seeing the results?

Ms Anne Graham: I ask Mr. Gaston to answer those questions.

Mr. Tim Gaston: There are two parts to this. The public consultation closed in December and we are analysing the contributions now. We are also in the process of developing phase 1 of the plan. It will be a five-year plan and, as the Deputy said, our estimate is that there will be an increase of approximately €50 million in revenue expenditure to match the proposal. We will deliver phase 1 of the plan in the coming weeks. We have targeted those services that are already nearly planned or where the Local Link offices have been able to indicate there is demand. We will shortly be publishing the phase 1 plan, along with an indication of when phases 2 to 5 will be delivered. Those will involve a more regional approach. The plan will have three main strands. Local Link will provide services, or we will jointly tender and then Local Link offices will oversee the contracts for routes. Bus Éireann routes will be modified. We are also in detailed discussions with several commercial operators regarding licensing. Those are the three strands of delivery which must come together.

Turning to the question of indexation, we are very much aware of the cost of fuel increase. Some of our contracts, those I described earlier, include a fuel index component. If there is an increase in the price of fuel, then the feed we pay them will be increased. Some contracts, however, do not have such a provision. In those cases, we have identified what we believe to be the indexation increase and we are doing a one-off variation for 2021 in respect of the increased fuel costs the operators incurred. If fuel remains at a high price, then we will do a one-off indexation variation for 2022 as well.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Must that be requested or will it be rolled out to all the operators, such as those operating the Local Link services?

Mr. Tim Gaston: It is a bit of both. Some of the operators highlighted it to us, but because we are tracking the fuel index for all our contracts, we were aware of it-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: When is it proposed to do this? We are in a critical situation. Fuel increases have reached levels of 30%, which no business can sustain.

Mr. Tim Gaston: We are seeing increases even higher than 30% and the costs of some fuels are increasing even faster. If payments have not been made already, they are imminent. The discussions are under way.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Okay. I ask Mr. Gaston to update me on that process.

Mr. Tim Gaston: I am happy to do that.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The transport co-ordination units, TCUs, were set up as far back as 2014. I may be wrong about the date. I consult a great deal with my Local Link co-ordinators in Wexford and Waterford. They tell me the NTA is not listening to a word they are saying, that routes are being decided from an office in Dublin that are not relevant to rural Ireland and that is it. I am relaying a message as a public representative on behalf of the constituents who elected me regarding the need to provide a service. We must provide an alternative means of travel, and it must fit the requirements. Therefore, it can not be done from an office in Dublin using Google Maps. It must be done based on genuine co-ordination and not box-ticking. It must be a process involving the TCUs, because they have the people who understand what is required. They cannot be dictated to in a scenario like this because that will not work and it will cost too much. As it stands, Bus Éireann is providing school transport, while section 39 organisations are handling some of our health-related transport. It is all over the place. The TCUs do not appear to be doing what they were set up to do. Policy in this area is becoming more fragmented, as opposed to co-ordinated.

Ms Anne Graham: I do not accept that. I am disappointed to hear that some of our Local Link offices do not consider that they are being listened to by the NTA, because we believe we work closely with them. We are not just-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: Very quickly, I ask Ms Graham to comment on how many bus stops have been put in since 2019? It was said they would all have been put in by then. How many have been erected in County Wexford?

Ms Anne Graham: The Deputy is talking about new services.

Deputy Verona Murphy: No, I am talking about the actual bus stop. The pole that identifies that this is a Local Link service. That is what I am talking about. The bus stop that identifies for the public that there is a service.

Ms Anne Graham: I cannot answer that question at the moment.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I can answer it. There are none, absolutely none.

Ms Anne Graham: I have not had an opportunity to respond to the Deputy on the provision of rural transport services. No authority would ignore the fact that there is a requirement for additional public transport services in rural Ireland and we know-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: The NTA might not be ignoring it. I only have two minutes, with respect. The NTA might not be ignoring it but nobody is doing much about it-----

Ms Anne Graham: I do not accept that. What is Connecting Ireland about except our response to what should be delivered in terms of the provision of rural transport services? That sets out, county by county, in an organised and integrated way, our proposals in relation to the provision of public transport-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: It is very slow. It is very slow and the cost-----

Ms Anne Graham: We have received the consultation on that. We are going to deliver the first phase but we will require additional budget, year on year, to be able to deliver those services.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The NTA has a budget of €1.2 billion and as I said, the minutiae-----

Ms Anne Graham: This is related to the services. This is about our operational costs. This is about the additional PSO or additional operational costs that we need on an annual basis to be able to deliver.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I appreciate that and I agree with Ms Graham-----

Ms Anne Graham: The Government has given us an additional €5 million for this year, which means that we are going to be able to deliver services in rural Ireland. Our ambition is to deliver Connecting Ireland and more than that.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The ambition needs to translate into delivery-----

Ms Anne Graham: It is.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Actually, it is not.

Ms Anne Graham: We have to have a plan in order to be able to deliver against that plan.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The plan is not viable currently. Mr. Gaston has said that the NTA will make recompense but fuel costs have been rising for 12 months-----

Ms Anne Graham: Yes, but we have addressed that. That is going to be addressed. What we are talking about-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: Does Ms Graham know how long it takes a transport contractor facing a 30% increase in costs to go out of business? Not very long.

Ms Anne Graham: It is not in our interest for an operator to close-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: It is not in our interest at all and it is not in the public interest.

Ms Anne Graham: No, and that is why we are working with operators-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: Well, the NTA is not working fast enough. I am telling Ms Graham straight-----

Ms Anne Graham: I do not accept that.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Well, I do. I have sat down with the co-ordinators providing the service. They are doing their damndest, with local knowledge, but it is not being accepted. I have asked them what they have offered and what is on the table. There is no correlation be-

tween what is being offered by them and what is on the table. I ask the NTA to look at it again and to provide the service that is required to give people a public transport alternative. We do not have a viable alternative to the car in rural Ireland.

Ms Anne Graham: That is what Connecting Ireland is going to deliver. We will start delivering on that this year. We have seen an expansion in rural services over the few years-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: We need to see progress. That is all I ask.

Ms Anne Graham: We do need to see progress and we will achieve progress this year.

Chairman: Deputy Dillon is next.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I welcome the witnesses. I thank them for joining us today and for their ongoing efforts throughout the pandemic. I will stick with the topic of Connecting Ireland. As someone who represents a rural constituency, it is a hugely important matter as we move to meet our climate change obligations and ensure that we have sustainable transport into the future. I would like to get an understanding of the current expenditure within the rural transport programme from 2019 through 2020. I note that in the financial statements, PSO payments for Local Link services amounted to €22 million in 2019 and €24.6 million in 2020. What does that expenditure relate to?

Mr. Tim Gaston: Most of that expenditure goes to operators to operate services. Some of it will be for administration by the transport co-ordination units, of which there are currently 15 dotted around the country, but the vast majority of that funding goes to operators to provide services. In some cases, we provide the vehicles but as discussed earlier, in the Local Link programme many of the operators also provide the vehicles. The cost of that operation includes everything at an operational level.

Deputy Alan Dillon: If possible, can the committee be furnished with a breakdown of the percentage of spending on the different categories, for administration, vehicles and so on?

Mr. Tim Gaston: No problem.

Deputy Alan Dillon: To add to Deputy Verona Murphy's point, what is the current expenditure within the NTA's national fund for the Connecting Ireland programme?

Mr. Tim Gaston: Connecting Ireland is a new programme that has not yet delivered. Connecting Ireland is taking the principles that we would have had previously for network planning and so on, wrapping them into a project and seeking additional funding. The spend on rural transport currently is approximately €23 million to €24 million. There will be an additional €5.6 million for new services, enhanced frequencies or longer routes on existing services. We are taking the whole network and rejigging it to make sure that it becomes more useful. The additional cost of making it more useful is the €5.6 million.

Deputy Alan Dillon: In terms of the NTA's collaboration with the different Local Link services, how does it allocate funding to each on a national basis? Is it a demand-led programme? How does the NTA engage with Mayo Local Link, for example, in terms of delivering a local service?

Mr. Tim Gaston: Two things happen. We may well take a county, as we did previously before the Connecting Ireland approach came along, review all of the transport in that county and see where there are gaps and where improvements are needed. A good example of that would

be Leitrim. Last year, we brought together some of the county's health services and closed services and brought them into the open network. With some additional funding from the Government, we were able to provide a better network overall in Leitrim. The TCU managers themselves are often very much in touch with local demand and would present to us. There is process by which they can seek additional services and most of those demands are met, following discussions. We want to see that services link in with trains, with Bus Éireann's regional services and so on.

Deputy Alan Dillon: In terms of the implementation of this plan, the NTA has provided a presentation on the next steps and the timelines. Are we on course to deliver in quarter 2 of 2022, as per the finalisation of the implementation plan?

Mr. Tim Gaston: Yes, we are.

Deputy Alan Dillon: What will we see across Ireland then?

Mr. Tim Gaston: We will see an number of things. We will see some variations to existing Bus Éireann services. Routes will be varied to provide a better overall network. We will also see some new services being tendered. The most challenging piece will probably be in our discussions with commercial operators because as we change the subsidised network, there may well be opportunities for them to seek licence amendments. Those processes will all happen but advanced discussions are already under way with all of the transport co-ordination unit managers about what will be introduced in the first phase in their areas.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I am sure the NTA is aware that services in some counties are better than others in terms of how they implement their own local strategies. In terms of accessing funding to deliver services, is there a set budget there? Ms Graham talked about an additional €5.6 million.

Ms Anne Graham: That budget is in place and it is for additional services. If any additional contracts or tendering are required, we provide the funding for that. We do the tendering with the Local Link offices for new services and the funds are given to the Local Link offices to pay for those services. If it is an extension of an existing Bus Éireann service, then its contract is amended in order to be able to fund the additional cost associated with the extension of its direct-award contract. That is what the €5.6 million is being provided for.

Deputy Alan Dillon: In terms of the NTA's remit, how important is this for the NTA? The authority has a wide scope and is dealing with demands in urban areas for MetroLink, BusConnects and so on but for rural Ireland, this is hugely important. The sum of €5.6 million seems really insignificant in the context of what is actually required.

Ms Anne Graham: As we set out in the Connecting Ireland consultation, we believe that just over €57 million is required to deliver what we set out in the plan.

Deputy Alan Dillon: How much of that has been spent to date?

Ms Anne Graham: We have not spent anything to date because we have just received for this year the first budgetary allocation from Government of €5.6 million. We will require additional funds year on year up to €50 million annually, to be able to deliver the Connecting Ireland plan that we published. Our PSO budget is allocated on an annual basis as part of the standard budgetary process. We seek additional funds through the Department and it is up to the Government to decide if those funds are made available to us or not. At least we have a plan in place

and know what funds are required. The good thing about Connecting Ireland is that it sets out of the network of services and a minimum frequency of services but, if we want to go further in meeting our climate action targets, the frequency can be amended and the operational hours can be extended to meet the demand. If a further reduction of carbon emissions and the provision of more services are required by the Government, the budgetary requirement could be higher.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Ms Graham mentioned in her opening statement the purchase of three hydrogen buses. Could she give us some information on the expenditure on them? In Mayo, there was a significant announcement on a new hydrogen facility that is to come into operation in the next three to five years. As a result of that, the operator will be looking for clients. With regard to the procurement of the three buses, what was the total cost? What will be the plan to review their efficiency?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Those three buses were specially built. From memory, they were approximately €800,000 each. The investment was €2.4 million for the three hydrogen buses. Their purpose is for us to assess whether the technology works for us, what the long-term operating costs are likely to be and the issues with operation, because it involves a different technology. The buses went into service last year. Later this year, we will carry out a formal review of what we have learned, start to work out whole-life costings and then decide whether this is something we should be pushing towards in the years ahead. It probably is, but it is a little too early to be definitive about it. The hydrogen is still very expensive to purchase. Hopefully the cost will come down over time, but at the moment it is expensive. That is our plan at the moment.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: We all acknowledge that transport will be one of the three big areas we will have to deal with. We have to achieve a modal shift. That has got to be the objective, not least because of our climate obligations and the crisis the planet is in but also because there is a very strong economic reason. We need our public transport services to connect and work.

I am a strong advocate of public transport and have been for decades. I have been very active in this regard, including through my co-ordination, along with CIÉ, of a sizeable survey in my area in the 1980s that delivered very significant changes tailored to the needs. I have got to say, however, that my experience with BusConnects has been horrendous. I just do not believe people were listened to. It was said in the opening statement that two phases of the BusConnects Dublin network have been successfully delivered and that there are plans to deliver three more this year. One of them certainly has not been successfully delivered. There are significant problems. I can testify to that because my area is one of the areas where one phase, the C spine, has been rolled out. I cannot measure the H spine and do not know how the witnesses measure success, but success is not empty buses, the generation of more traffic, or people buying cars because the public transport is not working for them. It may well be working to some degree, but you could not say it is successful.

Let me use as examples the L58 and L59, the buses that connect to train stations in my area via Celbridge and Leixlip. The complaint that I most frequently get from the public concerns why money is wasted running empty buses. On most days, the number of people on each bus could be put into a taxi. The service runs every half hour from 4.30 a.m. until 11.30 p.m., empty. Services that were being used have been removed from routes to allow for the delivery of the new services. My office has become the complaints department for BusConnects. That has been my experience of it. It may well be working closer to town. I accept there is a much more direct route if one is going along the motorway or main carriageway rather than into com-

munities, but it is in communities that people live. The buses are not connecting; the feeder buses come after those on the main route. They are not turning up and people are just giving up on them. They are running empty.

The witnesses might provide us with the information on the income. It is not a great time to measure it, because of Covid, but the witnesses might state the income and numbers of passengers before Covid and now. As far as I am concerned, the number of passengers indicates success. We were promised a dedicated line for people to give feedback. We got a booklet with a general number, which I have rung several times. To be honest, it is just a Dublin Bus general number; it is not a dedicated line. I do not know how the NTA picks up the feedback and complaints and how re-tailoring is done. We were given many commitments, including a commitment to have ambassadors along the route. I went out looking for them but did not come across any. Success is not the word that I would use. I am hugely disappointed that there has not been the desired opportunity for the public to engage directly, rather than engaging via other public representatives and me. There is no point in engaging with the witnesses because I do not get a response. I have found the whole process highly frustrating and disappointing. I believe money and opportunities are being wasted.

The NTA had better get the H spine and C spine right before starting to roll other ones out. Considering that the bus is the workhorse of the public transport system in terms of the number of people carried, we cannot afford to get this wrong. I do not want to be critical of the potential improvements to public transport but my experience of it has been awful. Most of the complaints I receive concern the waste. The booklet was sent out a week before the spine was delivered. The NTA needs to learn some lessons from that. People cannot make sense of it. If you have been over and back, made many submissions and are a bit familiar with it, it is fine, but it is not very clear. The NTA really needs to make a much bigger effort in communicating with the public. I would not rely on the feedback on the H spine that the NTA has got so far because my experience of the C spine is that the methods of feedback are wholly inadequate.

I would like an opportunity to contribute later because there are other issues, concerning the DART and the metro, on which I would like to engage. I would like to hear what the witnesses are going to do about measuring success and feedback, because we cannot afford to get this wrong.

Ms Anne Graham: I am very disappointed to hear Deputy Catherine Murphy's remarks. We obviously want to get this right as well because it is in the interest of public transport customers. The difficulty in measuring success in the period of Covid is that we know that only 50% of passengers, particularly those who were required to work from home, are travelling at the moment. It is for our normal customers who would be travelling, particularly at peak commuter times, that many of the services are designed. The Deputy has identified that buses are empty. That could be as a result of the restrictions.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Please do not give me that.

Ms Anne Graham: I am not saying that that is the answer.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Nobody wants some of those services.

Ms Anne Graham: What I am saying is that it is difficult to examine and test a service and see how it is operating when we are in a time of abnormal conditions through Covid. We know that we are not back to normal operating conditions if 50% of our passenger journeys are not

there. We will at all times look at how people are responding, but we would like to get through this period of the pandemic and get back to some normality in terms of operating before we would make any changes in terms of those services.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Is Ms Graham saying that those services will not change until after the pandemic and things have returned to normal?

Ms Anne Graham: We will change in response to demand. The issue is that at the moment demand is not steady or back to pre-pandemic patterns.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Where people were using a service and BusConnects is introduced and services are taken off this is what happens. I am using my area as an example. I am sure this is going to be replicated. The authority needs to be listening to the feedback in those areas.

Ms Anne Graham: Absolutely.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It is not listening to that feedback because there is no method for people to feed back.

Ms Anne Graham: That is something we take on board. We will see if there any improvements we can make to ensure that we get the appropriate feedback.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Will the NTA look at where it is operating services and nobody is using them? The biggest complaint I am hearing is that buses are travelling around empty. People are complaining about the waste. At the same time, they are asking for services previously in place to be reinstated.

Ms Anne Graham: I understand that. Again, I have to reiterate that there is, possibly, a demand that is not there yet because of Covid. When we get back to some normality in terms of people's travelling patterns post-pandemic, if we find that those buses are running empty we will, of course, not continue them.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I presume the NTA carries out traffic surveys. If one listens to "AA Roadwatch", one will note that it is the areas on the periphery that dominate its reports. I have done some measurement around, for example, car numbers between one particular junction and the next, where I noted a considerable increase so it is not that people are not travelling. There is traffic chaos at some of the schools that were previously served by a bus service. Bus services were being availed of during the pandemic, but they are not using them now because the service has changed. This needs to be addressed quickly. How will the NTA roll out the other phases if it has not really evaluated the H and C spines?

Ms Anne Graham: I accept that. We take the Deputy's feedback on board. We will have a look at that again, but I do feel that we need to consider the fact that travel patterns are not back to their normal patterns at the moment. We do examine and improve at each phase before we move on to the next phase.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I cannot accept that. I will not allow that to stand on the record because that is not the experience.

Chairman: I suggest that Ms Graham would come back to the Deputy on the matter.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I do not want this to be localised.

Chairman: There is a particular problem with communication.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I do not want this to be localised. This is about eight spines, two of which have been rolled out. We have to learn lessons. This is being rolled out on an incremental basis for a purpose. I acknowledge that aspects of it are working, but there are parts of it that are deplorable. If the NTA does not pick up on that, it will make the same mistakes on the others. I do not want this to be considered something that is parochial, localised or whatever. It is about a service that works.

Ms Anne Graham: I understand that Deputy. We take that feedback very seriously in terms of looking forward and the future roll-out of BusConnects. I still believe there is an issue around the fact that the patterns are not back to their normal level.

Chairman: It would be useful if Ms Graham would come back to the Deputy on what is going to be done. There is a problem in regard to the giving of feedback, which has been emphasised a number of times.

Ms Anne Graham: We will address that.

Chairman: That needs to happen. We will take a sos now for ten minutes.

Sitting suspended at 11.05 a.m. and resumed at 11.17 a.m.

Chairman: The next speaker is Deputy James O'Connor, who, I know, is rushing from another engagement. If the Deputy O'Connor is not on the call yet, Deputy Munster is next.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I will go back to the questions on next-generation ticketing. Am I right in stating that the authority could not give a date for when private operators on PSO routes would be able to provide the next-generation ticketing system for those aged between 19 and 23? Is it the case they will have to wait for the bus to be replaced or will the account-based ticketing system and technology be provided?

Mr. Tim Gaston: It is not the next-generation ticketing project that is the problem with ticketing for those aged between 19 to 23 but rather the existing Leap card system. The next-generation ticketing is the new scheme that will be coming in as part of the BusConnects programme.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Right.

Mr. Tim Gaston: In the context of the existing network, a percentage - I am not sure of the exact amount but it is not the majority - of commercial operators do not have Leap-enabled ticketing equipment. They might have other ticketing equipment and we might well be able to take information from that. There are a number of policy and technical matters that need to be resolved for whoever the Government asks in that regard to administer the scheme for those aged between 19 and 23. It may be the NTA. Information will be required as to how many young people have travelled, the fare forgone and the compensation due to the operator for providing the 50% discount. As I said, we can do that in a relatively straightforward way for businesses with Leap, which is all the PSO network, but we cannot do that with commercial operators now because only some have Leap-enabled ticketing equipment.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Okay. Are they going to have to wait?

Mr. Tim Gaston: Not necessarily. There may be an opportunity to put in an administrative process whereby the operators present the fare forgone, if you like, that is, the number of pas-

sengers who travelled and what the fare would have been. However, there would need to be an administration team set up to manage that.

Deputy Imelda Munster: If the NTA deems that there is an insufficient number of passengers, is it the case that it is not going to bother with that particular company or whatever? I assume that is why the authority is looking at figures.

Mr. Tim Gaston: Well-----

Ms Anne Graham: Maybe I will respond to that if is okay. The decision in respect of the young adult card and what operating service is funded will be for the Government. Currently, the Government decision is that a young adult card with a 50% reduction on the adult fare will be provided on PSO bus services. We have the infrastructure to be able to deliver that and we have the funding for the fare forgone for that element of the provision of services. Separate from that are commercial licensed services that currently provide 13% of the public bus services throughout the State. If they are to be included in a scheme, a new scheme would have to be developed and funding would have to be found because it is currently not included in this year's budget. While the infrastructure is an issue, we also have to determine what would be the fare forgone and what would be the cost to the State for providing a young adult reduction on commercial services that currently only receive a State subsidy associated with the free travel but do not receive one associated with young people travelling on their buses. We are currently working through, in consultation with the commercial operators, what would be the fare forgone if they were to provide and operate through a Government scheme for a reduction of the fare through a young adult card on their services. A lot of work still needs to be done to ascertain what the cost is as well as to see what the technology issues are as well.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Okay. Has the authority flagged that with the Government and the Department as-----

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Deputy Imelda Munster: -----being an issue or an impediment, as such?

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Okay. Is it possible today for people with the TaxSaver passes or the pensioners and carers to pre-book seats on Irish Rail, Bus Éireann, Dublin Bus and commercial operators' services?

Ms Anne Graham: Can Mr. Gaston answer that?

Mr. Tim Gaston: Yes. Irish Rail accommodate pre-booking through its online channels for people with free travel passes, or any other ticket holders for that matter. Currently, it is not charging for that. Bus Éireann may do so on its Expressway services but we do not provide that on the PSO services of Bus Éireann. There is no pre-booking of seats with any other service, namely, either Luas or Dublin Bus.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That will be an issue. Is the NTA going to address it?

Mr. Tim Gaston: It would be very unusual to have pre-booking on something like the Dublin Bus network because that is mass transit in the city. Generally-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: What of Bus Éireann, say?

Mr. Tim Gaston: We discussed next-generation ticketing earlier. When you have a platform like that, there is certainly the possibility for long-distance journeys that people can pre-book a seat for all of the route or a section of it but at the present time we would not have the platform within the NTA for the services we are subsidising to support pre-booking, other than on Irish Rail where it makes sense for the Intercity network.

Deputy Imelda Munster: What percentage of the total bus fleet is currently wheelchair-accessible?

Ms Anne Graham: In terms of the urban bus services-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes. start with urban.

Ms Anne Graham: All of the urban bus fleet is low-floor wheelchair-accessible.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Okay.

Ms Anne Graham: On the Local Link services, I think about 80% of our Local Link services are wheelchair-accessible. We are moving, with each contract, to get to 100% accessibility on Local Link services. On the regional bus services, there is a combination of high-floor coaches and low-floor, front-access, ramp-access operating on our regional services. I believe it is 100% accessible but they are not all low-floor.

Deputy Imelda Munster: All right, so there would be a lift if the vehicle is not low-floor. Is that what Ms Graham is saying?

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Deputy Imelda Munster: She is also saying that regional buses are 100% wheelchair-accessible.

Ms Anne Graham: If you combine the wheelchair lift with the low-floor access at the door, I believe they are 100%.

Deputy Imelda Munster: There was an issue coming up quite often with the access via the lift. Customers were saying there was an issue. Either they were told they could not access the lift or that there was not a second person there and there were problems with that. Has the NTA managed to sort that out?

Ms Anne Graham: This is still a very challenging area.

Chairman: The Deputy has two minutes left.

Ms Anne Graham: The issue with the wheelchair lift is the space required at the bus stop in order to be able to facilitate the wheelchair lift and the wheelchair. In terms of that infrastructure, we have been working with the local authorities to deliver at least one bus stop that can facilitate those lifts in each main town in Ireland.

Deputy Imelda Munster: What percentage of that has the NTA achieved?

Ms Anne Graham: It is still a low percentage, I think.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Why?

Ms Anne Graham: I could not say we have been successful in terms of our delivery. It has

been a slow delivery. It has been challenging to be able to find the space within the towns and villages to be able to provide that wheelchair lift.

Deputy Imelda Munster: It is not really factually correct to say 100% of regional bus services are 100% wheelchair-accessible if there is an obvious issue with the lift-----

Ms Anne Graham: No, and I accept that. It is actually-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: -----and the bus stops. I mean the provision of wheelchair-accessible bus stops.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes. I accept it is the fleet that is accessible but that does not necessarily mean it is accessible from every stop because the stop infrastructure needs to be improved as well.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Does the Ms Graham have a breakdown of the regional buses on the basis of how many are low-floor vehicles and how many use the lift for wheelchair accessibility?

Ms Anne Graham: Not to hand. We can forward that to the Deputy separately.

Deputy Imelda Munster: All right. If the NTA does not have the information in relation to the bus stops that have the wheelchair-----

Ms Anne Graham: We can report that to the Deputy as well.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Please do. What percentage of private operators on the PSO routes are wheelchair-accessible?

Ms Anne Graham: Again, I do not have that information to hand but I can certainly provide that to the Deputy as well.

Deputy Imelda Munster: All right.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. Her time is up.

Deputy Imelda Munster: When Ms Graham refers to the regional services and Local Link, does she have percentages for urban versus rural in the context of wheelchair accessibility?

Ms Anne Graham: In terms of Local Link?

Deputy Imelda Munster: Outside of Local Link. Or is that solely what she is basing that on?

Ms Anne Graham: As I said, our urban bus services are fully-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes.

Ms Anne Graham: -----low-floor wheelchair-accessible. It is 100%. On other urban areas, I am not sure where else the Deputy is referring to.

Chairman: Okay. I thank Ms Graham. I ask that she comes back to us with the figures on that.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Chairman: Deputy O'Connor has ten minutes.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Chairman. I welcome the NTA to the committee. I have a couple of questions on the budget the authority has at the moment.

I begin with a question around Bus Éireann services, the price of which the NTA obviously has a role in controlling. The fact is we have a private bus system operating under the umbrella of Bus Éireann through Bus Éireann Expressway. How does Ms Graham think that is sustainable, with the NTA also giving in excess of €570 million in PSO funding to operate the same routes? Although they are getting a subvention from the State they are, in some cases, double the price. I will give her one very good example. There is an Expressway service that leaves Dungarvan to go to Cork. It passes through Youghal and Middleton on its way. That costs half what the PSO-funded, NTA-controlled service Bus Éireann provides leaving Youghal to go to Cork does, on a similar journey that is half the distance on the same road. Why is that allowed to happen? The NTA has responsibility for setting the price but it makes no sense that we are giving hundreds of millions in PSO funding and then undermining that system by providing the Expressway service. In Bus Éireann's defence, it is actually managing to provide a cheaper service. Are we wasting the State's money by doing both?

Ms Anne Graham: In terms of what we actually control, we control the fares on the subsidised service, which is the non-Expressway service. The funding we have available to us, which is the PSO, makes up the difference between the fare revenue and the operational cost. With regard to Expressway fares, that is a commercial decision by Bus Éireann, which looks at its operational costs and decides what fare to charge on its services.

Deputy James O'Connor: As the CEO of the NTA, is the irony not lost on Ms Graham that the NTA is putting a very significant amount of public money into trying to improve public transport services, and even though the NTA is subventing these services, they are still double the price of what Bus Éireann is able to provide through Expressway?

Ms Anne Graham: If we were to reduce our fares to the level that Expressway is operating at, we would need a significant increase-----

Deputy James O'Connor: How is Bus Éireann making a profit?

Ms Anne Graham: I cannot make any observation on the commerciality of Bus Éireann.

Deputy James O'Connor: Who owns the Expressway service?

Ms Anne Graham: The State owns-----

Deputy James O'Connor: Does the NTA not provide the price setting capacity on behalf of the State?

Ms Anne Graham: Not for Expressway services or any other commercial services.

Deputy James O'Connor: How is that allowed to happen?

Ms Anne Graham: That is the structure we have.

Deputy James O'Connor: As CEO, what does Ms Graham think of that structure?

Ms Anne Graham: I operate under the legislation that we have and the legislation requires us to provide subsidised PSO services.

Deputy James O'Connor: Ms Graham will not express an opinion on it.

Ms Anne Graham: We try to integrate. This is one of the issues we brought forward in terms of Connecting Ireland, where we are trying to improve the provision of public transport across Ireland. In some cases-----

Deputy James O'Connor: Does Ms Graham think that policy is improving public transport services across Ireland? There is an Expressway service owned by the State and funded by the State, which the NTA is not subventing, and that is fair enough, but it is subventing Bus Éireann PSO services on the same route that operate at twice the cost.

Ms Anne Graham: It may be providing services at different times and at times when it is not as commercial to operate a service.

Deputy James O'Connor: That is not right.

Ms Anne Graham: It also may be providing services to towns that are not provided on the Expressway service. I am not talking in particular about that case but in other locations there may be an Expressway service operating alongside a PSO service. The point I am making is that when we look at Connecting Ireland and how we are trying to connect all of our services, both the commercial services and the PSO services, in some cases the PSO services tend to operate at times when it is not commercial to operate.

Deputy James O'Connor: In the example I provided, they operate in tandem. That is just one example of countless others around the country, I imagine. I cannot see how it is in any way sustainable when the NTA is providing hundreds of millions in PSO funding on an annual basis if Expressway can come in and, frankly, undercut the NTA.

The other point I want to make is that the prices the NTA is charging rural transport users outside of the fare zones, such as the green zone in Cork and the ones around the Dublin metropolitan region, are extortionate. This needs urgent attention. I know what a part of Ms Graham's response is going to be, namely, the lack of funding her organisation gets. Can she not make a case here in the committee to call for that funding or to describe what the NTA needs to do in order to bring PSO service prices down to a level where people will leave their car at home and transition to public transport?

Ms Anne Graham: There are two aspects to that. One is looking at the structure of the fares on our regional transport services. The work is already under way to ensure that, across the country, there is a structured, distance-based fare that is applied on all our subsidised services. As I said, that work is under way to ensure that at least when it is a distance-based fare, it is charged at the same rate in Cork as it is in Dublin or other parts of the country. It currently is not and we are aware of that, so that is something we need to address to ensure it is fair.

We must try to have a balance. When we are looking for additional funds for the provision of services, we have to ask should that funding go towards additional services or should it go to reduce the fares on existing services. Our approach has been to extend the frequency and the provision of services, and that has been our focus, while at the same time trying to at least retain fares and, where possible, reduce fares in order to make them attractive for public transport customers.

Deputy James O'Connor: In the limited time I have, I want to switch to more Dublin-based questions, which are important to ask. With regard to rapid transit systems, it is fair to

say Ireland has had a lot of issues with the availability of public transport, particularly in high density areas and in particular in Dublin, because it is a primate city - let us call a spade a spade. Does Ms Graham think the board of the NTA has the required expertise on an international basis to provide the NTA with the guidance in terms of its capacity to deliver on projects like MetroLink and other major infrastructure projects that the organisation is involved in? Looking through this, I see many people who have experience in financial services and although some are in transport, it is lacking that international expertise that Ireland needs. Does Ms Graham think there is any scope for the board to perhaps look at bringing in some foreign advice in the area of public transport investment?

Ms Anne Graham: I do not think it is appropriate for me to comment on the experience of the board, as the appointments to the board are made by the Minister for Transport. What I have to ensure, as CEO, is that we have the appropriate expertise within the organisation and, if we do not have it, that we seek that expertise outside the organisation to advise us in terms of the delivery of public transport.

The Deputy is referring to Dublin. Many improvements have been made in recent years in terms of the delivery of public transport and additional capacity. The DART has been expanded to a ten-minute frequency, we have seen additional capacity built on the green line and we have seen Luas cross-city constructed. In terms of bus services, we are now in a process of improving our bus services through BusConnects. There are also a lot of infrastructure works to come in order to improve public transport, not just in Dublin but right across the country.

Deputy James O'Connor: That work is welcome. However, taking the facts and figures that we know, Dublin is one of the most congested cities in the world *per capita*, which is obviously disturbing. How does Ms Graham feel the organisation is doing with regard to tackling that issue? What plan does the NTA have for the next ten years to lower that statistic and to bring us out of the bracket the city is currently in when it comes to traffic congestion?

Although many of the projects that involve public transport expansion in Dublin are particularly focused around existing residential settlements in the city, which is necessary, I would also make the point that for commuters outside Dublin city and outside the M50, many have no alternative but to drive because the journey times are unsustainable and there is no capacity available on the services that are being provided at the moment. We need to see rapid action in that area. Post pandemic, there will be a very swift return of the demand that was overwhelming the system in 2019. That is something I have a degree of concern about and I ask Ms Graham to address the point.

Ms Anne Graham: There are many projects that we have outlined. First, we updated our strategy last year and we hope to finalise that. The strategy sets out how we are going to meet the demand, reduce our carbon emissions over the next 20 years and provide for demand not just in Dublin city but right across the region. MetroLink, BusConnects and DART+ are three major programmes of work that are part of the national development plan for delivery of improved public transport across the Dublin region.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I want to return to the issue of BusConnects, considering we are talking about getting people in and out of Dublin with the least congestion possible. We are rightly investing in BusConnects and I am very hopeful about it as a project. However, I am worried about the return on BusConnects as an investment in terms of existing bus lanes, which are certainly a major issue in my constituency, if we are unable to enforce the proper functioning of those bus lanes, especially the many new bus gates. The design of BusConnects is quite

innovative and it will take a bit of time for road users to get used to it. A person who lives in a locality with a lot of bus lanes in it will be able to identify all of the pinch-points off the top of their head. Next week, the penalty for parking in a bus lane will increase from €40 to €80. This is to be commended but unless it is enforced, it will not be very effective. I would be interested to hear what the NTA is doing about camera-based bus lane enforcement. I have raised this issue in the Dáil. I appreciate that there are various parties involved, including the Garda, local authorities and the Departments of Transport and Justice. It seems that it crosses many Departments and that no one is necessarily taking the bull by the horns. Would the witnesses like to make a comment on the NTA's plans or their own expectations of bus lane enforcement in the context of camera-based enforcement? Have they done reviews of this project? Do they have any sense of the cost of such a project? I believe the NTA should be driving it. I know the witnesses cannot comment on policy matters because they are for the Department, but I would like their thoughts on camera-based enforcement.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: We agree camera-based enforcement will be essential to make sure the benefits of the BusConnects infrastructure and the faster service do not get eroded. The Deputy is right that it is a policy matter. In fairness, the Department of Transport is examining this. We are confident that before the new infrastructure starts to get rolled out there will be delivery of additional camera-based enforcement. What it will be is to be worked out but I am pretty sure there will be additional camera-based enforcement in place to support BusConnects in operation.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: At present, it resides in the Department. The NTA is not necessarily organising it. There is no work ongoing in the NTA. Is this correct?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It is correct to say that there is no task force set up to pursue it. We just need to flesh out a plan with those the Deputy mentioned, including the Department, the Garda and others. That plan has to move on to implementation.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Is it fair to say the NTA has the expert-----

Chairman: Departmental officials are present if the Deputy wants to address the question to them.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I might bring in the departmental officials. Before I move away from the NTA, however, I want to ask whether it fair to say that it has the expertise in-house if responsibility were to be placed in its hands?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It is fair to say that we would have enough expertise but so do other organisations. I do not want to say we are the sole body. There are also other bodies out there with a similar amount of expertise.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I will turn to the Department of Transport on this issue. There are often concerns about privacy with regard to camera enforcement. It works very well in other countries. Is there current and active work on this?

Ms Ethna Brogan: I thank the Deputy. I can take this point. There are two actions outlined specifically on developing camera-based enforcement in the new road safety strategy that was launched recently. We are getting together with the relevant agencies, as our NTA colleagues explained. There are a number of agencies involved. Those privacy concerns the Deputy mentioned will also have to be addressed. It is a specific action that we will be bringing forward under the new road safety strategy. That is as far as I can comment at present. It is something

on which we will be actively engaged.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I thank Ms Brogan. As somebody who lives in the constituency of Dublin Central, I know that it will be fundamental to the working of BusConnects. On a somewhat related issue, and this is probably more for the NTA, I want to ask about investment in red light cameras. The small programme to date has focused on protecting the Luas. Are there plans to expand this to protect pedestrians or people with disabilities? There is rampant running of red lights in Dublin. Are there plans for red light enforcement, particularly cameras?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I know the Deputy is aware of the one that was in Blackhall Place.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: It was a very small pilot that we had been waiting on for a very long time.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Because a lot of technology needs to be developed we need to get the overall plan developed. It is not clear to us. If we just rolled out two or three other red light camera locations we might then find a bigger camera programme is to be put in place whereby we would start afresh. The wiser thing to do is to flesh out the overall direction of camera-based enforcement, inclusive of red light running, and then move forward to implement it in a much more coherent way.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: It would have a huge impact, particularly in urban areas, on the feeling of safety that people with disabilities in particular have when crossing the road. I only have four minutes and I do not want it all taken up with this question. On a possibly related matter, will the witnesses quickly outline the oversight of local authorities on the investment in active travel? I am particularly concerned about the implementation of the design manual for urban roads and streets, DMURS. Where there is investment is a review done on compliance with this document?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Yes. I think I mentioned in an earlier conversation that we have a methodology to oversee these projects. This methodology requires us to sign off on various issues at various points. One of the points to sign off is that the design is of the quality we need it to be. It is fair to say some projects have slipped through the net in bygone years. This was due to local authorities and the NTA being vastly under-resourced. Both of these issues have been addressed. I will very briefly take a generic project. The design is done by the local authority in consultation with us. We get the design in and conduct a simple or detailed review depending on how big the scheme is. Only then does the local authority move ahead to construction.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Is that review undertaken in direct reference to DMURS?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It covers DMURS, the national cycle manual and some traffic science publications. It is not that the books are out on the table side by side but it is looked at from the sense of all of these things. It is definitely inclusive of DMURS.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I know DMURS can be seen sometimes as a narrative document and as being open to interpretation, but off the top of my head I can point to a number of projects that certainly do not comply with DMURS that have been built recently.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I did say some things did slip through our net.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: The national cycle manual was mentioned. An update is urgently needed in order to ensure local authorities follow best international practice. The current

national cycle manual is out of date. I would say it is probably not fit for purpose at this stage considering the amount of resources that exist to make good cycling facilities. When will we get the new updated version?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It is being worked on. Next month we will have a draft that we will bring to certain parties to get it reviewed before it is finalised. I would say it will be final in about three months.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: In March 2021, at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action, it was indicated that it would take four to five months. We are a little bit out of date now.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: We absolutely are. The work is being going on but it has not got to the standard we want it to be at. It has taken a bit more time. We do not want to go out with a document that does not get to the standard we need it to be.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Just to be clear, when Mr. Creegan states that the NTA will present it to certain parties I presume it will be presented to the Department and certain stakeholders.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Yes, including disability groups and cycling groups. We will have some kind of consultation with some key stakeholders to make sure they have seen the manual in advance and identify any issue they may have with it before we finalise it.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: A document such as this does not go to public consultation, it just goes to the stakeholders.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Not normally. It is possible we might do so but it is not normal for us to do it.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: What is the status of these documents? Are they considered statutory documents?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: They are guidelines. They do not have the statutory weight of a standard but they have the funding associated with the project, which comes from us generally. It is a core requirement that the design must comply with the standard. The guideline has the same weight as if it were a standard.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I am watching my time ticking down. Can I just be clear when it comes to road engineering that traffic documents, for example, on the width of a road are statutory.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I am not sure I would use the word statutory.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: They are binding.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Okay, they are binding. I would regard-----

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Is it fair to say that road traffic engineers look at standards for roadways that are binding and standards for cycling and walking that are not quite as binding?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: The reason for this is that there are more things to deal with in an urban area. Generally, a road in a greenfield site is quite easy to deal with and we can be very specific. In an urban area with shops, trees and everything else, if we write down absolutely explicitly thou shalt not go below 1 m, we might then find it is 1 mm less than this. We need flexibility in

the document. This is why there is a little more flexibility.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: There are unintended consequences to this.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: There sometimes are.

Chairman: Deputy Sherlock has joined us.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I thank the Chair. I apologise profusely for missing the entirety of the meeting thus far but that was unavoidable. I apologise also if some of my questions have been asked and answered. If they have, that is fine. I can take the answers from the record afterwards.

I want to talk about the Cork-Dublin line. There was an announcement of approximately €91 million, as I understand it, for the upgrading of that line to ensure that the speed at which commuters could travel between Cork and Dublin and *vice versa* is speeded up. I want to get a deeper understanding of where that spend is going and how it is proposed to spend the moneys. I understand that signalling upgrades are a component part of that, and possibly new intercity railcars, ICRs. I could be wrong but Ms Graham will clarify that for me. The reason I ask is because, while I am a weekly traveller on the Cork to Dublin line and I am a regular DART user, I wonder whether the Mark 4 engines are fit for purpose in a modern railway infrastructure and whether there is a proposal to replace those with more energy-efficient carriages and train sets. Where is the NTA in terms of that conversation with Irish Rail? That is my first question.

Ms Anne Graham: In terms of the fleet, we have not been having any conversations in relation to replacement of the Mark 4s.

In terms of the investment on the infrastructure outside of the greater Dublin area, that is not managed by ourselves. That would be managed by the Department. The Department might want to respond to that question.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I thank Ms Graham. The other issue relates to correspondence that we would have received in relation to bus shelters. People may ask why am I asking a question about bus shelters. Bus shelters are important to people who do not have their own transport, particularly if they live in intermediate towns. For instance, if you are living between Cork and Limerick in a town such as Buttevant, which has been waiting for a bus shelter for a number of years, it is entirely appropriate for me to ask where the NTA is in terms of the provision of such shelters and why they are not being rolled out at a quicker pace to ensure that we encourage more people to use public transport.

Ms Anne Graham: Mr. Creegan might respond to that.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It is fair to say and we accept that the roll-out of bus shelters has not been as fast as we would like it to be. Certainly, over the past two years, with various restrictions that we all know about, we have not achieved as much as we wish.

It is more difficult, though, than people think. Generally, what holds us up is that some additional footpath works are required in a particular location before we can put the shelter down. We do not have the *vires* to go in there and dig up those footpaths. We are relying on the local authority doing some work at those locations and they have been pulled all over the place for the past two years.

We have worked with most of the local authorities now and have developed a schedule of

bus shelters that we hope to get installed as quickly as we can. Equally, we will be working with the bus shelter supplier to see can we roll out more shelters as well over this year, next year and onwards.

It is a place where we recognise we have not done enough and have more to do.

The last point I would make is there are other locations where people are asking for shelters and the location just does not suit because either the footpath is too narrow or there is a window or an entrance alongside that is affecting visibility lines. It may look obvious to somebody asking why do we not do it but, actually, we and the local authority could not agree to it. Wherever we can do it, we will try and get over the obstacles that I have mentioned there. We expect to roll out a lot more this year and next year.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I thank Mr. Creegan. I appreciate the answer. I used Buttevant as one example and I am unashamedly parochial in this sense. Buttevant is an example of where infrastructure is not being rolled out in towns and villages that depend on intercity routes. If some attention could be given specifically to Buttevant, I would be very grateful for that.

My final question relates to fare structures. I have a mountain of correspondence with the NTA in respect of fare structures between Mallow and Cork. Mallow is a typical example of a town that is within commuting distance of a big city and where I perceive that there is an inequality as between the commuter who commutes to Cork from Mallow and the person who travels, for instance, from Greystones to Pearse Station in terms of fare structures. I note and welcome the correspondence that I have received from the NTA in relation to the introduction of commuter fares. I wish to raise the issue of commuter fares because there are thousands upon thousands of people who will make the modal shift from car to train if the fare structures are right throughout the country. Mallow is a typical example of that. The sooner we get those new fare structures this year, the better. Overnight, you will see a demand for those services among students, workers and citizens in general. That is why I asked the question about the Cork-Dublin upgrades in relation to speed. If we can get more rolling stock on those lines between Cobh, Midleton, Cork, Mallow and Charleville, for instance, and open up new intermediate stations as well, you will create demand. Quite frankly, that is where the Minister is at. That is where the citizens are at. The more the NTA can influence that and bring that about, the more positive the impact it will have for citizens. If there is a confirmation of the fact that commuter fares will be introduced, as per the NTA's correspondence to me already, I would welcome that. That is my final question.

Chairman: If members want to come back in for a second round, I ask them to indicate if they are not in the room. I have some questions.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: Can I get a response to that?

Chairman: My apologies, I thought the Deputy was finished.

Ms Anne Graham: I can confirm that we will be introducing the commuter fare in Mallow this year.

Deputy Sean Sherlock: I thank Ms Graham. I appreciate that.

Chairman: I have a couple of questions. In relation to the DART+, BusConnects and MetroLink, I read through the briefing notes yesterday that the NTA sent along. I thank Ms Graham for them. There is €46 million spent so far on DART+. There is fleet money there but I

am not counting that. I am talking about spending on developing the project. On BusConnects, there is €89 million spent on developing the project and on MetroLink, there is €88.1 million spent on advancing the project. In the documents that the NTA sent along to us, I was trying to map out the progress on them. While I understand that there will be substantial preparation work to be done, when you put all of that together, €223 million has been spent on preparation work across those three projects, namely, the DART+, BusConnects and MetroLink.

I refer to the documents the NTA sent. For example, DART+ is set out under five headings. If you take DART+ West, Iarnród Éireann published the preferred option for public consultation, with consultation closing on 6 October. On DART+ South West, the second round of the public consultation process on the preferred route was held during November and December. On DART+ Coastal North, there is an initial public consultation project for an emerging preferred route for the DART+ Coastal North project. The DART+ Coastal South project is at an early stage of development and it is currently planned to launch the initial public consultation in the middle of this year. The DART tunnel is similar.

Moving on to BusConnects, if the committee will bear with me, I will find a relevant piece here. In line with the public spending code, the preliminary business case for BusConnects Dublin has been provided to the Department of Transport. It is currently being reviewed prior to a Government decision.

On MetroLink, it is stated that it is anticipated that a railway order application will be submitted to An Bord Pleanála at the end of the second quarter of this year, subject to Government approval of a preliminary business case. To be honest, I was a bit taken aback by where progress with the DART, BusConnects and MetroLink projects stands. The other thing I was taken aback by is the combined sum of €223 million has been spent on this preparation work. Some of them are from way back. There is a long way to go. The witnesses know that and I know it from reading through those documents. Is the amount of money involved as regards preparation work not excessive?

The second question, and I ask the witnesses to keep their answers brief because I have a few other questions, is how much more is it estimated to cost to get it to the stage where we will see JCBs on-site and shovels in the ground? How much more will cost in preparation work for those projects?

Ms Anne Graham: I will ask Mr. Creegan to respond.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: First, “preliminary business case” is the term that is used. This does not mean that it is a superficial business case. It is a detailed one. However, the term that is used in the public spending code is “preliminary business case”.

On the Deputy’s question as to whether the money is excessive, the short answer is “No”. These are enormous projects on an international scale. This is the level of money and investment that is needed at this stage. All experience around the world has shown that if one does not invest properly into working through the design at the beginning, then one will suffer with issues during the construction stage. The wisest euro one will spend is at the planning and the design stage, rather than picking up the problem later on. We have all the controls in place, such as those relating to competitive tendering, etc., to make sure that we are getting value for money and so forth. This is the scale of investment needed for large projects in order to bring them-----

Chairman: In addition to the €223 million, are we talking about another €223 million to

get to the stage where there will be shovels in the ground? Will it be another €100 million? Is there a budget for those three projects?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I would like to come back with an answer on that rather than giving the Chair an incorrect figure now. However, it is certainly a lower figure. Most of the investment is in what we have already done, such as getting the planning applications and the designs ready. Getting it to construction is a smaller proportion, but rather than giving an incorrect-----

Chairman: Would Mr. Creegan accept that some of those projects have a long way to go before there will be shovels in the ground?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: To take BusConnects as an example, we hope that the planning applications will start to go into An Bord Pleanála in a couple of months' time. It will depend on how quickly they go through that process, because there are 12 of them. Hopefully, not all of them will be subject to challenges. Depending on planning process, we could get shovels into the ground next year. We would like to see construction on BusConnects starting next year.

Chairman: Could Mr. Creegan come back to us with a figure for the preparation budget for the three projects?

I would like to move on to electric vehicles, EVs. The 46,615 in the State. Approximately 21,000 were bought in the first 11 months of last year according to the figures that we have. In the Dublin area, 9,816 were bought in that 11-month period in 2021. There are 159 charging points in the Dublin area. People would accept that there is regular public transport in the Dublin area, as there should be, and it needs to be improved. This is not an argument of urban versus rural. I want to make that clear. I understand why there needs to be efficient public transport and continuous work to improve all the time in our capital city and in other cities and towns. In County Laois there are 457 EVs and there are 249 in County Offaly. That compares with 21,519 in Dublin. There are ten charging points in Laois and there are eight in Offaly. That is the best information that I can get via the mapping from the Department or from the NTA. There are 159 points in Dublin. The point that I am trying to make is that there is substantial investment being put into public transport in the Dublin area, as there should be. However, we are caught in a situation in rural counties where the EV is not an option at the moment. One can see that the greatest of number of subsidies for EVs are in the greater Dublin area. A greater number are being bought there. The number of charging points is higher in Dublin, as I would expect it to be. I am trying to point out, however, that the numbers are tiny in rural counties such as Laois and Offaly. The number of vehicles that are being bought as a result of that is tiny. This is because we do not have the infrastructure. As well as this, range anxiety is a real issue because the technology is not there yet.

The other point I wanted to raise about EVs relates to a reply to a parliamentary question that my colleague, Deputy Darren O'Rourke, obtained about the latter. I was taken aback by this, because I had thought people who buy EVs were careful about money and might be a little frugal. I do not mean that in a bad or derogatory way. I thought that they might be careful about the environment. However, the list of vehicles bought last year is jaw dropping. It included Jaguars, Land Rovers, BMWs and Mercedes. There were huge numbers of them. From an NTA and Department issue point of view, and I know this policy issue, but maybe we should look at this again. Are we subsidising Mercedes-Benz, Jaguars, Land Rovers, BMWs and huge Audis in and around the cities where there are already extensive public transport networks?

I do not want to be too parochial about this, but people who live in rural counties like Laois

and Offaly are stuck with petrol or diesel cars and they might not have the money to change them. The option of charging points is not there. The infrastructure is not there. There is also the range issue, which will hopefully be improved, although I think that hydrogen will be the real gig. EVs are not an option in these places because of price, the lack of charging points and range anxiety. Ms Graham might comment on that.

It certainly opened my eyes when I saw the reply to the Parliamentary question on what we are subsidising. I am for subsidising EVs, by the way. I do not want this to be taken up wrong, but are we subsidising 4-tonne cars in areas where 1-tonne cars would do because there is already good public transport?

Ms Anne Graham: That is probably a matter for the Department. In our own work, the only subsidy that we manage is that relating to facilitating the transfer of small public service vehicles, such as taxis, to EVs. The response the Deputy got was probably from the Department. It would not have been through the NTA. We do not have a role in supporting the provision or transfer of-----

Chairman: Will Ms Graham comment from an NTA point of view and an overall transport management point of view as to whether this makes good sense? I see some of these vehicles on the road. These are big cars that are doing short journeys.

Ms Anne Graham: Our role is to try to provide public transport services right across the country, not just in the cities, in order to give people an alternative to the car, if it all possible, and to reduce the travel by car, whether that car has a diesel engine or is an EV. Ultimately, it takes power-----

Chairman: Perhaps Ms Brogan from the Department might give a brief comment on that.

Ms Ethna Brogan: There are a number of initiatives under way in the Department. We can provide more information in writing but, for example, an infrastructure strategy is being developed this year. Also, as the Secretary General set out previously for the information of the committee, an office of low-emission vehicles is also being established within the Department this year to look at policy around the roll-out of electric vehicles and how to support them as well.

Chairman: Will it look at the issue of the large vehicles?

Ms Ethna Brogan: I do not have the details on numbers to hand-----

Chairman: We have them here.

Ms Ethna Brogan: -----but we can certainly follow up.

Chairman: Please do, if that could be examined. We are supposed to try to reduce carbon emissions but the emissions being created in manufacturing these massive jeeps or Jaguars, mostly used for short journeys in and around cities where there is already public transport, does not make sense while people in rural areas have neither public transport nor the option of a modest-sized EV, which most of us would be happy enough with.

I turn to the Ballybrophy to Limerick rail line. I thank Ms Graham for the replies. She sent me back a lot of information on this over the year. Just under €50 million was spent on this in the last ten years between maintenance and investment. That is welcome however a point that I have made before and will make again today, one train goes up and down that line once a day. There is huge potential there. We have a regional strategy, which I welcome, with the delivery

of Limerick, Galway and Waterford. We need to seriously look at how we can use that line to increase tourism around Limerick, the south west, Tipperary and south Laois. It is travelling to Ballybrophy. Much more use could be made of it. The car park has been expanded at Ballybrophy station which we looked for and is good news. The line has been upgraded. I have received answers in the past that the travel speeds had to be kept low because of the lack of investment but substantial investment has gone into it. It needs an on-the-spot, up-to-date engineering examination. I ask Mr. Gaston to come back to me on that. There is tourism potential but there are also large numbers of students and workers commuting from south Laois, down through Tipperary, Roscrea, Cloughjordan, Nenagh and the towns along there, who would make use of it. It goes straight into south Laois. There are tourism and commuter opportunities that can be exploited and explored.

Ms Anne Graham: Certainly. While the Department is looking at the infrastructure side in respect of the strategic rail review, the NTA and Iarnród Éireann are looking at the services we provide on that national infrastructure to see if we can get better use and make the best use of the infrastructure that we have and will have in the future. That investigation is under way.

Chairman: Will Ms Graham get back to me on that?

Ms Anne Graham: We will take the Chair's point into consideration as part of that.

Chairman: There are resources there that can be used better.

Ms Anne Graham: We understand that.

Chairman: It is a win-win. Many people would feel that. I look forward to progress on that.

Some members have indicated that they wish to come in a second time.

Deputy Verona Murphy: The Local Link contracts are up for renewal in 2023. I believe they can be extended for one year. Does Ms Graham know what the NTA will do or when does she anticipate that it will let the current Local Link providers know?

Ms Anne Graham: I do not know the current position but we can give the Deputy an indication of what we propose on that. Normally we would have to give them notice if we were going to go to tender or not. I am not sure what the appropriate notice that we have set in those contracts is. I can let the Deputy know in more detail.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Like anything, time is of the essence. They will probably need to know that too.

Returning to my earlier remarks, it was my own assertion from the information that I was given from the co-ordinators and when I looked at Connecting Ireland, that it did not seem that anything had been taken from the co-ordinators' views and inserted into the Connecting Ireland plan. That is what I meant rather than it being the co-ordinators' view. It is my view that this is how it is carrying on. A plan was provided, there were proposals but none seem to have been taken on board - I refer to my area of Wexford and Waterford - and I would like to see better engagement. The fact is that the co-ordinators do know best. As someone who was in transport for 30 years I can only commend them. They are doing a great job and they know what they are about. I would not say that lightly. I mean that. I know that these people know what they are doing.

Ms Anne Graham: We recognise that. In any reviews of the rural transport programme, as we rolled through, we always put forward that we needed the local input into whatever services we were planning and we needed people to manage the services locally on our behalf because that is the most appropriate structure to put in place.

In case there is confusion on the Connecting Ireland plan, what is proposed in that plan is the scheduling of regular scheduled services, where we want to improve those services. Associated with those are the demand-responsive services. They are not set out in the plan.

Deputy Verona Murphy: How does the NTA come up with those plans?

Ms Anne Graham: We tend not to come up with those. It is the Local Link offices which would have much better knowledge in terms of demand-responsive services.

Deputy Verona Murphy: When I made a previous query on that in a parliamentary question, the answer I received was that it was compiled from Central Statistics Office, CSO, figures.

Ms Anne Graham: That might have been related to the regular rural services that we are talking about, where we look at demand and what is set out in terms of people's travel patterns. That is as a result of the information that we get from the CSO. That is looking at establishing a network of regular services-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: I do not mean to cut across Ms Graham but we have limited time. In what came down as routes and what was proposed there were no changes. That would indicate that the NTA is not taking it on board. I would ask the NTA to look at it, reflect and come back to me. I am asking Ms Graham to take this on board. I appreciate she is saying that the NTA does but I cannot see it because it is not reflected in what is being divvied out.

Ms Anne Graham: I think that is related to the regular rural services. The Local Link offices are in contact with us related to those at all stages and at all stages of the delivery.

Deputy Verona Murphy: On delivery, I come back to bus stops. There is an issue. Rather than holding up the meeting, will Ms Graham write to me about the process? There is good engagement with Wexford County Council with my office, at least. The person in charge there has rolled out a number of bus stops but not at the behest of the NTA. They have been co-ordinated through the Local Link services. I know they have been carried out but there should be more.

Ms Anne Graham: They would have been funded by the NTA. While they would have been planned by -----

Deputy Verona Murphy: Yes but with difficult, time-delayed interactions.

Chairman: I call Deputy Catherine Murphy.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It is very difficult to compare the 2020 income with 2019 because of Covid. The income grew. We understand and acknowledge the earlier point about the provision of services at the time, particularly for key workers. It was impacted by remote working and so on. We understand that. However, there was also feedback from women who said that they did not want to use public transport in the evening, after dark or late at night. What is the NTA doing to understand what will be required to rebuild the use of public transport?

I have been interested in demographic settlement patterns for decades. There has been a doughnut-shaped settlement pattern with Fingal leading the charge in growth, followed by

counties Meath and Kildare. They are all putting pressure on the city centre. The three outer counties have a bigger population now than the city centre has. That is abnormal and needs to be rebalanced to an extent. When you start looking at some of the initiatives like DART+ and MetroLink, the areas that are generating that traffic are the ones that lag far behind. For example, DART+ is going as far as Maynooth and Hazelhatch. Why is it not going as far as Sallins and Kilcock and what can be done to dovetail that with the railway order to do so? It is, in fact, going to Kilcock as a huge facility is going in there; it is just that people will not be able to get on, which seems daft. Perhaps the witnesses could respond to those questions.

Ms Anne Graham: On public transport services, Mr. Gaston will probably want to chip in in response to the Deputy's question. Naturally enough, when people have been told not to use public transport during the Covid pandemic, it has had a very significant impact on confidence in terms of the safety of public transport through a pandemic. However, there are a number of people who have been using public transport through the pandemic. We put in place additional cleaning and other controls in order to build up the confidence that people have in public transport. In terms of trying to attract people back to public transport, we are looking at marketing campaigns to build confidence. We were just talking, yesterday, about how we would build people's confidence in using public transport again where they have not been using it over the last two years. We are trying to see if we are in a position to do anything from a funding perspective on fares reductions in order to encourage people to use a particular service. For example we ran the Kids go Free campaign pre-pandemic. We are looking at whether to run that again to encourage young people and their parents to use public transport. Perhaps Mr. Gaston wants to add to that.

Mr. Tim Gaston: I think Ms Graham has covered most of it. The biggest challenge we face is understanding what the new pattern is going to be and what the new normal will be. The one thing we are sure of is that most white-collar workers will not be coming into the office five days a week. Will it be four or will it be two? If it is two, that is a very different arrangement for us than if it is four. The other challenge we face is determining whether everybody will want to work Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. They actually still need the same peak for only three days of the week, where previously it was spread over five. There is a number of things that we need to see teasing out. There is work under way at the minute, recognising exactly the point the Deputy has made that the suburbs are busier than the city centre now. That is where the growth has been. We anticipate that we may and will need to rebalance how bus services are managed to give more service and more frequency, particularly more services between the peaks in the evenings and weekends. That is one of the deliveries that is coming through in BusConnects.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I refer to Ms Graham's point that the NTA is looking at organising campaigns to encourage people to be confident in using public transport and possible fare reductions in that regard to encourage more people to use services. Of course, it is in line with our climate action policies and plan and the NTA's objective to encourage people to use public transport. There are two issues that I wish to raise on foot of that. The first is one that I have previously contacted the NTA about, namely, the short hop zone that currently extends to Balbriggan. The witnesses will know that the hybrid DART is going to be extended, on the northern rail line, as far up as Drogheda. That would indicate that the greater Dublin area now extends as far as Drogheda. There is a huge problem, which as I said I have flagged up previously, namely, the disparity in the cost of rail fares between Drogheda and Dublin, Laytown and Dublin and Balbriggan and Dublin. As a result of that, many people, particularly in Laytown, choose to drive to Balbriggan. There is a difference of €25 in the cost of a weekly ticket. There

is a situation where people living in the east Meath area and working in Dublin will drive to Balbriggan and then get the train from Balbriggan to Dublin. If you are talking about a difference of €25 a week, that adds up to a substantial amount over the course of a year. It flies in the face of everything the witnesses have said on the NTA's objective and our climate action policy. Thus far, I have not had much luck campaigning on the issue. Will the NTA agree to examine the issue and look at the practicalities, given what they have previously outlined? It will stop people getting into their cars and driving to Balbriggan or indeed, on to Dublin, because it works out cheaper for them to drive.

The other issue that I wish to raise on foot of Ms Graham's points concerns the D1 and D2 bus routes. Again, it is logical, practical and for the life of me, I do not know why there is resistance. The buses operate between Drogheda and Laytown. They are very successful and a huge amount of the public use them. However, the current terminus is at Laytown train station and the thousands of people living in the Julianstown area have asked for the route to continue on as far as Julianstown. If the witnesses listen to this, they will see that it is madness that it has not been done. At the moment, the only way for residents in Julianstown to travel to Laytown - and bear in mind that Laytown has the train station, a beach and other amenities - is to drive. That particular 4 km stretch of road between the two villages has neither lighting nor footpaths. It is extremely dangerous to either walk or cycle on. If parents are taking their children to activities in Laytown, they have no alternative but to use the car. If that bus route were to be extended, it would also link the coastal villages of Laytown, Bettystown, Donacorney and Julianstown. Julianstown has connecting buses to Swords and Dublin Airport. The only way to get there currently is by car. It would also provide a link for the residents of Julianstown to all of the coastal villages and, of equal importance, it would provide public transport from all of the villages to the national ecology centre, Sonairte, which is on that road. For the life of me, given climate change policy and the objective of the NTA to get people to use public transport, I do not know why there is resistance. It is logical and an alternative to the car. Do the witnesses believe something like that is logical, practical and in line with NTA objectives and Government policy? I ask them to explain why it has not been done.

Chairman: We are up against the clock. A specific proposal is being put to the witnesses in relation to that group of villages. It is perhaps a local issue that the NTA can examine and revert back to the Deputy. I call Deputy Devlin.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: In the few minutes I have, I wish to raise two issues. One concerns security. My colleague mentioned the fear, particularly of women, on public transport, but it also applies to teenagers, the elderly and other users of public transport services. I am aware that there are private security firms, which I understand are hired by the operators, if I am not mistaken. As the transport authority for the country, what is the NTA's view on proper security? I am not a fan of security. I prefer a Garda presence but that is beyond all of our powers here. I would like to hear the thoughts of the witnesses on the matter as representatives of the NTA.

Ms Anne Graham: I will refer to Mr. Gaston, who can respond to the Deputy's question.

Mr. Tim Gaston: The Deputy has touched on an issue that is very pertinent at present, namely, antisocial behaviour and the whole question of it. Our experience and the feedback from customers is that it is typically both men and women who feel unsafe at times on public transport. Having said that, the research that we have done shows that over 90% of people who use public transport rate it as safe. However, there is a highly significant perception among people, who perhaps do not use it or do not use it very often, that there are safety issues.

There are two main differences between the train and tram services for people that are typically on a vehicle. Whilst on a tram there may be a driver, he is at one end of a long Luas tram and may or may not be aware of what is happening on the tram. On a train, passengers are even further away from the driver, who has no direct access to customers. On the onboard and on-platform issues that passengers are facing, whilst overall what is being reported to us is that there has been a reduction from the mid-point of 2021, there are still some very unsavoury and high-profile incidents that we want to work with the operators to address.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: Is it a requirement that the operators have to pay for that?

Mr. Tim Gaston: They fund that through the PSO funding that they will receive. Hence, Transdev and Irish Rail will receive funding from us. If we need additional funding to support additional initiatives, we will seek that from the Government. What we have seen, though, in both Luas and in Irish Rail, is an increased connection with An Garda Síochána. They both have control rooms. They are making increasingly good use of CCTV systems to see incidents occurring on the platform and, if necessary, they can call in the Garda. I have to say on record that we are getting a good response from the Garda and we are working increasingly closely with the force. Luas is undertaking a project at present to have live-streaming from inside the tram. This will be a big step forward. If the control room can see what was going on inside a tram when a customer reports an incident, then they can call the Garda and get them on board, if it is necessary to do so.

Deputy Cormac Devlin: I thank Mr. Gaston for the response. The feedback I get is that the platform is not the most dangerous part. It is when they are on the actual transport facility, whether that is a bus, DART or a Luas. On a bus, the emphasis is on the driver to monitor what is happening on board, as well as maintaining safety on the road. I believe there needs to be a dedicated Garda unit to this, whereby its members can hop on or hop off all various types of transport. Has the NTA has engaged with the Garda on that? I hear what Mr. Gaston is saying about the good response times and the good response generally. However, I would like to know that the NTA is pushing for this. Finally, in my last few moments, I ask the Department about the taxi advisory committee. Has that been fully appointed now? Are all the nominees on it? Is it meeting?

Chairman: Does Ms Brogan want to come back with a brief reply on the taxi issue?

Mr. Tim Gaston: On the question of the Garda Síochána, I can confirm that I meet regularly with it at assistant commissioner level. We discuss all the matters that the Deputy has raised, as well as a range of others.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Gaston. Does Ms Brogan want to reply?

Ms Ethna Brogan: Unfortunately, I do not have the details to hand on the current composition of the taxi advisory committee. However, I will certainly forward those, along with the other details that we have undertaken to forward in writing to the committee members, as soon as possible.

Chairman: Before we conclude, I want to ask Ms Graham about bus shelters. While it sounds like a small issue, I have engaged with Ms Graham on this many times over the past 11 years and although some progress has been made, it is terribly slow. I have a couple of things to note, one of which is they cost a lot of money. I have observed two things. First, some of the areas that we have put forward do not require a big bus shelter. In Monasterevin, the NTA put

in a big one. It was right because there were more people at the bus stop than at the train station and it needed a big bus shelter.

Portlaoise could do with a second one, particularly on the upper-bound line. I ask Ms Graham to examine that. There is a very small one at Lyster Square, opposite the shopping centre in Portlaoise. That needs to be bigger.

I would like to focus on the route along the R445 through Borris-in-Ossory, Castletown, Mountrath, Portlaoise and Ballybrittas for a moment. There are no bus shelters along it. Bus shelters have been promised. Can we look at ones that are less expensive? I argue strongly that Borris-in-Ossory needs one. There is room on the street as there is a wide main street, which has been bypassed. We can make better use of what is there. Could Ms Graham come back to me on what is happening on that?

When one is standing on the road in Castletown waiting for a bus, cars or trucks pass at high speed. On a wet day or on a wet morning, when people are going to work and children are going to school, they are wet before they even get there. We need to try to provide a small bus shelter there. In Mountrath, there may be problems with footpath widths. However, the local authority needs to be given latitude around Patrick Street, Mountrath. It is a wide street and the parking bays have been built out in order to designate the parking spaces. This means that there is street space on Patrick Street. Portlaoise needs a second one on Lyster Square and Ballybrittas needs a bus shelter. Again, it does not need one as big as those in the larger towns. It does not need one as big as in Monasterevin.

On the N78 route, bus shelters are needed at Crettyard, Newtown and Ballylynan. Again, small ones would do in Crettyard and Newtown. There is loads of space for them. At Ballylynan there is a wide street with build-outs to designate the parking areas. I was in Ballylynan on Saturday and there are locations there for bus shelters. The weather has been dry for the last two weeks, but there was a week when it rained all week. We want to get people onto public transport but we live in a country with a wet climate where we get intensive periods of heavy rain.

I forgot to mention Kilminchy. There is supposed to be a bus shelter on each side of the road there. Kilminchy alone has over 1,000 people living in it. There are a couple of thousand more people living around that end of Portlaoise. It urgently needs a bus shelter on each side of the road there. Again, there is space. If we are going to get people to use public transport, we have to provide that. I ask that a smaller model of bus shelter be looked at. I have seen big ones going up in areas where there are generally one or two people using it. I want to see that figure increasing, as I am sure Ms Graham does, to six, seven or eight people, in order to get people out of cars. However, people will not get out of the car on a wet day to stand on the side of a road, or leave the car at home or forget about the car altogether to use public transport unless we have that vital infrastructure. I do not expect Ms Graham to come back to me with all of the details in an answer. However, perhaps she could come back to me on each one of those.

To conclude, the local authorities under the bus legislation that was brought in eight years ago were given greater role in respect of bus stops. This is for the Department to take on board as well. Local authorities need to be the bodies that designate them, put them up and put them in place. I mean no disrespect to the witnesses but cannot be co-ordinated from their office. The NTA cannot be sorting out bus stops in Castletown, Crettyard and places like that. That needs to happen locally, with the municipal districts of the council, with the councillors and with the engineers. Of course, the NTA designates the bus routes, and I am not arguing against

that. However, that needs to be devolved down. While I understand that the NTA must operate within the legislation that is there, can you give any slack to the local authorities to allow them do as much as they can? I would argue for that. Would Ms Graham like to respond briefly on that point?

Ms Anne Graham: We will respond to local authorities that come to us with plans.

Chairman: Have you, though?

Ms Anne Graham: We do not really want to be going to the local authorities with plans. We want them to come to us. All we are doing is funding it, effectively. This is because that will speed up the delivery as well. If plans are brought forward by local authorities, I am sure that we would try to deliver those as quickly as possible. However, we have found that we have had to engage local authorities, to really get them engaged on delivery those kinds of things.

Chairman: There should be resources too, in that department.

Could Ms Graham come back to me about the N78 route of Crettyard and Ballylynan and the R445 route through Borris-in-Ossory?

Ms Anne Graham: Okay.

Chairman: I thank the NTA and the Department for joining us here today. I thank the staff of the NTA and the Department for their work in preparing the documentation and briefing notes for us. I also thank Mr. Seamus McCarthy, the Comptroller and Auditor General, for, as always, assisting the committee.

Is it agreed to request the clerk to seek any follow-up information following the agreed actions arising from today's meeting? Agreed.

Is it also agreed that we note and publish the opening statements and briefings of today's meeting? Agreed.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I apologise to the Chair for missing my slot. I advised the clerk that I had an alternative committee. I presume that I am too late to come back in at this point, am I? Perhaps to assist the Chair, many of my questions are for the TII, who will be with us next week. Perhaps I will reserve my questions for next week. Having worked with Ms Graham in the past, that if there are other issues I want to come back on, I can come back directly to the NTA after I speak to the TII next week.

Chairman: That is okay. I have been watching out for the Deputy all morning. I know that he was held up unavoidably with other parliamentary business.

Deputy Paul McAuliffe: I was solving gender balance, Chair, which only takes an hour or two. Unfortunately, it does not.

Chairman: It is important that the men take that seriously. If the Deputy has any particular questions for the NTA, Ms Graham will take those on board and she can follow up with him.

The committee will suspend until 1.30 p.m. We will resume in public session to consider correspondence and other business of the committee.

The witnesses withdrew.

Sitting suspended at 12:40 p.m. and resumed at 1.34 p.m.

Business of Committee

Chairman: The business before us today includes minutes, accounts and financial statements, correspondence, the work programme and any other business. We will go into private session before adjourning. The first item is the minutes of the meeting from 20 January, which have been circulated to members. Do members wish to raise any matters relating to those minutes? If not, are the minutes agreed? Agreed. As usual, the minutes will be published on the committee's website.

The second item is accounts and financial statements. Between 13 December 2021 and 21 January 2022, 27 sets of accounts and financial statements were laid before the Dáil. I will ask the Comptroller and Auditor General to address these before opening the floor to members.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: As stated by the Chairman, there are 27 sets of financial statements. In general, they relate to the 2020 year of account and, in most cases, a clear audit opinion. No. 1 is the special EU Programmes Body, which is a North-South body that I audit in conjunction with the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland. It gets a clear audit opinion. No. 2 is the National Library of Ireland, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 3 is the Local Government Fund, which is a substantial amount of €1.5 billion, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 4 is An Bord Pleanála, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 5 is the Credit Institutions Resolution Fund which, again, gets a clear audit opinion. No. 6 is the Food Safety Promotion Board, again a North-South body, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 7 is the National Council for Special Education, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 8 is the National Tourism Development Authority, Fáilte Ireland. In this case, I gave a qualified audit opinion. The accounts give a true and fair view except in regard to pension funding, in my view. Unlike most other grant-funded bodies, the financial statements of the National Tourism Development Authority do not recognise a deferred retirement benefit funding asset in regard to some of its pension liabilities. This is on the basis that the authority considers that it has not been provided with a statutory or other guarantee in regard to the future funding of the scheme. As a result, it has a net liability position on its statement of financial position, but it still believes that it is appropriate to prepare the accounts on a going concern basis. I have drawn attention to that. I think it should be recognising a matching pension funding asset.

No. 9 is Tourism Ireland, again a North-South body, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 10 is the An Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 11 is the Intestate Estates Fund Deposit Account, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 12 is the National Paediatric Hospital Development Board and its accounts for 2020. I give a qualified opinion in that case also. The accounts give a true and fair view except that they account for the costs of retirement benefit entitlements of staff only as they become payable. That is a standard instruction for health sector bodies from the Minister for Health. Otherwise, the accounts give a true and fair view. No. 13 is the special account Hepatitis C Insurance Scheme, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 14 is the National Training Fund, again a sizeable fund of €718 million, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 15 is St. Angela's College, which is a college of education in Sligo, to which I gave a clear audit opinion but I draw attention to Note 11, which again relates to retirement benefits accrued by current and former staff. That is standard for the university sector. No. 16 is the National University of Ireland, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 17 is the Law Reform Commission, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 18 is St. James's

Hospital, which is one of the section 28 hospitals. It is given a clear audit opinion, but I draw attention to non-compliance with procurement rules in that case. No. 19 is the Sport Ireland Facilities company, which is a subsidiary of Sport Ireland, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 20 is the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman, which gets a clear audit opinion, but I draw attention to Note 9 to the financial statements, which deals with the superannuation arrangements for staff. Discussions are ongoing between the Office of the Ombudsman and the Department of Finance about the responsibility for the funding of pension liabilities under the schemes. That has not been resolved.

No. 21 is the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 22 is the Leopardstown Park Hospital Board, again a section 38 hospital, which gets a clear audit opinion. No. 23 is the special account for the purpose of the Health (Repayment Scheme) Act 2006. This is a relatively small turnover and it was reimbursement of charges that were improperly levied. A scheme was put in place to provide for that. It is a clear audit opinion. Related to that is the health repayment scheme donations fund, which had a nil turnover but the account continues to exist. There is a clear audit opinion on that. The Health Service Executive consolidated patients' private property account, which had a turnover of €41 million and net assets as of 31 December of a total of €103 million got a clear audit opinion. This is actually private funding of individuals but it is being managed and held in trust by the Health Service Executive.

No. 26 is the Institute of Public Administration and that got a clear audit opinion. No. 27 is the Irish Museum of Modern Art, which gets a clear audit opinion. There were three of the accounts that were signed on 30 June and only presented in December. They are within the committee's scope for asking for an explanation. Those are No. 4, An Bord Pleanála; No. 8, the Fáilte Ireland accounts; and No. 27, the Irish Museum of Modern Art. The certificate for the National University of Ireland was signed on 30 August but the Department has already provided the committee with an explanation for why it was late. That is in the correspondence for today.

Chairman: With regard to St. James's Hospital, the amount is €516 million.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: The turnover.

Chairman: Yes. The turnover is €516 million but if the amount is over €500,000, that is what we raise questions over. How much is it?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: There is not a definitive figure. The hospital looked at a sample of its procurement. The figure was approximately €60 million and it found 6% by value, I think, that was non-compliant. I will get the exact figure if the committee bears with me for a second. I can get the figure before the end of the session but I do not seem to have it to hand.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have a couple of points for clarification. On the special EU programmes body, Mr. McCarthy has indicated this is done in conjunction with the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland. How does that work if there are essentially two audit processes?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Effectively, we agree on the plan for the audit and then one or the other audit office carries out the actual audit work. When the report on the audit is prepared, it is assessed by both management teams. If I raise a matter, the Northern Ireland audit office may pursue it with the client if that is what is required, for example. We each lead on three or

four of the actual audits.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Okay. On Fáilte Ireland, Mr. McCarthy mentioned an issue with pension liability. Is that an issue for the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform or the line Department? With whom should we correspond to get clarification?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: That is the line Department, really. The obligation is on the board of the agency to form a view as to what is the appropriate accounting policy to pursue. It has taken a very strict line but when we analyse the circumstances of the pension liability, it is effectively saying there is no guarantee it will be funded in the future to meet the pension liabilities that staff have already accrued. To my mind, that does not actually reflect the reality and there is an implication. If an action was taken in law, I think the funding would have to be provided.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I suggest we write to Bord Fáilte in the first instance to get clarification. It would also probably be appropriate to at least raise the matter with the line Department. We should reference that it has been brought to our attention.

There are a couple of accounts with very small amounts of money. The special account for hepatitis C has €1.7 million, and this is small in the wider comparison. Will Mr. McCarthy explain the current purpose of that account?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: In the mid 1990s, because of HIV contamination and certain people suffering as a result of blood transfusion contamination, they were not able to get life insurance. There was a difficulty around things like mortgages and so on. A scheme was put in place where the State would, effectively, subvent their insurance. Payments are being made year on year to allow them to cover the risks.

Deputy Matt Carthy: Is the figure of €1.7 million growing every year?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: No. It is fairly level. It is a small amount of money. I reported a number of years ago on the accounts related to hepatitis C and HIV. I think I included that. There is a time series on that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: There is the special account for the Health Repayment Scheme Act and it is €150,000 and the health repayment donations fund, with a nil turnover. Are they serving a purpose at the moment?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: I do not think so. Around 2003 or 2004, it was determined that residents in long-term care institutions had been charged on a basis that did not have a legal foundation, so moneys had to be repaid to them. The special account was used to make the payments back to those who had been improperly charged or to their estates. It was recognised that some people might feel they need it because they had gotten a service and paid for it. It was anticipated that some people would feel it appropriate to donate the money instead of receiving it back. The donations account is there to receive that money instead of it going to the individuals. There has been very little turnover on that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I am sorry for holding us up and the Chairman will be glad to hear I must go to the Dáil Chamber in approximately ten minutes so he will be rid of me for a while at least.

I have a general query in the first instance relating to accounts and financial statements, particularly financial planning. This arises from the commentary relating to the scandalous case of

the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, in County Kerry. It is a scandal in the first instance in health terms. It is clear from reading the reports that there will be a significant financial outlay in potential legal proceedings and in the resolution of the matters. There is a Garda investigation and a review ongoing but this is not the first time we have had a case like this. In fact, our health services are littered with stories and scandals of this nature.

Where is such a case reflected in terms of the potential liabilities that could arise as a result of such cases in accounts and financial statements? I am talking about the ultimate cost to the taxpayer. How do we as a committee examine the financial obligations? Whatever the findings of the Garda investigation or the review, we can probably say with absolute certainty that there will not be a single individual in the HSE who will pay a price with a job, reprimand or future entitlements. That, in itself, is as big a scandal as the actions in Kerry. I am seeking the Chairman's guidance as much as anything else in asking what role this committee can play in such cases to hold people to account. A HSE spokesperson is quoted as saying: "It would be unfair of us as an organisation to single out any identifiable individual or individuals." I would say it is unfair on the people affected for the individuals responsible not to be identified and singled out in this instance. I would like clarification on the role of this committee in that regard.

Chairman: Perhaps Mr. McCarthy would like to address that.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: I would expect that the claims that will be lodged will be lodged with the State Claims Agency, or at least handled by it. It will, in due course, identify what it expects the implications of the claims will be. That will be added to the contingent liability that it reports in its financial statements each year. Ultimately, when payments come to be made, there will be a charge on the HSE at corporate level, as it were, and it will not appear in any other set of financial statements.

Chairman: That clarifies one aspect. Another is that this committee is not in a position to deal with this on its own. Due to situations like this one, the cervical smear tests and so on, compensation is running into the billions of euro at a time when we are trying to get investment to fill gaps in key areas of the health services and other services. This is a question that the Oireachtas needs to address. There are very few people who would disagree with the Deputy.

There will be an inquiry. I want to be careful about the Kerry situation because there will be legal proceedings and we do not want to do anything to jeopardise them, but on the face of it, what has happened looks scandalous.

In situations where there is clearly mismanagement or some other problem, no one is held to account and there is no penalty. Until we reach a point where there is some kind of penalty in such situations, they will keep happening one after the other. These situations have arisen during each of the three Dáileanna of which I have been a Member. There were inquiries and reports were issued. The people who are responsible can shrug their shoulders and say there is a report, but there is sometimes very little action taken on those reports. More important, no one is held to account. If that changed, people would be more careful to avoid giving rise to these situations.

Deputy Verona Murphy: We have to be cognisant of the fact that, if I make an inquiry about health services in Wexford, I am directed to CHO 5. To get an answer from CHO 5, I have to ask a parliamentary question. Someone could go around in circles for a long time all while a situation is developing. I have a situation where a GP has referred three teenagers to CAMHS. They were all rejected, in that they could not be seen. It will take weeks, if not

months, to get an answer. I hope there will not be a loss of life.

Regarding Deputy Carthy's point, the consultant in this case will be adjudicated on by his profession. He will face the Medical Council. We purportedly have systems in place that protect children, but they are clearly not working. The system is broken.

Chairman: We are digressing, but as legislators, there is a job to be done in terms of putting in place systems of accountability. I have-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: If the Secretary General of the Department just took €81,000 in an increase, someone has to have a key performance indicator, KPI, somewhere and be responsible. Is it a big wage with no responsibility or burdens? I do not get it.

Chairman: It is clear that there is a problem with the systems of accountability. I find it frustrating. As an Oireachtas, all parties should come together and try to do something to put in place not only checks and balances, but also penalties for when people clearly allow a situation like what happened in Kerry or with the cervical smear tests to arise.

I want to move on.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have another issue I wish to raise.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Can I raise-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: I agree with the Chairman, but if this committee does not pursue the need for accountability in such instances, then no one else in the Oireachtas will do so. We need to be cognisant of that when we are compiling reports.

Chairman: We can make proposals but-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: My final point relates to accounts-----

Chairman: -----it is the Oireachtas as a whole that would have to do that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I accept that.

I wish to raise the debacle of the pay of the Secretary General of the Department of Health. The Chairman will recall that, when we asked the Secretary General about his publicly stated position that he was waiving a portion of his salary, he refused to answer our questions. Having submitted parliamentary questions to the Departments of Health and Public Expenditure and Reform, I was struck to see there was no mechanism to find out whether individuals were returning some of their salaries to their line Departments. It strikes me as strange that €80,000 could be handed back and it could not be identified in accounts. I wish to make two proposals in this regard. The first is that-----

Chairman: It will come up on the agenda, Deputy. I discussed with the clerk putting it on today's agenda under any other business, AOB.

Deputy Matt Carthy: On the off chance that I am not here for that, I request that we write to the Department of Health seeking clarification as to when that salary ceased to be waived-----

Chairman: We can do that.

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----and how it is addressed in the accounts. I am happy that the

matter is on the agenda under any other business, AOB, but it raises bigger questions about the type of information that we are getting from Departments.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. Regarding the issue of accountability, the committee can put together a proposal and put it before the Oireachtas.

Deputy Colm Burke: I wish to discuss the CAMHS issue. In terms of medical negligence, my understanding is that we will be paying out approximately €540 million this year. This figure has been increasing every year and will continue to do so. When the State Claims Agency appeared before us, it stated that there was over €4 billion in claims now. The problem in the Kerry situation is that there were no checks and balances. Who was responsible for putting those checks and balances in place? This person was not a consultant. How was someone who was not a consultant put in place without appropriate checks and balances? This question needs to be answered.

Chairman: We can correspond with the Department of Health on that matter. The proposal-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: I do not want to delay us but there have been reports, particularly in the media, that the whistleblower has been asked to take time off. We cannot have situations where people are victimised for speaking out about issues like this.

Chairman: We are dealing with the accounts. With members' indulgence, I suggest that, for next week's meeting, they put together a proposal that we can send to the HSE and the Department of Health. That is the best way forward. There is a feeling in this committee that we need to follow through on this matter.

Deputy Colm Burke mentioned something that was also in my mind, namely, the raft of claims that are coming. Some €4 billion was the figure we last heard in that respect. Are we going to see another €2 billion or €4 billion on top of that? Somewhere along the line, this has to stop.

Can we agree the accounts and statements as-----

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: May I respond to the question on the scale of the non-compliant procurement at St. James's Hospital? The sample examined involved 20 suppliers and a total spend of €59 million. Of that, it was found that 6% by value - over €3 million - was non-compliant. It was sizeable. That was not a full survey of all procurement.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I have to go to the Chamber. Is it agreed that the committee should write to the Department regarding the waiving of the Secretary General's salary?

Chairman: That will come at the end. The Deputy has made the proposal.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It is just in case I am not here.

Chairman: We will deal with the substantive issue on the agenda. Are the statements noted? Agreed. As usual the listing of accounts and financial statements will be published as part of our minutes.

Moving to correspondence, as previously agreed, items that were not flagged for discussion at this meeting will continue to be dealt with in accordance with the proposed actions that have been circulated, and decisions taken by the committee in respect of correspondence are

recorded in the minutes of our meetings and published on the web page.

The first category of correspondence under which members have flagged items for discussion is B, correspondence from Accounting Officers and-or Ministers and follow-up to matters relating to previous meetings.

No. 1009 B is correspondence from Mr. Niall Cody, chairman, Office of the Revenue Commissioners, dated 14 January 2022. It provides information requested by the committee on ten diverse issues, including the taxation of couriers, the number and associated value of seizures of drugs and cigarettes from 2019 to 2021, expenditure on facilities at Dublin Port and Rosslare Europort due to Brexit, a monthly analysis of the support Revenue has provided to each sector during the pandemic, and the settlement between Revenue and Perrigo. It is proposed to note and publish this item. It was flagged for discussion by me and Deputy Matt Carthy.

Two separate pieces of correspondence come under No. 1009. One gave a breakdown of the use of the voluntary PAYE scheme over the 15-year period from 2004 to 2018. There is a table of the gross pay of the taxation by a number of employees and number of employers. One thing that stood out, which I found very unusual, was that in 2018 the gross pay of those ten employers for 154 employees was €1,524,970 and tax paid €22,329, and the number of employees 154. That means that the wage for each employee was about just over €10,000. The taxation the PAYE paid was €144 for the year by employee. I want to take more time with this but it is something that we may have to follow up again with Revenue. There is certainly something unusual about that.

Deputy Carthy has left, but other members may wish to comment on the second document. It relates to bogus-self employment. Revenue have sent a document from the Chief Inspector of Taxes. It is copy of a document dated from 1997. It says that compliance of tax by couriers “was ‘put on hold’ until the status of couriers for tax and PRSI was concluded”. This is from 7 March 1997. It states:

As you are aware, the Department of Social Welfare Appeals Office have decided that a motorcycle courier who provided his own equipment (e.g. motor cycle, special gear etc.) and was engaged under the standard courier contract was insurable as a self-employed contractor under the Social Welfare Acts.

While the decision is not binding on Revenue I propose, as previously stated, in the interest of uniformity and with a view to bringing the matter to a conclusion, to treat couriers as self-employed for tax purposes, whether deliveries are made by van, motorcycle or bicycle ...

That appears to be at complete odds with what we were told when Revenue was before the committee, namely, that there was not a uniform decision to treat all couriers as self-employed. The document refers to treating couriers as self-employed for tax purposes elsewhere. It can be seen that the decision was made to treat all couriers as self-employed. I wanted to bring that to the attention of the committee. If any member wants to come in on that, feel free. Any future engagement may have to revert back to that. We will note and publish that correspondence.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: For clarity, is it the suggestion that this is not the most up-to-date statement of the employment status of couriers that is on the public record but that it is the most relevant.

Chairman: We received this correspondence. It is dated 17 January.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Yes, I have it in front of me. This is the document that they have in front of them when they are making these decisions. Before we get to the nebulous definition of whether a courier paid for his or her own helmet defining or whether he or she is self-employed, I must state that any document dating from 1997 completely predates any of the current business models relating to couriers. I just want to record my surprise that it is a document from 1997 that we are referring to when we are making these kinds of decisions. Is it worth following up with Revenue whether this is really the most up-to-date piece that it has?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: There are tax briefings which are updated on -----

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Do they supersede this one?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: They outline the current position, I think. So while there is obviously a history of this and while certain things are more articulated in the 1997 document, the current position and the basis for it is set out in the tax briefings.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: But this can be seen as a kind of seed document from which the rest of it grows.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Exactly.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: I thank Mr. McCarthy for the clarity.

Chairman: It is from the Chief Inspector of Taxes to Mr. Kieran Ryan, chartered accountant. There is absolute clarification in that letter dated 7 March 1997. That is the point I am making. It seems to be at odds with many of the answers we got here.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Certainly it is.

Chairman: Looking at the table of taxation for the ten companies, the income is in the region of €10,000 per employee and the taxation yield is €144 for a year in 2018 seems very much at odds with the reality of what that might be.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: I think in the evidence given by the chairman when he was here last, he did say that a very substantial number are employees and they are taxed as employees through the PAYE system. The current figures are only in relation to those who are availing of a PAYE facility. Even though they are treated as self-employed, they are availing of a Revenue facility for payments. That completes their process. At €10,000 a year and with significant expenses deductions, there would be very little income tax liability.

Chairman: It would be hard to live on that in 2018 though, would it not?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: On €10,000? Yes, it would of course.

Chairman: You would not have a great lifestyle out of that.

No. 1011B is correspondence from Mr. Mark Griffin, Secretary General, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, dated 17 January 2022. It provides detailed information requested by the committee in respect of the national broadband plan. That will be relevant to our meeting with National Broadband Ireland, NBI, and the Department on 10 February. We are meeting with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, next week. Information is also provided relating to grants under the retrofitting scheme. It is proposed to note and publish the correspondence. Is that agreed? Agreed. There are a number of issues in it that I prefer to

keep until next week, having had some time to look at it yesterday.

No. 1014B is from Mr. Fergal Lynch, Secretary General, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, dated 18 January 2022. This arises from information requested by the committee regarding compliance with procurement guidelines. Last week, we considered an interim response from the Secretary General, No. R1004, and the substantive response is before us today. In its 2020 accounts, the Department disclosed non-compliant procurement totalling over €91 million, and 151 of the 153 contracts concerned related to the provision of international protection accommodation, which is part of direct provision. Responsibility for this area was transferred to the Department from the Department of Justice in 2020. In No. R0939, the Secretary General explained that he took the view that these accounts, which the Department of Justice considered to be competitively procured, should be included in the disclosure of an uncompliant procurement for 2020. Linked to efforts to address this non-compliance is the Department's work in implementing the White Paper to end direct provision and to establish a new international protection support service. The Secretary General includes an overview of that process. It is proposed to note and publish this item, except for details of the individual contracts which are provided on a confidential basis, and also to forward it to the relevant sectoral committee for its information. Is that agreed? Agreed. Two Deputies had flagged that for discussion but they are not present.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Chairman, I am here.

Chairman: I am sorry, Deputy Munster.

Deputy Imelda Munster: It was just about getting an update. There were recommendations from the advisory group, and that included the number completed in the fourth quarter of last year. Could we look for an update on that? Also, could we ask when we can expect a timeline for the implementation of the White Paper?

Chairman: Okay, we will ask for that.

Finally, members will recall that we had requested information regarding 11 bodies that provide funding to An Taisce and agreed to consider those responses together today. However, while analysing the information the secretariat noticed that it is not complete. Any payments that were made to An Taisce from the then Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht would have been made exclusively by the heritage division of that Department. Responsibility for the heritage function no longer resides with that Department as it transferred to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage as part of the transfer of functions in 2020. As the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage did not provide the requested information relating to its heritage function, for which it now has retrospective responsibility, the secretariat has sought an update on the heritage funding. While it is open to any member to address the responses now, I propose that we hold over consideration until we have the complete picture. Is that agreed?

Deputy Colm Burke: When are we likely to get the full report on that?

Chairman: We have requested to have it by next Tuesday.

Deputy Colm Burke: Thank you.

Chairman: In fairness, it is part of the disruption caused by the big changeover in Departments.

Deputy Colm Burke: Yes.

Chairman: Some Departments have five or six different roles. This one went to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Hopefully, we will have it soon.

No other items of correspondence have been flagged for consideration today.

The next item is the work programme. Next week, on 3 February, we will engage with Transport Infrastructure Ireland to examine its 2020 financial statements. On 10 February, we are scheduled to examine expenditure on the national broadband plan with NBI and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. As agreed last week, we have a series of housing-related meetings scheduled after that with the Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government, the Residential Tenancies Board and Home Building Finance Ireland. The secretariat is working to make the necessary arrangements which would take us up to 3 March.

With regard to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, an issue that has arisen is the provision of women's refuges, and, unfortunately, it has become more pressing in the past fortnight for the wrong reasons. There are nine counties without a refuge and it is causing big problems. Perhaps we could add it in and take it as a small item in one of those meetings. We could address that with the Department regarding what is being spent on it, what money it has and what plans there are for the future. Nine counties, including Laois and Offaly, do not have a premises. Women and children are being sent miles away from schools, doctors, support groups and families, with no transport and nothing. That is along with the trauma of being out of the family home and in many cases being victims of domestic violence. One can imagine the extra layer of difficulty. I have dealt with too many of them, unfortunately, over the years. Does Deputy Hourigan wish to come in on that?

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Yes, Chairman. To be honest, I was going to ask if we could include some of the issues regarding emergency accommodation in the 17 February slot. However, the issue you have raised is very pertinent at present so I second the proposal that we include that in it. I might come back to the emergency accommodation on another occasion.

Chairman: Thank you. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The only other item I wish to raise regarding the work programme is that there are some more developments with the University of Limerick, UL. I propose to put it on the work programme again. Matters are far from being resolved there and there are a number of serious issues that might need further examination. With the agreement of the committee, I propose that we invite the chancellor, who is the chair of the board, to appear before the committee on the next occasion. On the last occasion, the president, who is a relatively new president, was put in a very difficult position. We have to ask the hard questions, but in some ways she was fairly new to it. That is not doubting her ability or anything like that, but she was dealing with a lot of issues that arose or started before her term.

The last issue I wish to raise relates to the three separate meetings scheduled on policing. Combined with the three on housing, that is six gone. With the mid-term break, we are looking at two months gone. Could we amalgamate two of the meetings on policing? There are meetings with the Policing Authority, the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, and An Garda Síochána. We are having three-hour rather than two-hour meetings now. The Garda Síochána appropriations accounts would need a separate day by itself, but perhaps we could bring in GSOC in the first part of one morning meeting and from 11 a.m. we could take the

Policing Authority. Deputy Catherine Murphy asked for it to be included, but I am not sure that we have much to go through with the Policing Authority. She obviously has issues she wants to raise and I want to be fair to her, but I suggest that we do it as part of one engagement. Have members any strong feelings one way or the other on that? If not, then we will seek to do that on the same day. If anyone has a better suggestion, he or she should feel free to make it, but I suggest that we take GSOC first because there are a number of issues involved. That would be from 9.30 a.m. until 11 a.m., after which we could take the Policing Authority. Would that order be okay? Agreed. We will ask the secretariat to arrange it that way, which will bring things back a week. An Garda Síochána would be taken as a stand-alone item.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: Can we return for a moment to the issue of the chancellor of UL attending? Would it be helpful if we agreed a date that was far enough ahead? I agree that it is vital that the chancellor appear before, and talk to, the committee. There is no point in sending someone to us who is not in a senior position to explain what was happening in UL. I feel strongly that the chancellor should attend. Would it be useful to set a date that would give UL a few weeks' notice and allow us to ensure attendance?

Chairman: There is one slot coming up. It would be after the justice matters. If we are addressing the issues relating to the Garda at two meetings instead of three, it will give us more space. We will try to schedule that so as to give plenty of notice.

Deputy Neasa Hourigan: If there is any issue with the chancellor not attending, we might return to the matter at our next correspondence meeting.

Chairman: That concludes our consideration of the work programme.

Under AOB, which is the last item on the public agenda, I wish to raise a matter and then open it to the floor. It arises from our consideration last week of R1000 from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform concerning the format and content of the appropriation accounts of Government Departments and offices. We agreed to include this as an agenda item for today's meeting. This matter has arisen several times, including last week. It is an area that we need to try to improve. Members might also recall that, last November, we agreed to request that the Department include the committee in any consultation process involving proposed changes to the framework for accounting by central government agencies, rules around management of public funds and the publication of codes of practice for governance of public bodies. It is welcome that the Department has agreed to do so. We also included a number of potential additions to the information presented in the appropriation accounts, including legal costs and pay and staffing. The Department has made changes in respect of reporting on legal costs. They will come into effect this year for the 2021 appropriation accounts. This is a good move and is welcome, as is the fact that the Department has committed to considering the other suggested changes for the following year's appropriation accounts.

However, there is one other change that, in the interests of transparency and accountability, the committee should request that the Department act on for the 2021 accounts. It relates to pay, specifically the remuneration of Accounting Officers. It is not detailed in the appropriation accounts and, as noted in our letter to the Department, this is significantly out of step with the standard of disclosure expected of non-departmental State bodies under the code of practice for the governance of State bodies.

I will open the matter to the floor before requesting agreement that we write to the Department to request that this information, as well as the previous year's remuneration, be prioritised

and included in the 2021 accounts. Members will recall that we went through a rigmarole trying to get information on the pay of Secretaries General and we only got vague answers or did not get answers at all. That is not satisfactory. There are now four separate grades of pay for Secretaries General. There used to be three. Exactly what is being paid out in this regard needs to be shown in the appropriation accounts when we receive them, which would normally be the following September. Does any member wish to comment?

Deputy Verona Murphy: I agree with the Chairman, but does that suggestion go far enough? Perhaps the Comptroller and Auditor General has something to say. Are we talking about the pay grades of all civil servants?

Chairman: Accounting Officers. If we focus on just Secretaries General, we may be leaving out other positions. With the agreement of the committee, we will ask about Accounting Officers.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Anyone paid out of the public purse should have to detail his or her salary in the interests of transparency.

Chairman: We already get that information from other State bodies.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: The standard in the accounts of State bodies as opposed to Departments and central government offices is to set out the chief executive's salary but also the fees paid to board members. Departments do not have boards, though. The chief officer of a Department or an office could be a Secretary General, a director general or, as in the case of my office, the secretary and director of audit. There are a variety of pay levels depending on the scale of the office. To be consistent with the code of practice, it is probably appropriate that there be such a disclosure in the-----

Chairman: To clarify, there are now four pay grades for Secretaries General.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Yes, but some offices are headed up not by people at Secretary General level, but at assistant secretary level. In order to know what the chief officer is paid, there needs to be that disclosure in the appropriation account.

Deputy Verona Murphy: I cannot see why not.

Chairman: We will request that.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: The appropriation accounts are typically signed off on at the end of February or March, so any request to the Department would need to be made promptly in order to-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: In time for this year.

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: For the 2021 appropriation accounts.

Chairman: The clerk will act immediately and request that. Is it agreed that we write to the Department as proposed? Agreed. Do members wish to raise other matters before we go into private session?

Deputy Matt Carthy: Could it also be agreed that we write to the Secretary General directly to ask him about the period of time during which the portion of his salary was waived?

Chairman: We are asking for it to be shown in the 2021 accounts when they are published

so that we can see what pay was given over the past year to Secretaries General. Normally, we get the accounts in September. When we get them-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: Would it not be handier to ask the question now and get the information in February?

Deputy Verona Murphy: No. This way, it would be done every year. It should be done every year.

Deputy Matt Carthy: I agree, but-----

Deputy Verona Murphy: It would be transparent-----

Deputy Matt Carthy: -----we should do both.

Chairman: We can request it now.

Deputy Verona Murphy: -----without being too targeted. We do not want to make it personal. As far as I am concerned as a member of the Committee of Public Accounts, we should just have transparency in all Departments.

Chairman: If that is the committee's wish, we can write now.

Deputy Matt Carthy: My proposal is that we do both. It would not undermine any other process.

Deputy Verona Murphy: But one is more urgent than the other. The reasoning is that we would have the information included in the 2021 accounts.

Chairman: We will correspond with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to get an answer on that now. Before Deputy Carthy rejoined the meeting, I mentioned that we had gone through a long rigmarole trying to get this information. We asked questions but have been led around the place for a number of months. That is not a satisfactory way of doing business. From here on out, we will seek for the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to show this information in respect of Accounting Officers in the accounts of all Departments just as it is done in the accounts of State bodies.

Deputy Matt Carthy: It will not be a big part of the accounts because I do not believe it is a widespread practice. This is a specific issue. I agree it is not a personal one. The fault lies with the leaders of the Government who agreed to a salary increase of over €80,000 with no process used and, as yet, no justification given. I took umbrage at the fact that one senior Government Minister, the leader of the Green Party, pointed back to this committee and stated that it is up to the Committee of Public Accounts to get answers when he knew that the committee had raised the questions in the first instance and the answer was refused. For the avoidance of any doubt and for clarification, it is appropriate that we would write to the Secretary General to ask for information about this specific case. I agree that we should have a process in place for the medium and longer term.

Chairman: This was raised in early January 2021. The committee heard about it. We should not have to be led around like that, backwards and forward.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I agree with the suggestion that we should not have to write to request this information. As the Chair said, it is a battle a day to try to get the information. In

future, it needs to be clear-cut that the information should be furnished to us annually. Deputy Carthy has a point about the special additional salary that was added under such controversy. We need to write separately about the fact that it was waived. That is important too. That is €81,000 of public money in addition to the normal salary. It is not to be sneezed at. We need clarification, given how much obstruction there has been about it so far. I see validity in writing to both.

Deputy Verona Murphy: Maybe the Comptroller and Auditor General can answer this for us. Would I be right in saying that the author of this legislation regarding the requirement is the current Secretary General at the Department of Health?

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: Is the Deputy referring to the requirement for State bodies to disclose the chief officer's salary?

Deputy Verona Murphy: Was the current Secretary General, who is being obstinate-----

Mr. Seamus McCarthy: That would be the case. The code of practice was last updated in 2016.

Deputy Verona Murphy: It really is one law for them and one law for others. I fully agree with Deputy Carthy. I want one practice to continue and to be transparent in future.

Chairman: If what we are putting to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, which has taken on some of our suggestions, is acted on, that would be welcome. It should take this one on board. There is no reason not to. As the Deputy said, what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. We would then not have this again in the coming years. We would not have to go on a wild goose chase to get answers to questions. Regarding the role of the Committee of Public Accounts, the joint report from it and the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, is absolutely clear in the 14 recommendations. I do not see any reason for Government not to take it on board. We and the committee that Deputy McGuinness chairs did not work on that report for it to gather dust on shelves. That report needs to be acted on. It is clear with regard to benchmarking and how these figures are reached that there are issues with transparency and process. They are laid bare in the report. The case is laid out for what needs to be done. The recommendations are clear. This is an all-party committee. There are Government and Opposition members of this committee. The positions of the Committee of Public Accounts and the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach, which is the same, are clear.

Along with our duties in this committee, we have a responsibility as Members of the Dáil to make sure to raise this and keep an eye on it, to ensure that it is followed through on. The concern from last year was that if a small group of people can arbitrarily decide to jack up pay by €80,000 or €84,000, it does not inspire public confidence at a time when we are cutting back pandemic unemployment payments and other payments. I urge members from all parties to watch that and to make sure that it is followed through on. We will do what we can to make sure that it happens.

We will write to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform about the format in the appropriation account in future. We will also request a reply to the question that the Deputy proposed.

Deputy Verona Murphy: To the Department of Health?

PAC

Chairman: Yes. That will be done. When we return in February, we will engage with Transport Infrastructure Ireland.

The committee went into private session at 2.35 p.m. and adjourned at 2.42 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 3 February 2022.