

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM NITHE A BHAINNEANN LE MÍCHUMAS

JOINT COMMITTEE ON DISABILITY MATTERS

Déardaoin, 3 Meitheamh 2021

Thursday, 3 June 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Holly Cairns,	Alice-Mary Higgins,
Seán Canney,	Erin McGreehan,
Emer Higgins,	Fiona O'Loughlin,
Jennifer Murnane O'Connor,	Mary Seery Kearney.
Pauline Tully,	
Violet-Anne Wynne.	

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Martin Conway.

Teachta / Deputy Michael Moynihan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Accessibility in Planning and Delivery of Transport Projects: Discussion

Chairman: We have received apologies from Senator Ivana Bacik.

The purpose of today's meeting is to discuss the accessibility in planning and delivery of transport projects. On behalf of the committee I wish to extend a warm welcome to the representatives from Transport Infrastructure Ireland, Peter Walsh, chief executive, and Sarah O'Donnell, designated access officer. I am also delighted to welcome from the National Transport Authority, Mr. Hugh Creegan, deputy chief executive. Ms Anne Graham, chief executive, will join the meeting shortly.

I remind members that they are only allowed to participate in this meeting if they are physically located on the Leinster House complex or in the complex of the Convention Centre Dublin when the Dáil is sitting. In that regard, if members are joining the meeting remotely they should confirm where they are, whether on the grounds of Leinster House or in the Convention Centre Dublin, while making a contribution to the meeting. Anyone watching the meeting online should note that witnesses are accessing the meeting remotely. Due to the unprecedented nature of everything please bear with us should any technical issues arise.

I will outline some formalities. I wish to advise witnesses that, on the matter of privilege, they are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of the proceedings should be given. Witnesses are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against a person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I wish to advise members giving evidence from a location outside of the parliamentary precincts that the constitutional protection afforded to witnesses to give evidence before committees may not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given on this, due to the unprecedented nature of where we are, or on the extent to which evidence is covered by absolute privilege. Persons giving evidence from another jurisdiction should be mindful of the domestic statutory regime. If a witness is asked to cease giving evidence in respect of a particular matter, he or she should respect that direction from the committee. Everyone is reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice not to criticise entities or persons outside the House. I call on Mr. Peter Walsh of Transport Infrastructure Ireland to make his opening remarks.

Mr. Peter Walsh: I am not on the precincts of Leinster House. I am joining the meeting remotely. My thanks to the committee for the invitation to attend today. I am joined by my colleague, Sarah O'Donnell, who is TII assistant chief architect and designated access officer.

I understand that the committee wishes to discuss accessibility in planning and delivery of transport projects. It is an objective of TII to provide an integrated and accessible transport system which enhances the quality of life for all members of the public. Access for all is central to any scheme design and operation carried out by TII, either directly or by third parties on its behalf.

The Disability Act 2005 imposes significant obligations on Departments and public bodies to work proactively towards the improvement in the quality of life of people with disabilities.

The red and green Luas lines opened in 2004 and represented a major milestone in accessible public transport. The strategic decision to follow the continental model of new generation light rail meant that people with a vision or hearing impairment, wheelchair users or those with mobility issues could travel independently for the first time. Low platforms, level boarding,

passenger information displays, on and off-board audio messaging, accessible ticket vending equipment, audio loops and other facilities were developed in consideration of, and in consultation with, people with disabilities. This ethos of close engagement continues today. As a forum, the Luas user group has proved effective in achieving consensus with marginalised groups, in hearing their needs and in applying these, where feasible, to the earliest stages of design. Members of the group comprise representatives from the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, Voice of Vision Impairment, Irish Guide Dogs, Chime, the Irish Wheelchair Association, Enable Ireland and other social inclusion groups. Transdev, the Luas operator, also participates in this consultation process, which often includes targeted site visits and thematic presentations of relevance to the group. Recent engagement with members of the coalition of disabled persons organisations has expanded TII's engagement with the disability community in line with a social model of disability, as set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ratified by Ireland in 2018.

At the early stages of the MetroLink project, TII made a renewed call-out to disability groups and representatives with a view to reaching as many people as possible. Following the first round of non-statutory public consultation, submissions were received from the National Disability Authority and the National Council for the Blind of Ireland. A dedicated user group presentation on MetroLink was held on 24 September 2019 and more recently on 28 January 2021. A further user group meeting is scheduled for July 2021 and will be followed by a series of thematic workshops on the construction, infrastructural and operational phases of MetroLink to ensure accessibility is fully incorporated into the project requirements, as appropriate.

TII also sits on the Department of Transport accessibility consultative committee, which reports directly to the Minister on matters relating to disability and public transport, including key issues arising from the user group meetings and actions pertaining to the National Disability Strategy implementation plan.

As a public body, TII has developed corporate structures to support best practice in sustainable and accessible design. As well as the requisite access and inquiry officer roles, TII has established an internal accessibility committee to promote a cross-divisional approach to accessibility and to encourage the highest standards of service for all users of the transport network throughout the country. The committee comprises individuals from across all the directorates of TII and has developed protocols to address *inter alia* the Irish Sign Language Act 2017, the European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020 and the Employment Equality Act 2015.

The commitment of TII to accessibility extends to the national roads network. In February 2020, TII launched its disability toll exemption scheme. This national scheme replaced the cards that were previously issued by individual toll plazas and not only simplifies the process for applicants but also expands the scheme to enable qualified able-bodied drivers of disabled passengers for the first time to avail of an exemption. Approximately 8,000 vehicles have registered under the scheme to date.

TII is a key stakeholder in the development of the Department of Transport design manual for urban roads and streets. In addition, TII has a role in setting standards and guidance for national roads. TII's traffic calming and transition zones guidance sets out design guidance for walkers, cyclists and other vulnerable road users in our villages and towns. This aims to ensure that all users along our national roads are considered in streetscape works for new schemes and upgrade works to existing streets.

In addition, TII carried out an accessibility review in 2019 of all TII-controlled, as-constructed, motorway service areas to establish compatibility with guidance in BS 8300, Building for Everyone and Changing Places Ireland. This entailed a review by a specialist architectural consultant and input from stakeholders from the disability community. Recommendations arising from this review relating to changing facilities, aisle widths, disability awareness training and so forth are currently being rolled out.

No system is perfect and of course constraints and barriers remain. Where these arise, TII is committed to understanding concerns and to seeking solutions. My thanks to the Oireachtas committee for allowing TII the time to make this statement. I will answer any questions I can and, if not, I will get back to the committee on them.

Chairman: I now call on Hugh Creegan of the National Transport Authority to make his opening remarks.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I thank the committee for the invitation to attend. I understand the committee wishes to focus on accessibility in planning and delivery of transport projects nationally with a focus on rural transport planning and regional BusConnects projects. As the Chairman said at the start, I will be joined shortly by Ms Anne Graham, chief executive officer of the authority. The importance of public transport for people with disabilities is fully acknowledged by the authority. Recognising that importance, we are committed to ensuring that the transport infrastructure across Ireland, covering rail and bus services, inclusive of fleet and stations, are fully accessible. All new public transport infrastructure and public transport fleet are designed and constructed to be fully accessible. As parts of our public transport infrastructure date back many decades, however, we also have to address legacy elements of the existing system that were not designed with accessibility in mind.

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

Other regional bus services are operated under public service obligation contracts with Bus Éireann, Go-Ahead Ireland and other operators. New low-floor coach vehicles have been introduced on many of these routes to allow wheelchair access via door ramps, which replace high-floor coaches that require a wheelchair lift arrangement and the prior removal of up to four passenger seats to accommodate the wheelchair.

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

BusConnects is a programme to transform bus transport in each of our main cities to make the overall bus system operate better and become more useful to more people. It encompasses

the revamping of all aspects of the bus system, from the ticketing technology to the road infrastructure, the bus stops to the network of routes and the fare structure to the vehicle livery.

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

Significant levels of public consultation have been undertaken with regard to the BusConnects Dublin proposals to date and it is intended that this engagement will be replicated in the other cities. Members have been provided with an appendix to this statement, setting out various details of the status of accessibility arrangements across the spectrum of public transport in Ireland. That concludes my introductory statement. I trust I can answer any queries that may arise.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Creegan. We will now go to the members and start with questions from Deputy Tully.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I welcome our guest speakers today. I thank them for attending to answer questions around accessibility for people with disabilities on various transport systems in Ireland. I have a number of questions and points I wish to make and I will then hand over to the witnesses for answers.

This committee is tasked with ensuring the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD, which means that people with disabilities must be treated as equal citizens in our community. In order for citizens to experience freedom and independence, accessible transport is of the utmost importance. The organisations present, as the bodies with the oversight for our transport systems in this country, have an obligation to ensure inclusion on all our transport systems.

Access is still a huge problem, however. I am talking about wheelchair accessible stops and poor infrastructure in urban areas. We have insufficient wheelchair places on our buses, the lifts at stations are frequently not working and there is a lack of changing places and toilets. Wheelchair users must book trains hours in advance of using them. Many issues are still there.

The provision of services would be much improved if there was a proper consultation process with people with disabilities and disabled persons' organisations. That consultation should be meaningful and not just a box-ticking exercise where people are asked for input about project designs and those opinions should be taken on board and not just ignored.

How many board members do the organisations have with a lived experience of disability? An initiative by the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport in the previous Government was to appoint people with disabilities to the boards of each of the public transport agencies as a means of driving continuous quality and improving our sector. Did that happen?

How many members of the organisations' design teams have a lived experience of disability? That would be very important on an ongoing basis in order that they would have constant consultation on different projects.

To the National Transport Authority, NTA, in particular, why are yellow bus stop poles being replaced with steel poles despite a recommendation from the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, NCBI, to the contrary? Steel poles would be difficult for any of us to see against

the background of the built environment but for people with visual impairment in particular, it would be impossible.

I am told TFI Local Link bus services are refusing to accept people with disabilities without a carer. That is contrary to independence. Not all people with disabilities need or have a carer. They should, therefore, have the ability to board a bus without needing to have an assistant with them. I am told that individual pick-ups are also not carried out for people with disabilities by the TFI Local Link services.

How many changing places and toilet facilities are provided in bus and train stations throughout the country? There are a lack of changing places and toilets in the country as a whole. How many are in public places such as stations?

I also have concerns about cycle lanes, particularly for people with visual impairments. Again, it is not often taken into account where cycle lanes are placed. As we know, bicycles are silent. Can something be done with people for visual impairments in that line? I am conscious that I have asked many questions with a limited amount of time. I am sure some of my colleagues will bring up some of those issues again, however. I would appreciate the witnesses' answers.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Tully. We will go to the witnesses, who might perhaps respond to Deputy Tully's comments and questions.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Perhaps I will start as many of the questions are directed at the NTA. How many board members have a lived experience of dealing with disabilities? In terms of visible disabilities, we had one board member who was appointed by the previous Minister with responsibility for transport and who was visually impaired. He resigned to take up a post in the government sector a number of months ago. His post still has to be filled. He was part of the NTA board up until his resignation and there is now a vacancy to be filled.

In terms of members of the design team who have the same type of experiences, it is not possible for me to say that. There are, for instance, literally hundreds of people working on BusConnects in Dublin and in many counties as well. I cannot say that X number of employees fall into that category or not. It is the same with the MetroLink project, on which hundreds of people are also working. I certainly would not have the information to say how many of them fall into that category.

In terms of bus stops, it is frequently stated that we are replacing yellow poles with grey poles but what people omit to say are some of the other factors in that. At the moment, most of the bus stops around the country are actually very poor in terms of giving information to users. If the Deputy looks at most of the bus stops in her area, I am pretty sure they will not have any information on the heads of the poles telling people what bus stops there. If a person does not know about a service or does not know where it is going, it is not a very useful stop at the moment. Most of them do not have information carousels giving information on the timetables of the bus and the routings they travel. The programme on which we are engaged now is to actually roll out better bus stops, which give much more information to many more people.

There are approximately 12,000 bus stops across the country. They have not been very well maintained over the last number of decades. The Deputy will know that there are rusted poles and poles that are bent over in various places. We have opted for a stainless steel type pole, which is low maintenance. We recognise the need for visibility for the visually impaired, how-

ever. We have, therefore, put a very large flag at the top of the pole. By flag I mean a sign that is 400 mm wide and which, at the top, can be more than 1 m deep. That flag at the top of the pole is yellow and green, although mainly yellow, which provides a large amount of visibility just from that.

In addition, the carousel is the circular thing in the centre of the pole. They have always supplied us with black carousels. We asked the manufacturer to give us yellow carousels. All the carousels we will be putting in place, which are about 800 m long along the central poles, are made from yellow plastic to make them more visible. We tried to balance the various competing demands between providing information to everybody and providing yellow parts of the apparatus, for example the flags and carousels, and ultimately providing information on how to use it. At the moment, a lot of it goes back to it not being available.

On the Deputy's question about Local Link services not accepting people with disabilities without a helper, I would like to check that one out before I give a response. I will write back to the committee, as I am not clear on that. In terms of changing places and the larger type of toilet facility, we have recently opened one in Connolly Station with Irish Rail and the intention is to roll out more as refurbishment happens. The next place is Dublin Heuston, which is obviously a big destination hub. Waterford's Plunkett Station is the third one, from memory.

On cycle lanes and concerns about people with visual impairments, I think the Deputy is referring to bus stops, how cycle lanes get around bus stops, and how the visually impaired are dealt with. We have had several conversations with disability groups and cyclists about this. Clearly, there is no perfect way of merging cyclists and pedestrians at bus stops. We have to balance various competing demands. However, where crossing of cycle tracks are required at busy bus stops, we are examining if we can put in a signalling arrangement for the visually impaired. It would provide an audible signal, as well as a red light for cyclists to stop in the cycle track. We are exploring whether we can and should do that in various places where there is significant pedestrian movement across cycle tracks. The Deputy mentioned consultation; we do a lot of consultation and involve disability groups. We do exactly what the Deputy suggested. It is not a "tick box" exercise for us. We take feedback on board and make changes. We are not able to satisfy everybody all the time but that is not unusual. I hope I answered all of the questions, but if I missed any by all means let me know.

Mr. Peter Walsh: A lot of questions related to buses and trains. From a Luas perspective, I hope in my opening statement I gave a clear indication of the level of engagement we have with disability organisations. We take it very seriously. In terms of the number of board members with a disability, of our ten board members, one is visually impaired. In terms of design teams, I echo what Mr. Creegan has said. Many of the design teams working on projects are international. We have several hundred people working on Metrolink. Of those, I do not know how many people would have a lived experience of disability. However, within TII, we conduct a census every year with a self-declaration. Just above 4%, or 12 people of a staff of 280, have a self-declared lived experience of disability.

Chairman: I now call Senator O'Loughlin.

Senator Fiona O'Loughlin: I thank TII and NTA for their presentations. I have had the pleasure of engaging before with Mr. Creegan on issues in Newbridge. I have a number of questions to put to both organisations. I will first go to TII and then to the NTA. I have three questions for TII. It is good to see their access officer, Ms Sarah O'Donnell, in attendance too. When they commence tendering for companies to provide motorway service stations, do they

specify that there must be a provision for a changing places facility? If they do not, then why not? At this point, that should certainly be factored in. When they carry out road or footpath renewal projects along routes for which they take primary responsibility, do they automatically take into account wheelchair accessible buses and their sizes? Third, when preparing plans for going through towns, villages or cities, do they engage with the local disability organisations, advocates, or local authority access officers to take cognisance of the lived experiences of people with disabilities to avoid potential pinch points? Too often we have seen this only after the work is done.

I have questions for the NTA. I already mentioned that Ms O'Donnell is here, as access officer for TII. It would have been good if the NTA had brought their transport accessibility manager. Why did they not think that appropriate? On Part 8: public realm and streetscape regeneration schemes, what level of interaction does the NTA have with local authorities undertaking these projects to try to make sure that wheelchair accessible bus stops are being built into streetscapes? We see a lot of money being spent on public realm, and we will see a lot more over the next few years. It is important to take that on board and to avoid any unnecessary wastage of budget, due to retrofitting afterwards. Has the NTA engaged with Bus Éireann, Dublin Bus or Irish Rail disability user groups for input when purchasing new fleet or when designing new infrastructure? The fleet of the Luas is totally accessible. Do they hold any specific consultations with groups or advocates representing mobility-impaired persons to ensure that purchased bus or rail fleet is compliant, not just with international standards, which have apparently not kept pace with the development of powered wheelchairs? They are considerably bigger than those that have been laid down for access. Do they consult with them? Complaints have been received that powered wheelchairs are getting stuck by the driver area. Finally, there are two different bus sets of colours being used on the same route. People have come to me in relation to that causing problems for them. There is blue and yellow, and then there is red and white. That causes problems for with people with cognitive disabilities.

Chairman: I thank Senator O'Loughlin. First, I call Mr. Walsh to respond, and then Mr. Cregan.

Mr. Peter Walsh: On the first question, on when we tender for motorway service areas, we require changing areas. The audit of 2019 showed some room for improvement there. The level of the changing area was such that it was not suitable for wheelchair access. I do not know whether work has been done yet. Many motorway service areas have been closed to people accessing the buildings other than for toilets, due to Covid-19 restrictions. Whether or not that work is complete, I could not say. However, it is in hand. In terms of wheelchair accessibility and road works, we directly look after about 1,200 km of the 5,400 km of national road. We directly look after 1,200 km of the high-speed roads network where there are no pedestrians generally, so it is not common for us to make any provision for pedestrians during roadworks on those sections of road. They are largely motorways where pedestrians are not allowed at all, even for the dual carriageway sections. In the urban areas and the rest of the network, it is done through the local authorities. We fund the local authorities in that we are the approving authority for them and they allocate the contracts. I am not aware of complaints in terms of works of that nature. We would expect that there should be access arrangements for all road users, and vulnerable users and wheelchair users as well. An area of 1.2 m is generally the narrowest piece of any pedestrian arrangement that is acceptable. There should be access but if there are complaints, then we are happy to receive them and we will certainly communicate with the local authorities.

On whether local disability groups are engaged with at the time of design, I do not know offhand. Again, in urban areas we deal with local authorities as the sponsoring agency, so we would expect that there is consultation on these but I cannot give a definitive answer. If the Senator likes, I can get back to her on the matter.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: In terms of bringing along our transport accessibility manager, we thought there were limited numbers. That is the only reason we did not bring her along; there was nothing more to it than that. We assumed that it was two people - myself and the chief executive - who is due to join shortly.

On the public realm and interaction with local authorities, as the committee will be aware, we fund quite a few of these schemes ourselves. In the schemes we fund, we have much interaction and try to ensure the design meets the standards it needs to meet. On other schemes we are not funding, we do not have very much interaction, and probably none at all is the honest position. More and more of these schemes tend to have a component of cycling, walking or public transport so more and more we are involved in one shape or form in them.

On engaging with Irish Rail, Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann disability groups, yes, our transport accessibility manager engages with them. I think the Senator asked the question more in the line of new fleet. In terms of new fleet, it is difficult to link that engagement into a competitive procurement competition so we have done things like getting a representative of the Irish Wheelchair Association to the manufacturing plant of one type of vehicle we are manufacturing to review the wheelchair arrangements before the fleet was finished. In other cases we have done viewings and inspections with the Irish Wheelchair Association and other groups after the first vehicle is delivered because it is very hard for people to understand a design on paper and they need to see it in real life. We have made some modifications to vehicles on foot of those engagements.

I am aware that there is a single-deck type of bus, particularly in the Waterford area, where the access way into the wheelchair space is a bit tight. We had worked with the manufacturer there to modify a couple of things and install them on the vehicles. We wanted to run those modifications past some of the disability groups but Covid intervened. There are some vehicles that may be the subject of the complaint and we have heard about it. We will do a modification that may not resolve the issue for everybody but will resolve it for some people.

On bus colours and signage, and we normally call it bus livery, the Senator is right that there are at least two different types of livery floating around at the moment. We could invest and repaint all of the buses in one go but most buses and coaches are repainted on a four-year schedule. Our view was to transition it over four years so in that way there would be no additional cost to be paid from changing the livery. That is the logic of just having two livery currently.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I thank the witnesses for their presentations and supplying their opening statements in advance, especially the NTA as the appendix to its submission was very helpful and useful.

In terms of the Luas, I have travelled with people with disabilities on the Luas and it has been a very user-friendly experience. However, the problem is with the frequency of services. For instance, pre-Covid when one boarded the Luas early in the morning at the Bluebell Luas stop space was at full capacity. How is that situation factored into reviews and where does it appear?

At the moment we are providing much cycling infrastructure and providing segregated cycling lanes. What level of interaction or consideration is given to wheelchair users and people who are visually impaired crossing roads, particularly in Dublin? Have consultations taken place in that regard? How much are the organisations present involved in the outdoor dining modifications - for instance, to ensure that footpaths are on a par with the levels necessary for outdoor dining? Have such aspects been considered? Obviously, the visually impaired are having difficulties.

I refer to an issue concerning the placement of bins, which is an issue that I have only encountered once and that was in the last week. I have yet to see it for myself. Last week, I got a phone call from a person who said that there is a bin that appears to be very close to a bus stop and that perhaps it will be difficult to access a bus due to the proximity of the bin to the bus stop. Everything is new and newly done up but I assume that there is some *pro forma* set out for that. I am sure that when I measure the place with my ruler that I will find that this will not be the case. What is the process for setting that up? Is it similar to what happens with roundabouts provided by the NTA where there is a set specification stipulated?

A question that has been raised is as follows. Bus drivers are often put in a very difficult position so do not have the power to move people who have a buggy from a wheelchair zone within a bus. Can the witnesses suggest what we, as Oireachtas Members, should do about the matter? Should we call for a statutory instrument or something to empower bus drivers? I am sure that bus drivers do not want to end up in a conflict situation but want to be able to ask passengers to move on. Some wheelchair users have told us that if a person with a buggy is in the wheelchair zone on buses, then it becomes very difficult and perhaps wheelchair users cannot get on the buses.

I am aware that when a bus driver has to jam on his or her brakes there is no seatbelt in the wheelchair zone. Is there a possibility of providing a seatbelt?

The admission of a service dog on to a bus is at the discretion of the driver and service dogs are not always accepted. I ask the witnesses to indicate the policy regarding service dogs and where we can direct people to find out more information about the policy.

I would like to feedback from the witnesses on how the Just a Minute, JAM, card is being used. It was a really good development so well done on that.

There is travel assistance programme. Are people using it again? Has there been an uptake in light of vaccination levels, and people coming back out into their communities.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: On cycle lanes, there is much thought given to how they work in terms of wheelchair uses and the visually impaired but I am not going to say it has all been solved perfectly. It has not. At the beginning of the Covid pandemic, the amount of consultation with disability groups was probably less than it should have been. That improved in the intervening period as the emergency nature of some of the work being done eroded slightly. The answer to the Senator's question is more consultation.

We are involved in the issue of outdoor dining. I do not want to say that we review every design - we would not be able to and would only hold things up - but there are certain designs that are more important than others. Some of their funding comes through us and we at least get to see their designs. On paper, we are broadly satisfied that they are right before we allow them to go ahead, but much of this is down to the details at a shop or other location that cannot always

be gleaned from paper. It is not possible for us to be the policeman completely. We perform some oversight of the area, but it is really down to local authorities. In fairness to them, they apply common sense in most cases and get the designs in a reasonable state.

On bins that are too close-----

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I apologise to Mr. Creegan, but is the NTA relying on people to report where an issue emerges? Is that a message that we need to send?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I will put it this way: if there is something wrong and people report it, we will take action of some type with the local authority. I do not mean prosecution-type action, but we will engage with the local authority and, I hope, resolve the issue.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: To mitigate the problem.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: On bins close to bus stops, there is no process that involves us. Bins get installed by local authorities. There are normal rules around minimum widths that must be left clear. For example, a usual rule applied is that no footpath should be less than 1.2 m wide. I do not know what is happening in this case, but in the main, it is not a problem that we have seen. The siting is usually okay.

The issue of bus drivers' ability to get people to remove their buggies from wheelchair spaces has arisen many times for us. We ran a catchy campaign - I have forgotten its title - across social media and radio approximately two years ago where we tried to encourage people to free up the space. Ms Graham is also on this call. Does she remember what the campaign was called?

Ms Anne Graham: "Please Don't Buggy in the Wheelchair Zone".

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It had an effect for a while, but this is really a matter of courtesy. I am not sure that legislation deals with the issue because of the points the Senator made. Drivers do not want to get into a confrontation while they are driving 70 other passengers. It is a difficult problem to resolve. We believed the proper route was encouragement through a campaign of that type. Maybe it is something that we need to repeat.

I am not familiar with the issue regarding service dogs on buses. Is Ms Graham?

Ms Anne Graham: Generally, service dogs are allowed on all public transport that we contract, but if there is an issue on a particular service, it may be down to problems with space on some services, for example, our smaller buses in Local Link. As far as I am aware, service dogs and assistance dogs are permitted on all our public transport. If there is a particular issue, the Senator should please let us know and we will investigate.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I thank Ms Graham.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Approximately 14,000 JAM cards and downloads - it is also on an app - have been provided. Obviously, Covid has reduced its use completely and we will have to wait until normality returns to see how much it will be used in practice.

The travel assistance programme is a wonderful programme that is beneficial for many people. It is being deployed to assist people with the roll-out of the new BusConnects network. The first element of the BusConnects service will be rolled out at the end of this month. The travel assistance scheme either has reached or is reaching out to the people it is aware of to

provide them with assistance with the changes and to guide them through the change process. Additional personnel, whom we are funding, have been bolted onto the existing team to provide the resources to provide that service.

I hope I have covered the Senator's queries.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: That is everything. I thank Mr. Creegan. I look forward to talking to him soon about BusConnects.

Mr. Peter Walsh: I will hand over to Ms O'Donnell to deal with many of the questions, as she is much closer to the Luas user group and the issues that may have arisen. In terms of capacity, we work closely with the NTA and have recently completed a capacity enhancement programme on the green line, with an increase in capacity of approximately 30%, or nearly 9,000 passengers, per direction per hour via extended trams and new trams. In general, the red line does not have an overall capacity problem, although I appreciate that there are probably capacity issues at peak hours. I will ask Ms O'Donnell to deal with the specifics.

Ms Sarah O'Donnell: I will continue Mr. Walsh's point on capacity on the red line. Since extending platforms in the city centre is difficult, the way to increase capacity is through frequency. We can follow up on capacity enhancement plans for the red line.

Regarding wheelchair users, we are fortunate with Luas, in that there is less conflict because of the universal access. Every double door on a Luas vehicle is accessible to a wheelchair. As such, we do not tend to get the conflicts seen where there is limited space on Dublin Bus, etc. However, we are conscious that where there is crowding, campaigns to promote courtesy are probably the way to go.

Service dogs are allowed.

Regarding furniture, we always aim to lay out the furniture in as consistent a manner as possible and to minimise the amount of furniture on platforms. That is easier in out-of-town settings where there are not shopfronts, thresholds, etc. Generally, furniture is arranged so that there is a reasonable degree of consistency, users can get a sense of where to find the ticket vending machines, TVMs, and help buttons, and there are proper clearances at the edge of the platform.

I hope this has answered the questions raised.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I thank Ms O'Donnell.

Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for taking the time to speak to us and allowing us the opportunity to troubleshoot some of the recurring issues that impact disabled people who want to access transport services.

In my constituency of County Clare, public transport is a salient issue for most people, but it is particularly pressing for people with mobility issues. Wheelchair users have been subjected to exceptional protocols, for example, announcing their intention to use the bus or train by giving notice one to three days in advance. This means that there is an implicit assumption that we expect disabled people to be able to forward plan every time they need to access public transport. This is an unrealistic expectation for a non-disabled person and exposes how biased we perceive our disabled peers.

Having engaged with local advocacy groups, I wish to raise several queries. The NTA com-

pleted a public consultation process in October 2019. The National Disability Authority, NDA, made a submission at the time on the proposed changes to the licence conditions and the need to ensure that all elements of services were universally designed and, therefore, easy to access, understand and use by everyone regardless of age, size, ability or disability. Will the NTA publish the outcome of the submissions in a report? If so, what is the status of that process?

My next question is on the provision of rural transport. The NTA announced new services in County Clare with larger buses, but these are fixed-route services and may not suit passengers with a disability and the demand responsive transport, DRT, services or vehicles may not be suited to rural roads. Will the NTA confirm that passengers with disabilities will not be disadvantaged as new services are introduced? Mr. Creegan mentioned earlier that there was one board member with a visual impairment and he did not take up the post again. I believe that he left last December. I would like clarification on that issue, and specifically, why the vacancy remains, several months later. Has that post gone through the advertisement process yet? I ask Mr. Creegan to clarify that.

Finally, in respect of the awarding of contracts in County Clare, there was no stipulation in the tendering process for a wheelchair-securing mechanism. Therefore, it did not comply with the NTA's definition of "wheelchair accessible", or with chapter 1 section 1(3) paragraph 3 of the European Communities (Road Vehicles Type Approval) (Amendment) Regulations 2017. That is a very serious situation. It meant that wheelchair passengers had no restraint in the event of an emergency. This put passengers at serious risk of injury. I am aware that the vehicles were retrofitted in March 2021. Are all vehicles contracted by the NTA inspected for accessibility legal requirements before being put into service?

Lastly, in respect of the NTA's tendering process, I have heard that there is discrimination against wheelchair passengers in the process and that it fails to comply with NTA definitions. Why does the authority not follow its award criteria and passenger definitions and make corrections during a standstill period? To put that into context, I refer to the likes of low-floor access vehicles only receiving, for example, 20 marks in the tender process, whereas other vehicles with wheelchair access at the back receive full marks. That puts the question into context. I would appreciate the witnesses' responses to those questions.

Chairman: Does Mr. Walsh wish to respond first?

Mr. Peter Walsh: I do not think there were any questions for me.

Ms Anne Graham: I am here now and can answer some of the Deputy's questions. Apologies for not being here earlier.

The Deputy posed a number of questions. Focusing on the commercial services first, we carried out a public consultation in 2019. We have an objective to move our commercial services, which are licensed by the authority, to being wheelchair accessible in as much as possible. Mr. Creegan may have covered this in his opening statement and subsequent responses. However, the difficulty that we have is finding an appropriate vehicle, particularly if we want to have low-floor access for the long-distance fleet. Currently, the vehicles in the wheelchair accessible long-distance fleet are fitted with wheelchair lifts. That fleet is not the most accessible from the perspective of wheelchair users, in particular. It requires the removal of seats if a wheelchair user is to use it. It is not the level of service that we wish to see on our public transport services. However, in terms of fleet manufacture, the main type vehicles produced for long-distance coach travel feature a wheelchair lift.

We undertook a public consultation in 2019. We have put together proposals that we will publish. We concluded the proposals at our own board level and the Covid pandemic hit just as we were about to complete that process. In respect of the timeframe for introducing the requirements on commercial services, we needed to pause that until we got beyond the Covid pandemic, because it would place a financial burden on a sector that is currently under extreme pressure because of the pandemic. We will publish the proposals when we get to a point where we feel that the industry is in a position to be able to deliver on improved wheelchair accessibility across the services, which we hope to be very soon.

In terms of the provision for rural transport, in all counties, including Clare, we provide for both fixed and direct services, which are town to town services, on a fixed schedule and route. We also provide demand responsive services. There is a mixture of services. Our ambition is for all of those services to be wheelchair accessible. To a very large extent, our services across rural transport are wheelchair accessible, be it with a rear lift. However, we are moving towards as many of the vehicles being low-floor accessible as possible. That is the case in Clare, as in the other parts of the country.

On the issue of the board vacancy, it is a matter for the Minister to appoint the members of the NTA board. The Department and the Minister are aware that we have three vacancies on our board. It is with the Department and the Minister to advertise the posts. I believe they will be advertised shortly.

In respect of the tendering process in County Clare, we believe that all tendering processes were followed as part of the delivery of the services and the retendering in the Clare area. We did allow operators a period of time to retrofit their vehicles. That would be the norm in a tendering and contractual process. We do not believe that there is any discrimination against wheelchair passengers in the services that we provide. We do as much as possible to ensure our services are accessible. In some cases, the availability of fleet in a particular location or the availability of an operator with the type of fleet that is required is sometimes not there and it can take a number of retenders to be able to provide the level of service that we wish to provide.

Chairman: I thank Ms Graham. I call Deputy Murnane O'Connor.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank the witnesses for attending. They will be aware that over the past few months many concerns have been raised about wheelchair lifts not working in railway stations. My understanding is that there were perhaps 13 such cases, but that has since reduced to eight across the country. Perhaps the witnesses could provide an update on that issue. I spoke to the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, about it. Every few days she posts about the issue. I ask the witnesses to provide an update on that.

Second, an earlier contributor spoke about the Luas. I understand that there was meant to be an app so that someone could book a place on a service. Perhaps it has been launched, but I understand that it was supposed to happen earlier this year. Can the witnesses confirm if that has happened? Is the app up and running? It is important that it happens. Working with all the different disability groups is most important.

My third question is for the representatives of the TII. It is great to see that we have town bus services. I am working on getting a town bus service for Carlow town. It is a priority and I have spoken to the Minister on several occasions about it. Kilkenny town has a service. Is the Kilkenny town bus service wheelchair accessible? It is important to know, because I have not seen it. Hopefully, the Carlow town service will be established shortly.

On the issue of rural communities, and rural Carlow in particular, it is important that there is communication with people with disabilities who live in rural areas. The accessibility of taxi services is an example of another area that needs to be addressed to ensure that there are sufficient wheelchair accessible taxis. In general, it is important there is communication with the various bodies and that everybody works together. When surveys are done and people with disabilities have their say, it is important we listen but we must also deliver. I would like the guests to come back to me about the level of funding required for the areas they have identified they need to address.

Mr. Peter Walsh: I do not think I can address many of those questions. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, looks after the Luas and national roads, and will look after the metro if we get the opportunity. Many of the questions the Deputy asked relate to the National Transport Authority, NTA. I am confused about the reference to the application. The Deputy mentioned a Luas application. Perhaps Ms O'Donnell knows about that.

Ms Sarah O'Donnell: Is the Deputy referring to an application to book ahead for wheelchair users?

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I am.

Ms Sarah O'Donnell: That application applies to DART services. The Luas is fully accessible to wheelchairs so no pre-booking is required. The question the Deputy asked about the application should be directed towards DART services in this case.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: My understanding is that the application is not up and running. I might be wrong but my understanding is that the application is for the DART and the Luas.

Ms Sarah O'Donnell: It is for rail services but not the Luas.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: Perhaps Ms O'Donnell is right and I thank her. However, the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, told me there is also to be an application that can be used on a phone for the Luas and the DART. That is what the Minister of State said to me and I apologise if that information is wrong.

Ms Sarah O'Donnell: There is a pre-booking system under the travel assistance scheme. That is available for people who want assistance.

Mr. Peter Walsh: I do not think there was anything else the Deputy asked about on which TII can provide a response.

Ms Anne Graham: I will start and my colleague, Mr. Creegan, might assist me with some responses. The proposed services in Carlow will be fully wheelchair accessible. Low-floor buses will be operated. That will also be the case in Kilkenny. The Deputy also asked about taxis in rural areas. It is our ambition to continue to provide grant aid to facilitate the delivery of wheelchair accessible taxis across Ireland. We will continue to provide as much grant aid and funding as is available. We are at 16% at the moment but our ambition is to ensure a higher proportion of wheelchair accessible taxis. I will ask Mr. Creegan to give an update on the lifts in rail stations.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: A major upgrade programme for lifts at railway stations is ongoing. The problems were that lifts were being vandalised and many of them were reaching the end

of their lives. Spare parts were getting exceedingly difficult to get, which meant that when a lift went out of order, it was not a matter of getting a part off the shelf. Irish Rail would have to wait a week to get parts in to repair the lift. A major programme is going on to replace or upgrade the lifts. Work on 14 stations was completed in 2020. The intention is to complete the work on 22 stations this year.

In terms of lifts being out of order and people's awareness of that, my understanding is that Irish Rail has a section covering station information on its website, which provides information on which lifts are out of order. That information is certainly updated on a weekly basis and perhaps more frequently. The ambition is that those lifts will be replaced with more modern lifts. Lifts located in places where a high degree of vandalism has occurred are now being connected to a control centre and when a person presses the button, it can be viewed on CCTV camera before the lift is allowed to operate. That system is now in place at stations and is working successfully to reduce the amount of lift damage that is occurring. That was the core cause of lifts being unavailable.

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor: I thank our guests for those replies. It is important to get lifts up and running for wheelchair users, as our guests know. I can only speak about Carlow. I monitor the wheelchair lifts there. We are delighted the new bridge will soon be installed. The work has been going on a long time but we are told it will be another few weeks. I am delighted because the facilities are badly needed. I understand that the Covid-19 restrictions have made it hard. However, it is important that it is a priority to fix lifts that are not working in railway stations. It is important that those lifts are there for people to use. I would like those lifts up and running as quickly as possible, particularly in Carlow.

Deputy Seán Canney: The representatives of TII and the NTA are very welcome to the committee. I have been listening with interest to everything that has been said. There are many things I could ask but many of them have been covered. I wish to ask the NTA about the roll-out of rural transport. What level of additional cost is required to make sure our fleets of buses, taxis or whatever have disabled access facilities? Ms O'Donnell said that 16% of taxis have been funded to date which suggests there is a long way to go. What type of funding do our guests get through grant aid and how much more do they expect they will need in the future to try to improve facilities? Ms O'Donnell said TII would like to do much more. What are our guests' targets for improving those facilities?

I come from the rural constituency of Galway East. We have many issues around rural transport and trying to get connectivity. The Local Link, based in Loughrea, is doing work. When we bring forward proposals, we find they are turned down because they are not viable. I often feel those proposals should be trialled on the basis that a service will be taken up if it is run. I also have a concern about the fact that some services between Galway and Limerick have been cut by Bus Éireann in the Gort area. Bus Éireann has taken out some of those services when we should be including more services if we want to get cars off the road so public transport becomes our main way of travelling. Does the NTA need more money in order to make sure our rural transport links are geared up to take care of people with disabilities, in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities?

We have a set a target of having so many electric cars on the road by 2030 and by 2050. We will be electrifying our rail fleet. We will also be doing things and setting targets as a part of climate action. What do our guests foresee will be needed in the design of our infrastructure to make sure that people with disabilities are not left behind? One of the things that comes to mind is the fact that cars and traffic will be silent when vehicles are electric. How do we deal with

that in terms of alerting people that there are cars on the road or a train is coming if the engines are not running? I do not know what future planning has been done. We are talking about rolling out things and looking to see how they are working before we start implementing changes in the designs of our motorways and national primary and secondary routes to make sure that we will have a new type of vehicle on the road. How are we including those considerations in the future design of our roads? I feel that may not have been thought about but perhaps it has been.

Chairman: Will we go to the National Transport Authority first?

Ms Anne Graham: I will start off by talking about rural transport services. Our ambition is to have much better connectivity throughout rural Ireland. We are bringing forward a programme called Connecting Ireland which is about looking and making sure there are connections between towns and villages in rural Ireland to their main centres. We will be bringing that forward for consultation later on this year. It would include Deputy Canney's area in terms of County Galway.

When Deputy Canney said proposals were brought forward and were not considered viable, it was possible we did not have the funding available for those kinds of services. We have ambitions to put in a much higher level of service throughout rural Ireland. It will require funding. We will be putting together a case for the delivery of a Connecting Ireland infrastructure, which is about a much better connected network of services throughout rural Ireland. That will be part of a public consultation later this year. We will be available to give more information in terms of what those plans are.

When we say connected, we want all those services to be fully accessible as well, both in terms of fleet and the level of service appropriate for living in rural Ireland. The ambition of living in parts of rural Ireland without a private car and still being able to access services is the ambition we have in terms of Connecting Ireland.

There are some services at the moment. We are going through a period in the pandemic in which commercial operators providing the services on a commercial basis have struggled and can only be providing service currently with the support of the State and Government funding. The National Transport Authority has been given funding in order to be able to support those services, but we want to ensure that funding is used in the most effective way and on services which have the highest level of demand.

Some services across the State which are being provided by commercial services have not had high levels of demand. We hope that demand will come back. We expect it to come back, as the restrictions are eased. We keep under review the services which were reduced in the last few weeks in order to ensure we have a network of services available as restrictions are eased and are available for people to travel around the country. Those Galway to Limerick services will be under review between the NTA and Bus Éireann, but we felt it was appropriate to reduce a number of services with the operators in order to ensure we had funding available for a longer period of time for those commercial operators.

We want all of our taxi fleet to be wheelchair accessible. There is a funding element to that. I have not got the exact figure of what we would require if we were to grant aid at the same level as this year. There is also ambition for that fleet to transfer to being electric or low emission. Unfortunately, the availability of a fleet which is both fully electric and wheelchair accessible is quite limited and that limits the choice available for the taxi sector. We would expect that to improve as the technology improves and as more manufacturers get into the electric vehicle

space. We will probably give Deputy Canney more detail about that in a written response.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I can give the number now. We did a calculation for taxis some months ago. The cost of converting the remainder of the taxi fleet, both private and public cost, we estimate at €190 million because there are approximately 15,000 or 16,000 vehicles to be transitioned.

On the last point about electrification, it is worth saying we are buying some hybrid diesel electric vehicles this year in the bus fleet we are buying, which can run considerable distances electric only and we are also placing orders for fully electric vehicles from this year on. They will be equipped with a noise generator for operation within urban areas, for exactly the reason the Deputy said in that visually impaired people could not hear the vehicle coming along if it is silent and therefore, they are equipped with a noise generator. Bizarrely, we have to create a noise, but it is for understandable reasons.

Chairman: Does Mr. Walsh want to comment?

Mr. Peter Walsh: The issue of silent vehicles and all sorts of e-mobility scooters and the like is a matter of some concern to Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, but we have no role to play in regulating the manufacturer of these vehicles. In a recent request from the Department of Transport for an advice note on e-scooters and the like, we included a recommendation that separation from pedestrians would be desirable in terms of silent vehicles of that nature. Outside of that, I cannot usefully comment on this area. Does Ms O'Donnell have anything to add?

Ms Sarah O'Donnell: I do not, other than to say Luas is an electric system and the noise and approachability of it is a feature, so we have the bell. Making its presence known on the street is one of its features. It is one of the early interventions in the streetscape and it appears to work quite well.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank everybody who came before the committee today for being here. I would like to follow up on Deputy Canney's question on expanding the Local Link in rural areas. When will the service be fully accessible? It is important for people in rural areas in terms of their independence and personal mobility. Ms Graham spoke about bringing forward a consultation on that. Is there some kind of timeframe on that? Does Ms Graham have any idea how long it will take?

Ms Graham also spoke about funding. At this point we hope or like to think that funding for any kind of public transports being brought in would be inclusive of the fact the transport has to be accessible, that it is not an additional stream of funding one has to apply for in order to make it accessible. We hope it would be a given at this stage. Can the witnesses expand on that situation? That would be great.

People with disabilities have to wait at bus stops in rural Ireland. They do not have any shelter or adequate shelter all the time, which is problematic. What is the National Transport Authority doing about that? Does it have a work programme to address the issues? To what extent is that funded? Any information on that would be great.

What is the target date for the NTA working towards the elimination of the practice of requiring people with disabilities to ring ahead to access transport services? If the NTA has the figures for the buses purchased or ordered in January 2020, how many of them have two wheelchair spaces? What plans does the NTA have to retrofit buses which only have one at present? If there is time, I will come back in with more questions afterwards. I will start with those first

and ask the question on Local Link be prioritised.

Ms Anne Graham: I will commence and my colleague, Mr. Creegan, will support me. On the funding for Local Link and the expansion of its services, I meant the funding of the operational costs. We need additional subsidy to be able to provide for those services, because the fare revenue would not be sufficient to meet the operational costs. We need additional PSO for expanding the services. It is more on the operational side than on the capital funding side, to be able to provide new services. That is across the board, not just for Local Link. It would apply to all our urban and rural subsidised public transport services.

As regards providing them, it would automatically be a requirement that they be fully wheelchair accessible. In terms of Local Link, we have a very high level of accessibility across those services. We are now in a position to be able to grant aid the purchase of fleet for the fleet-owning rural transport operators, so they can now transfer their fleets to being wheelchair accessible. We are also, through the tendering process, requiring the fleet to be wheelchair accessible and low floor as much as possible. We have a very high level of accessibility through that service and we want to get to fully accessible on rural transport services. That will be part of the expansion. In terms of connecting Ireland, it is more about where those services are going to be. Later this year, we will start the consultation across Ireland on where those services will be.

My colleague, Mr. Creegan, might respond on bus stops and shelters.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: We have a programme which we roll out for bus shelters each year. They are expensive. They all require individual planning permission, which takes some time. Also, quite frequently they require works to be carried out by the local authority to facilitate them. All of that takes time to organise. We have been doing about 100 shelters per year around the country. In the past year that has reduced a little because of Covid. We hope to do probably more than that. There are approximately 12,000 stops throughout the country and it is not possible to put a bus shelter at every one of them. We have to be somewhat selective as to where to put them and where the most value can be gained. That is the programme on which we are working. It is approximately 100 bus shelters per year, with each requiring individual planning consent and equally relying on the local authority doing prior works to make changes to the road layout in those areas, which takes time.

The Deputy also asked how many buses we have purchased with two wheelchair spaces since January 2020. The answer is we have not purchased any. We have been purchasing buses with one wheelchair space and one buggy space for some years. We have not transitioned to creating space for two wheelchairs because that is going to require the removal of seating from the bus, which will reduce the overall capacity. There may come a time when we will be able to do that, but prior to the Covid pandemic we had a problem with our bus service being at over capacity. The short answer to the question is we have not purchased any buses with two wheelchair spaces, at least for the urban bus fleet. Some for Local Link may be purchased, but not for the urban bus fleet.

Ms Anne Graham: There was a question about booking and the removal of 24-hour booking ahead. For bus services that have a low-floor platform, there might be a requirement to take out some seats to access the wheelchair space, but generally what we are trying to move to, particularly with low-floor vehicles, is that the wheelchair space is kept available at all times. For the double-deck coach fleet, that will be the requirement from now on.

Mr. Creegan might comment on Irish Rail with regard to moving towards reducing the booking time and the requirement for a ramp on rail services.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: The booking time has been reduced to four hours, but at present the fleet requires ramp access on the DART service and that requires attendance by somebody to make that happen. In the case of the new DART fleet that is going to be purchased, and we will be purchasing a great deal of new DART fleet, a lot of effort has gone into seeing how we can minimise that platform-to-train interface and how we can make that work more successfully. That contract still has not been awarded so I am not in a position to be able to say what the solution that is emerging is, but I can confirm that a major focus of the tender process was to try to improve that. However, if in the layout we have of some of the rail network where stations are built on curves, such as Tara Street station, there is a limit to what can be achieved, and it is very challenging. If all our stations had lovely neat straight lines and all the platforms were the same height, it would be a great deal easier for us to make the transition. Unfortunately, that is not the case.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Can I quickly follow up on those? Ms Graham said the consultation will take place later this year. Does she know how long that will take? I am wondering how long it will be until we get to the point of expanding the rural Local Link.

With regard to the bus stops, Mr. Creegan said it is not possible because there are 12,000. Is it the approach that in the funding that goes out there is no ambition or possibility of having a shelter at 12,000 bus stops?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I will take the second question. It is just the sheer cost of 12,000 bus stops at €10,000 to €20,000 per bus stop. It is a lot of money. Perhaps there is a way it can be afforded over time, but for now we have to prioritise and we do what we have been doing for the most important ones. What I did not say in my answer, and I should have added it, is that we have been working with local authorities to identify the top 20 or top 30 bus stops in their counties that require bus shelters. As long as they are willing to do the advance work I mentioned earlier, such as changing the kerb and the like, we can come in and install the bus stops. As regards the ambition to spend that amount of money, we are not at the stage yet of saying every bus stop in the country needs a bus shelter. There are certainly many more that need a shelter, but it may not be at the stage where every one of them needs it.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I should say the point of view we are coming from as the Committee on Disability Matters is that, following engagement with people about transport, this is a big barrier and deterrent to travelling for many people with disabilities. We are coming from the point of view that it does not really matter if one area needs it more than another if there is anybody in the area who cannot access public transport as a result of the lack of facilities. What can we do to ensure there is funding for every bus stop to have that? Ultimately, we are charged with enabling people to exercise their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. The right to transport is very important in that regard. Where is that funding stream coming from so we can push for TII to get that?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It is not just funding. It is the physical ability to install the bus shelter. The biggest delay we have with bus shelters is in modification to the road. The Deputy will be aware that you can put a bus stop in a particular location that is not obscuring visibility. If you put in a bus shelter and that bus stop is on a corner, it does not work. Suddenly, everything has to change. You must find a new place to stop the bus, build a new hard standing and so forth. The biggest constraint is not funding but the ability of the local authorities, with all the

demands on them at present, to carry out the road modifications necessary to install additional bus shelters. As I said, we try to manage this by working out programmes with them that deal with their top 20 or 30. When we get those done we will be in a better position to roll out more. It is less about funding and more about local authority resources and the physical constraints of installing a bus shelter as opposed to a simple pole.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I welcome the witnesses. Many of the questions I had have been answered. As Deputy Cairns said, this is the Committee on Disability Matters. Our job is to oversee the implementation of the UNCRPD. With regard to transport, we have a responsibility for accessible transport, which is to ensure persons with disabilities have access on an equal basis with others and to identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers. I feel frustration on many things. I feel that disability provision has been made a cherry on the cake, the best case scenario and not a default measure. If it is possible, we will make it accessible. We will get there. I am frustrated that we are not getting there fast enough. All the members who sit on this committee have that frustration.

There a number of things I wish to highlight. I refer to the bus shelters. Have witnesses engaged with every local authority in the country to create the top 20? I can throw five or six examples at them from Louth. I can send an email about them after the meeting. Is there anything we can do at a national level to support the NTA, TII and local authorities in doing that? I accept that a bus shelter at every bus stop location along every boreen throughout the country is not possible or feasible, but we must work with what we have.

On the reliability of the bus service and the website, I have heard many stories of people who have been left at the side of the road in Kilbeggan. They were told the bus was coming but it did not. They were then told that they needed to call the operator and not to trust the website. We are encouraging people to use public transport, we are trying to provide accessibility for everyone in the country, yet there is a lack of reliability. Is it possible to get disability awareness training for all public transport staff? People do not look blind or visually impaired but, anecdotally, I have heard that they are often treated very rudely by people who do not understand the nuances of a certain disability.

There must be forward planning with regard to people with disabilities, but we must work on reducing the time taken for that forward planning. That adds in with what others have said about the fluidity of transport and being able to go from one mode of transport to another in order to get to a location. If a person is at a train station, he or she cannot see what train is coming next on the platform. I know of people who take photos on their phone so they can zoom in on it to see what platform they are on or how long it will take before the train arrives. What work has been done in assistive technology at bus stops and train stations? I found this engagement very worthwhile.

Chairman: Do witnesses for the National Transport Authority wish to come in?

Ms Anne Graham: I will speak firstly about the reliability of services. That is a concern of ours as well. In order to attract people, all people, on to transport we must ensure that our services are reliable. There are occasions when services do not turn up for mechanical or other reasons, and that is regrettable. However, we want to ensure that the customer knows about such services and that is why real-time passenger information is such an important tool as an information source for passengers.

Through our contracting team and contracts, we have been driving both the reliability and

punctuality of our transport services. This is through the performance indicators that are in our contracts. We have seen significant improvements in the reliability and punctuality of the services provided by Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann and Go-Ahead Ireland. We hope customers in Kilbeggan will see an improvement as well but, unfortunately, there are times when a service does not operate, and we obviously apologise for that. I hope the information provided is trustworthy. We work with the operators to ensure real-time information is reliable because there is nothing worse than standing at a stop while not having the correct information. We continue to work on that. It is always a work in progress to ensure we make improvements.

We hear the frustration of the committee in terms of moving quicker on delivery. It is the delivery of infrastructure that was built without accessibility in mind. We are retrofitting, we know that. The scale of retrofitting is significant in some cases and will take a period of time. It requires funding and the resources of local authorities to deliver that. It is our ambition to move as quickly as possible to deliver that, but delivery and requests must be reasonable. That is the responsibility of the NTA in working with local authorities and operators. I hope it gives the committee some comfort that we also want to improve and improve services. It is not a lack of ambition or drive on our part either.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I thank the witnesses for their presentations and the supplementary documents, which have been useful in detailing different aspects of the programme. My questions will build on what has already been asked. If we look at what is already there, what is coming next and the new plans, is universal design part of what the NTA and TII are planning? I know it was referred to as being a part of vehicles. Universal design is not just in terms of the bus or rail stock we have, but it is also about the engagement of auditing the journey from door to door, for example, the accessibility of our stations and stops.

Following on from the question about bus shelters, the issue is not necessarily just about bus shelters. It is also about seats. In some cases, it is not just about having a covered bus shelter, but about having seating. Seating is a real consideration for people who use and rely on public transport, buses and rail. Can the witnesses comment on that? I want to flag that the idea of having a top 20 or top 30 bus stop piece might need to be reconfigured with the ambition level raised. I say this in the context that we have a programme for Government that is committed to a radical rebalancing of the amount of money that is to be spent on public transport, as opposed to other road infrastructure. That is a shift and a commitment in terms of our transport spending.

I have come from the launch of the climate committee's report on transport. I am a member of that committee. Witnesses will be aware that there is a real ambition and a commitment on resources. What we hope to hear from the witnesses – I hear some of it – is for a level of ambition. Given the significant scaling-up of public transport that is required over the next five to ten years in Ireland, will universal design be part of that? Will that be central to it? How do we ensure that it not all about having to do all the green infrastructure and finding that there is no time left to do the disability accessible infrastructure? How can those be deeply combined?

I had specific questions as to seating, which is a key issue. In terms of platforms, I know there is an issue with platform-to-carriage accessibility. Has the lowering of certain parts of a platform been looked? It is not about looking at the entire platform but a part of a platform so we can have better accessibility that is there as standard. This is the major shift across all of transport policy, not just in terms of disabilities.

I refer to the consultation on Local Link and rural transport that is happening. I am con-

cerned that a demand-led strategy is still at the centre. Demand led is fine, but it necessarily involves a large community and a loud campaign. Communities have had to fight for public transport when, in fact, we as a State need to move to a point where we are actively offering public transport to everybody, including people with a disability. Could Mr. Walsh assure us about the result of that consultation? It is often the case that people are shouting they want something to be accessible.

A demand-led service is linked to the question of advance notice and staffing. We have heard about lifts being out of order, some are old stock, they get vandalised and people need notice so that there is somebody to assist at a platform. With increased public expenditure, should there be increased staffing as part of that so there are staffed stations? We know that is a deterrent against vandalism and encourages people to participate more.

I want to give credit to the Dublin Bus travel assistance scheme, which has been really good. It is a person-centred scheme which has been very impactful. It has been readvertised by Dublin Bus. Is that scheme something that we might see more of nationally?

I refer to the design manual for urban roads and streets, DMURS. TII has that role in terms of being part of the Department of Transport's design of urban roads and streets. I refer to car free and pedestrian roads and other forms of travel. I would like to get a sense of how TII is engaging around DMURS in terms of looking to active travel spaces that are inclusive for people with a disability. It is not just about buses and rail; it also includes active travel spaces. For example, people would have active travel options in order to reach a public transport option. Could Mr. Walsh comment on that?

Mr. Peter Walsh: I will address what I can of that. On what is coming next and the commitment to universal design in the public transport services TII is engaged in, including the Luas and MetroLink, we have the full support of the NTA as our approving authority to include universal design. That is part of it and is not regarded as an extra or anything of that nature. The issue of door-to-door journeys is not something TII has engaged in.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: I know that. It is part of the Local Link service.

Mr. Peter Walsh: We are looking at engagement around walking in cities and making sure that things tie in. At the moment we are contributing to a process that has been organised by others. We have not engaged in anything of a door-to-door nature. I will call on Ms O'Donnell to talk about DMURS and our engagement with that.

Ms Sarah O'Donnell: On DMURS, TII would have been a stakeholder and has also written extensively on transition zones which involve the leads into towns and villages. It prioritises cycling, walking and vulnerable users and using traffic calming, better spaces and landscape to create spaces that are safer, slower and more compatible with walking and cycling. The transition zones approach is entirely context based. It involves the setting, location and local requirements. That is an appendix to the DMURS document and the ethos is very similar. It is not just about where a bus stop is placed or where there is access to a train station. It is much more holistic approach.

On universal design, we had much engagement with the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. In terms of MetroLink and some of the other projects, building for everyone is a key document. On Luas Finglas, we have taken a broad approach. Spaces will be designed for children and elderly people. The line will go through parks, which involves resting places, the

attractive separation of cyclists and walkers, etc. We will look at the UNESCO La Città Dei Bambini. This is the idea that when we design for children, we design for everybody. DMURS, healthy streets, etc., all apply. All of those strong guidance documents are feeding into the projects that we are engaged with.

On the travel assist scheme, Dublin Bus runs it and TII avails of it. Transdev, the Luas operator, also has a service that can be booked in advance if people need assistance travelling on the Luas. I hope that helps.

Ms Anne Graham: I will start the response in terms of the NTA. I will focus on public transport in rural areas, namely, Local Link services. There is a mixture. We will still retain the demand responsive services required in very isolated rural areas where there is not necessarily a demand for scheduled services. They feed into scheduled services so that we can ensure there is a connection between a very remote rural area and more scheduled services, and onwards to even bigger scheduled services. Making those connections is what connecting Ireland is about, as well as ensuring that we have those connections.

In terms of the design principles around connecting Ireland, it is about having a connection to the next local centre in a reasonable time and at a reasonable frequency throughout the day to the extent that people could possibly envisage living without a car in parts of rural Ireland. That will not necessarily help the 20% of people who live in very isolated rural areas. We hope that with demand responsive public transport services, community car schemes and rural hackney schemes, which are also supported through the NTA, we can build connections around rural Ireland that will allow people to live independently without the need for a private car while still being able to access the services they need. The defining principle is that all of those features would be fully wheelchair accessible. I will ask Mr. Creegan to comment on the rail side of things.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Senator Higgins asked if we had considered lowering parts of the platform to improve the rail to carriage connection. That would actually involve raising part of the platform. Our colleagues in Irish Rail considered this. The issue is that the fleet operating on most of the lines are all of different floor heights. It is a legacy issue caused by the fact some of the fleet dates back to 30 plus years. Unfortunately, we could not find a singular height which would mean there could be level boarding by ballooning part of the platform to a particular height.

As we roll out a new DART fleet, we will try to standardise the fleet on the Dublin network. It may then be possible to rationalise the fleet on other lines so that they are all of a singular type. That would then allow us to consider the possibility of raising platforms, in particular at front carriages or something like that, which would allow for much easier boarding. Right now, unfortunately, the difference in height between the different fleet types means that it does not help.

The Senator asked about seating at bus stops. We hope that is not something we will do much of but it is easier to do. We will take that away and see if we can provide it more easily and in many more places. I said earlier that there are visual and line of sight impacts with shelters that do not necessarily occur with seating so it should be easier to provide more of it. We will take away that point.

Chairman: I thank our guests and will follow up on a few points. Before I do, Senator Higgins would like to come in.

Senator Alice-Mary Higgins: My final point was about the staffing of stations. It would make an immediate difference if we had staff in stations on a busy DART line, rather than phoning to arrange the attendance of staff.

Ms Anne Graham: The approach we take is to have staff and a customer service agent available on all our inter-city services. Those staff are available to assist customers at every station, whether it is manned or unmanned. The approach on the DART line is to man the larger stations. The approach has been to man stations from an access point of view in zones and make accessibility available within a reasonable time period. I know Irish Rail's ambition is try to reduce that four-hour time period even more. We can certainly respond to the committee when Irish Rail is in a position to do that.

Chairman: I thank our guests for the conversation and discussion. It would be appreciated if the NTA would respond in correspondence to Deputy Cairns's questions about the consultation on the rural Local Link. We are looking at the availability of public transport for people with disabilities through TII and the NTA, especially in rural areas. There needs to be a recognition that while there are challenges for transport in urban areas, the scarcity of transport in rural areas for people who are vulnerable, isolated or living with a disability needs to be at the forefront of our guests' minds at all times. It is a challenge.

We must ensure that people with disabilities are at the forefront of decision-making about the transport infrastructure of Ireland, including roads, trains, buses and anything else. There are people who will not be able access those facilities fully and we need to look at that. Before weighty decisions are made, advice should be sought from disability groups and organisations. There should be a reach-out to the disabled community to ensure that informed decisions are made by the NTA and TII. I ask our guests to do that because it is hugely important. We look forward to further engagement with our guests. We will come back to them again. I ask them to bear those recommendations in mind and to come back to Deputy Cairns's question about Local Link. I stress that our guests should bear in mind at all times people with disabilities, vulnerable people and those in rural areas who are isolated, as we have referred to in numerous conversations. I thank our guests for their time and the members of the committee for their engagement. We look forward to working with our guests again.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.24 p.m. until 11.30 a.m. on Thursday, 17 June 2021.