

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Dé Céadaoin, 28 Márta 2018

Wednesday, 28 March 2018

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Seán Canney,	Paudie Coffey,
Michael Collins,	Maura Hopkins,
Michael Fitzmaurice,	Grace O'Sullivan.
Éamon Ó Cuív.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Danny Healy-Rae.

Teachta / Deputy Joe Carey sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Rural Transport Policy: National Transport Authority

Chairman: I remind members, staff and delegates to ensure their mobile phones are switched off as they cause interference with the broadcasting and web-streaming of the meeting which makes it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the proceedings.

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss rural transport policy with representatives of the National Transport Authority. On behalf of the joint committee, I welcome Ms Anne Graham, chief executive officer, and Ms Margaret Malone, manager of the rural transport programme. I thank them for attending at short notice. It is appreciated by the committee.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. The opening statement was circulated to members and will be published on the committee's website after the meeting.

I call Ms Graham to make her opening statement. If she so wishes, she may introduce her other colleague.

Ms Anne Graham: I thank the Chairman and members for the invitation to attend. I understand the joint committee wishes me to address the topic of rural transport policy. In my statement I will focus, in particular, on public transport. To assist me in dealing with subsequent questions, I am joined by Ms Margaret Malone who manages the rural transport programme within the National Transport Authority.

Before dealing with the specific area that will be the focus of my presentation, I would like to set in context by providing a brief overview of the remit of the National Transport Authority. Its remit is to regulate and develop the provision of integrated public transport services - bus, rail, light rail and taxi - by public and private operators in the State, to secure the development and implementation of an integrated transport system within the greater Dublin area and to contribute to the effective integration of transport and land use planning across the State. I have included in Appendix 1 of my statement more detail on our role and remit. In addition to its statutory responsibilities, the authority has various arrangements in place with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to discharge functions on its behalf. They include the assignment of responsibility to the authority for integrated local and rural transport, including the provision of the rural transport programme.

I will address the authority's responsibilities in relation to regional and economic strategies of regional assemblies. Under legislation, the NTA is required to provide for a regional assembly a report on "the issues, which, in its opinion, should be considered by the regional assembly in making a regional spatial and economic strategy". This function is set out in section 31FF of the Planning and Development Act 2000. The authority has recently made such submissions,

as required.

On the provision of public transport services, public transport in rural areas is provided in the following ways. Iarnród Éireann provides rail services under contract with the National Transport Authority. Changes to rail services require the approval of the authority. Bus Éireann provides a variety of services through its commercial Expressway services that are licensed by the NTA and through a network of subsidised public bus services under a direct award contract with the authority. Both services serve many rural towns, with frequencies varying from several times a day to a weekly service. Changes to the subsidised services require the approval of the authority. Other commercial operators provide a number of town-to-town services and intercity services across the State without a State subsidy. If Bus Éireann or any commercial operator is required to withdraw any of its commercial services, the authority will work to ensure communities are not left behind. Bus services are also provided under the rural transport programme. These services are contracted by the NTA and managed by 17 Local Link offices throughout the State. The services are primarily demand-responsive, which includes approximately 80% of all services. However, regular scheduled services between and in towns are also provided under the programme.

I will address the rural transport programme or, as it is now known, Local Link. The objective of the programme is to provide a good quality, nationwide, community-based public transport system in rural Ireland which responds to local needs. Typical services provided under the programme include demand-responsive transport services. The services do not operate on a fixed route but respond to requests for services by intending passengers and operate by making specific trips to pick up and drop off passengers at the door. They can be operated by large public service vehicles, hackneys or community cars. Scheduled fixed transport services comprise services with a regular route, stopping places and timetable. Key features of the public transport system include completing 1.9 million passenger journeys per annum, of which 900,000 are provided for free travel passengers. The figures include 200,000 passengers who require assistance. The system provides for an average of 150,000 service trips annually, travelling over 11.8 million km annually. Over 400 private operators provide the services, using the services of almost 900 drivers. The programme also funds the provision of once-off trips for individuals and community and voluntary groups to help to address the lack of transport as a factor in social exclusion. Some 62% of service trips are defined as either fully or partially accessible.

On passenger journeys and revenues, the number of passenger journeys grew from 1.7 million in 2015 to 1.89 million in 2017, a significant change, particularly between 2016 and 2017 when we saw growth of 5.6%. In the past two years the authority has supported the expansion of rural transport services to include regular commuter bus services. Operating at least five times a day on a five, six or seven day a week schedule, the services are specifically designed to ensure connectivity with other public transport services. This connectivity facilitates passengers to make onward journeys, typically to access education, employment, health, recreational and other opportunities. I have included in Appendix 2 a national listing of these regular services.

I will address the funding of the rural transport programme. Prior to its restructuring, a myriad of funding streams supported the provision of rural transport services. Post-restructuring, there are two main funding streams from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, with the free travel pass scheme. As in other areas, funding for the programme reduced significantly during the economic downturn. In recent years the funding allocation has continued to increase, thereby enabling further improvement and expansion of services. In 2015 the funding from the Department of Trans-

port, Tourism and Sport was just over €10 million which has grown to an allocation of €14.3 million in 2018. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection provides an annual funding allocation of €1.5 million under the free travel scheme towards the cost of the programme. Other sources of income for the rural transport programme include fare income and the provision of transport services for other organisations such as the Health Service Executive which are funded separately by the relevant organisations.

The authority has recently produced its rural transport programme strategic plan for the period 2018 to 2022. We have copies of the plan for committee members. It sets out key objectives both for the delivery and development of the rural transport programme in the five year period to the end of 2022. The key priorities of the programme continue to include addressing rural social exclusion and the integration of rural transport services with other public transport services. Nine key priority areas have been identified. They include sustaining the rural transport programme; route development and expansion; integration with other statutory services; the accessibility of services; access for all; ensuring the rural transport programme delivers an optimum customer experience; children and young people; encouraging innovation in rural transport service provision; and monitoring the progress of the rural transport programme.

The authority works continually with Bus Éireann, as it provides services in rural areas, to provide for improvements on its contracted services and is looking at the expansion of these services now that the budget for public service obligation services has increased since 2016. The authority also promoted improvements in the regional cities which have seen phenomenal growth in passenger numbers. These improvements cannot be sustained unless significant improvement works are carried out by the city authorities in providing for bus priority measures, particularly now as car traffic congestion is growing rapidly. Improved town services have been delivered in Athlone following the success of the Sligo bus services enhancements. The work in enhancing the services provided by Bus Éireann has recently been delayed significantly as it has had to prioritise the changes required as part of its business recovery plan. The work in enhancing the services provided by Bus Éireann has been delayed significantly in recent times as the company has had to prioritise the changes required as part of its business recovery plan. It is expected that Bus Éireann will complete that work shortly and that we can recommence the service enhancement work.

The authority recognises that there are many gaps in our service provision and there is a need for new services. We have focused on the lack of services in our main towns and we are prioritising the provision of new town services in Kilkenny, Carlow and Mullingar. These centres all have populations between 19,000 and 26,000 and all have minimal levels of service.

In exercising its functions the authority seeks to co-ordinate services to achieve the provision of an integrated public transport system of services and networks for all users. Wherever appropriate, we seek to integrate and co-ordinate services to provide for seamless travel options where change of bus or mode is required. This is relevant for the operation of the Local Link services, which can facilitate connection to mainline inter-urban services irrespective of the provider of those services. In fact, the NTA is the only body that can bring modes and operators together in an integrated service pattern to provide the best service for rural communities.

A number of key infrastructural items support public transport and are required to increase the attractiveness of public transport, especially in rural Ireland. These include bus shelters, accessible bus stops and information at stops. The provision of additional shelters has been greatly constrained in recent year by lack of funding. The contract for the provision and maintenance of bus shelters rests with the NTA rather than each operator. Therefore, we are now

well placed to deliver a comprehensive shelter programme.

Information provision has improved. New bus stop poles and information have been rolled out on a pilot basis in Cork city. Real-time information, while not available on signs at every bus stop, is available on the Transport for Ireland website and app, as well as through an SMS text messaging service. However, our ambition to deliver in these areas has been constrained due to lack of funding. It is expected that funding will improve from 2019. However, the authority needs to be in a position to put in place the resources that can deliver on our ambitious programme of improvements. That concludes my presentation. I trust that we can answer any queries that arise.

Deputy Seán Canney: I thank the witnesses for the presentation and for their attendance.

I have come across many private bus operators who are operating services on a commercial basis with no subvention from the State. They are successful in doing that but one issue they have raised with me from time to time relates to putting in place new services or enhancing the existing services by creating more bus stops. This involves applying for licences and the process has become highly protracted. In the past, they would get the approval of the Garda and then the licence would be approved by the Department. Now, the local authorities are involved and there is what we call a sign-off, which is a process that brings responsibility, caution and delay in getting these bus stops in place. It is prevalent in rural areas. Those involved are willing to provide a service at no cost to the State. Will the NTA look at this and realign the application process to make it simpler? It would allow us to get the bus stops in place.

I accept that bus stops, especially in rural areas, are set up in places where the necessary space may not be available. The bus may have to pull up on the road and take off again. That is the simple fact of it and we are not going to change it. I believe we should take that into account and allow the operators to operate that way. The associated paperwork should be streamlined. If the Garda approves a licence, then the NTA should take on the responsibility of approving it rather than bringing in the local authorities and having engineers involved. The engineers are reluctant to sign off on something because they believe they are taking on responsibility.

I have held discussions locally with the Local Link companies. Several issues arise. While services have improved, I understand that there may be a re-tendering of the Local Link service. It is probably unnecessary at this time to be looking to re-tender as it only creates more uncertainty. It also creates a sense that people do not know whether they will be providing the service by the end of this year. I am keen to hear the comments of Ms Graham on that point.

Another simple issue has been raised with me. I was looking for maps of bus routes for Local Link. The operators do not have maps or the capacity to create the maps because those operating the services are one-man or one-woman bands. Three companies, comprising three people, operate in Galway.

Another point is that the NTA has data relating to the total integrated system of transport provision. These operators do not have access to the data. In some cases, it could take three months for them to do the work to ensure the service is integrated across the board. However, if they had the data at their fingertips, they could get access to the information at the disposal of the NTA. There is no cost involved in such sharing of information.

The other issue they raised with me is the idea of related services. While we have the Local Link and we operate an integrated service, we also have local on-call services. The fear is that

we might forget about these or that they might get lost when we are developing other rural links. We need to ensure the continuance of the bus going out to Headford and environs to collect 12 or 14 people on Friday. The bus brings them in to collect their pension, go to the pharmacy or the doctor, have a cup of tea in the local resource centre and get back home in the afternoon. It allows them to get a bus to Galway if they want. It is important that this service remains in place and is supported. The resources of Local Link companies need to be enhanced. They need to be given a little more help with administration staff to ensure that they are in a position to deliver as they expand services. The associated money should be ring-fenced for three or five years in order that they know with certainty how they can plan for the coming three to five years.

My last question relates to the lack of railway services in rural areas, especially along the western rail corridor. Phase 1 has been completed from Ennis to Athenry. It has been proven in recent years that the numbers are increasing. Under the national development plan it is intended to look at extending the service from Athenry to Claremorris in order to have a link between Galway and Mayo by rail. What is the attitude of the NTA? Is the authority supportive of it? Does the authority perceive that as being something for rural Ireland that will make a difference in creating the Atlantic economic corridor? I understand that the NTA may have made submissions suggesting that we put a greenway on this line. What is the NTA's attitude in this regard?

I believe that if we are to progress development in rural Ireland, we definitely need to extend the western rail corridor for the future of development and to create connectivity for freight, tourism and commuter services. As the NTA representatives may know, Galway city is chock-a-block and people cannot get into it. The main clear artery from north Galway comes through the railway service into Eyre Square. We could create a commuter service from Claremorris, Westport and Ballina all the way into Galway and have return services to these places. Such a development would enhance tourism and all the various possible economic derivatives. What is the attitude of the NTA representatives on that point?

Chairman: Thank you, Deputy. As we are under time pressure today, I am going to club three members' questions together. The next member indicating is Deputy Ó Cuív. He will be followed by Senator Coffey. I will then invite Ms Graham to address the questions.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: We are all under time pressure because some of us are on two committees that are meeting one after the other.

I welcome the witnesses. Ms Graham said the remit of the authority is to regulate – we understand that – and develop. What precise role does the authority have in development outside the greater Dublin area? Has the NTA sought to amend the legislation to give it the same powers and responsibilities outside the greater Dublin area, GDA, as it has within it to make it a truly national transport authority?

It was explained that Iarnród Éireann provides rail services under a contract with the National Transport Authority and that any changes to rail services require the approval of the authority. Who initiates proposed changes in rail services? Who is the person who says we recognise that we have an inadequate commuter rail service into Galway, for example, or into Cork or Limerick, and we need a much more comprehensive, integrated rail service that serves the needs of people who want to travel to work by train? Is it the NTA or Iarnród Éireann that initiates the process? Is the NTA the disposer or the proposer of rail policy in terms of the services? We need to get a handle on this issue. It is similar with bus services. For example, in many parts of the country where urban areas service rural areas, starting in the third level

cities, as I call them, and towns and going out to the rural areas, there are no buses after 6 p.m. Ultimately, whose responsibility is it to propose that we move into the 21st century and change all of that? Is it the responsibility of the bus companies or the NTA? In other words, does the NTA just dispose of proposals or does it make them and say this is the service that a national transport body should provide and this is what we want?

My next question relates to fares. It is a bugbear of mine. I think I raised it with the NTA previously. Fares per kilometre are strangely way more expensive in the non-urban areas. In Galway, for example, the designated urban area goes out to Barna, or in the Dublin area it has been extended to Sallins, but beyond that one is in the sticks and one's fare doubles for going one mile. Whose responsibility is it to drive change in that regard? I refer to equity, fairness and equality, all the terms that are the buzzwords of modern society. Who drives change - the NTA or the bus companies? As with the fare issue, is the NTA the proposer or the disposer?

My understanding is that a submission was made by the NTA to the greenways policy, proposing to use the railway line from Athenry northwards as a greenway, even though the programme for Government says that the Government will investigate reopening that railway line. Will the witnesses explain the NTA's role in that and in making proposals for the western rail corridor? Does the NTA have a view on the need to develop commuter rail into the major cities from the surrounding areas of Galway, Waterford, Limerick and Cork? We do not have commuter rail in any of those cities other than Cork. How does it sit to propose the demise of a railway corridor?

In 1959 the Harcourt Street railway line was closed in Dublin. It is now the green Luas line which goes out to Sandyford. The line used to go out to Bray. It was all sold up fairly fast. By 1989, 30 years later, everybody realised that was a fundamental mistake and that what seemed impossible in 1959 - that there would be massive populations around Dundrum - actually happened. It is proposed that there will be 1 million extra in population and they will not live where the national plan wants them to live. They will live where they want to live. The western rail corridor and maintaining its availability for a railway line is key to the future. The Chairman has a particular interest in the southern end of that railway line and getting decent services on it. I commend him on that because it has enormous potential that we are not exploiting. Limerick has endless railway lines around it that could be used for commuter transport for up to 30 miles around the city. We need to get a clear NTA position on the railway lines.

Senator Paudie Coffey: I thank the witnesses for their presentation and for attending the committee today. This is a very important engagement. As our remit is rural and community affairs, and as representatives of rural areas, it is obligatory on all of us to emphasise the significance and importance of transport to living in rural areas. I wish to re-emphasise that at the very outset.

I acknowledge the important role and function of the NTA in directing policy nationally in terms of planning and integration of public transport and transport provision. While we recognise that infrastructure is so critical for urban transport, it is also critical for rural dwellers as well in terms of how they integrate and interact with society. I note the NTA's role in providing direction and reporting to the regional assemblies which will have a critical role in devising strategies for long-term planning under the new planning framework. My question to the NTA is whether it rural-proofs the planning reporting to such bodies as the regional assemblies. Do they look at the demographics to see how rural communities, towns and villages are integrated with the larger towns that I would see as the service centres for those regional areas? The assemblies have a critical role in this area. The regional assemblies have the responsibility for

devising planning strategy for their regions for the next ten to 20 years, but the NTA has a critical role to play in providing information that serves the entire community, both urban and rural. I would be interested to hear the perspectives from the representatives in that regard.

The co-ordination of existing services is critical. The NTA has a crucial role in terms of filling any voids or deficits that are not serviced by private operators in the transport area. We have successful transport initiatives in various areas. In my area in Waterford a subsidised service operates in Portlaw, for example, a town 12 miles from Waterford city. Suirway services run a very sustainable bus service, supported by the State through the NTA, to keep that service alive. Local Link provides feeder services throughout rural County Waterford with much success. That needs to be acknowledged. However, I feel there is more potential to link rural towns and villages to other feeder services. I would like to hear if the NTA has future plans on how it hopes to influence future planning and how it engages with the various transport providers to provide a better integrated and co-ordinated service.

In terms of co-ordination, I have been made aware by students, for example, who travel by train or bus, that there is often a lack of continuity of service when people are using public transport in Ireland. For example, if they are travelling between cities, a train might arrive at one station at a particular time and the train to the next city might have left ten or 15 minutes prior to the arrival of that train. I can provide such examples to the witnesses from the NTA. I am just giving a broad sample of some concerns I have heard expressed. I would like to hear how the NTA can influence all of our public transport providers, both private and public, to try to co-ordinate services so that we have consistency and continuity in services.

One mode of transport that we should recognise more is the two-wheeled variety, namely, cycling. It is such a beautiful country but we do not have enough infrastructure to encourage people to use bicycles more. That is especially important given the climate change challenges we face. I would like to hear the NTA's vision for cycling in this country to assist people who want to cycle more in both rural and urban areas. The NTA has an important function in that regard.

My final point also relates to climate change challenges. We heard the Government announcement recently on the prohibition of new diesel engines after 2040. Does that apply to public transport fleets in the country? If so, what is the NTA doing now to ensure we have a sustainable transport fleet in both the public and private sectors in respect of its operation, its impact on climate change and how energy is used in this country?

Ms Anne Graham: I will start with Deputy Canney's questions, one of which concerned the protracted nature of getting approval for bus stops. Unfortunately, the policy changed from being a Garda approval to a local authority approval. As it is set out, the only legislative body that can approve the location of bus stops under the Roads Act is a local authority. We do not have a role in approving the location of bus stops. We have provided guidance to local authorities about how and where they should locate bus stops, particularly those associated with rural services. We engage with local authorities to try to encourage them to ensure they approve bus stops in a timely manner but we acknowledge more work needs to be done in that area because some operators get through our part of the licensing system quite quickly and then get held up on bus stop approvals. We are aware of that. Unfortunately, we do not have the powers to approve bus stops. It is the local authority that approves them. Ms Malone might cover Local Link re-tendering.

Ms Margaret Malone: A few questions were asked about Local Link, some of which I will

now address. The first issue was the re-tendering of the programme. The current four-year programme has been in existence since 2014 and expires at the end of December 2018 and consequently, we will be looking at the next stage from 2019 to 2022. In 2013-14, there was a closed call for applications. It was not an open procurement process for a variety of reasons. A number of groups tendered for the call and 17 transport co-ordination units, TCUs, are now in existence with the brand name of Local Link. We have been getting legal and procurement advice this time around and it looks as if we must go through a formal tendering process this time around to comply with both EU and Irish procurement legislation. I accept there is a degree of anxiety and nervousness about what the process might be, who will come through the process and how it will reflect and take on board the amount of good work undertaken by the existing Local Link groups in recent years. As we are still working on what that process will look like, we have not yet gone out to the groups to formally advise them what the procurement process will be. We aim to be in a position to do that probably by the end of April. We will then make sure there are any number of meetings, sessions and briefings to address concerns and will have a number of question-and-answer sessions around the country in order that everybody is very clear about what the procurement process will be. In terms of complying with the legislation, we are looking at a request for tender process - an open procurement process.

Regarding the question on maps and whether access to mapping is not of as high a standard as it should be, I accept that. We have had issues with our system for the rural transport programme, which is called the integrated transport management system, ITMS. It has had some issues over the past number of years but I am happy to say it is in a much better place now than it has been. Much investment, time and resources have gone into trying to resolve some of the outstanding issues. As of this morning, before I left the office, I checked and the mapping functionality is up and running again. There has been a delay there that has hindered the ability of some groups to design their routes and services. In a more long-term way, we intend to integrate the ITMS more formally with the authority's other systems in order that ultimately, the Local Link groups will be able to access the same mapping information and the same layering of information the authority uses to inform all of its other planning processes. Consequently, we are working in that direction.

As for addressing social exclusion and making sure the programme does not lose sight of where it started from, the rural transport programme was initiated back in the 2000s. It formed out of a need to address rural social exclusion and that has been a basic tenet of the programme all the way through. We are moving into an era where we are taking on board more regular high-frequency commuter-type services and running them through the rural transport programme but there is no avoiding or walking away from the needs and responsibilities that arise from a rural social exclusion point of view. Members will see that a large number of actions throughout the strategy we will circulate shortly are designed around addressing rural social exclusion in particular.

Ms Anne Graham: I will pick up on the rest of Deputy Canney's questions. He asked about the budget and a three or five-year budget that gives some kind of certainty. We would also like that certainty because as we only get our operational budget on a yearly basis, it is difficult for us to plan, which also makes it difficult for the Local Link offices to plan ahead.

In terms of the western rail corridor, our role with regard to rail infrastructure is very specific. We have a contract related to the provision of services and the only place where we influence the provision of infrastructure is in the greater Dublin area, where we fund the capital investment in infrastructure. The overall policy relating to the provision of rail infrastructure

outside the greater Dublin area is a matter for the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. It manages the infrastructure through a contract with Irish Rail for the improvements on and maintenance of the infrastructure. As an authority, we have views from a transport planning point of view about rail infrastructure because it is costly infrastructure to provide and maintain. We obviously feel it is important for high-quality commuter services into cities. This does not just include Dublin but the regional cities as well. It is important for moving people on an inter-urban basis. We need high volumes to be able to cover the cost of providing the infrastructure to make a business case stand up for providing the infrastructure but also for keeping it maintained and the value for money associated with that.

We respect what was set out in the national development plan regarding the western rail corridor. In terms of the submission we made, there is a bit of a misunderstanding when we refer to abandoned railway lines and their potential for use as greenways. This did not refer to the western rail corridor. That was not what we intended and we will clarify that with the particular regional assembly. We were talking about railways other than the western rail corridor, of which there are a number around the State. It is for those to be used as greenways. We were not referring to the western rail corridor. If there is a business case to support the development of rail because it is important from a public transport point of view, we will support it if it stands up economically.

As for Deputy Ó Cuív's questions about who develops bus and rail services, it is a combination. In some cases, we develop the plans because we have our own transport planners and service planners. We put forward proposals whether they are for the bus company or the rail company to see whether it can provide those services with the resources it has or what the cost associated with providing those would be. In some cases, we instigate the changes but in other cases, the operators instigate the changes. When we were set up initially, we did not have the resources to be doing the transport planning. We are developing that service planning role far more as we have been in a position to increase our resources in that area. Ultimately, we must approve whatever changes are mooted. Where we instigate such changes, we obviously wish to approve them but we must check whether the operator is in a position to deliver them. We also are open to the operator having its own ideas and innovating in services. We would approve those services if the funding is there and if we feel it is the right service to provide. We have been pushing for services like evening services, off-peak services and services that probably do not provide the same return in terms of fares but which we still think there is an obligation to provide. It is the policy of the NTA to develop and improve services at off-peak times, evenings and weekends. I acknowledge Deputy Ó Cuív has made a particular request and has met us to discuss a certain service. We are waiting for our operator to furnish us with the timetable and an outline of the cost. The formal approval process will then begin. We are very open to any suggestions for improvement, particularly where off-peak and weekend services are concerned.

In regard to fares, the NTA tends to be the proposer of fare structure. Trying to rectify and simplify the fare structure that we inherited six or seven years ago has been a difficult process. We have focused on simplifying the number of rail fares and fare stages, particularly in the short-hop zones in city areas. It took about five years to get some form of distance-based fare system in the commuter zone, but a lot more work needs to be done on that. We will be doing a similar exercise on the intercity fare. Similarly, Bus Éireann has a hugely complicated fare structure and we are working with it to simplify those fares. We are simplifying the relationship between a standard adult single ticket and the deductions for child or student fare in order that it is much simpler for people to understand what fares are being offered.

The argument the Deputy has made to us is there should be the same fare structure in the cities as there is in the rural areas. We do not agree with that. In order to function, a city requires a lot more people to use public transport than does a rural area in respect of congestion. We therefore must encourage as many people as possible to use public transport in the cities. Moreover, there is a greater cost associated with providing transport in rural areas than in city areas. As such, a simplified fare structure and lower city fares allow us to provide more services to meet the congestion in those areas. We feel there should be a different fare structure in the cities than applies in rural areas. However, we subvent our fares in rural areas to a higher level per passenger journey than we do-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The subvention is higher per passenger journey, but not per head of population.

Ms Anne Graham: We have had this-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The NTA does not subsidise the people where I live at all, because there is no service there. The subsidy per passenger journey is infinite because there is no service.

Ms Anne Graham: We have said that we are trying to address the gaps in services. We have not said that all gaps have been filled.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: The measure of spending per passenger journey is totally inequitable. It would be much better to start on the basis that there are a half a million people in Connacht and a million people in Dublin. Is the subsidy for public transport in Connacht half of that in Dublin? It is not. It is about a tenth. Of course the NTA is always going to win by measuring per passenger journey, because the people who do not have the service cannot use it and therefore are never subsidised. It is a crazy measure.

Ms Anne Graham: I refer the Deputy to our investment priorities. We have increased the subsidy to services provided by Bus Éireann very significantly, by 50%. The subsidy for the service provided by Dublin Bus has been reduced. Investment in rural services has increased compared with investment in Dublin-----

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: It is still the case that 1.1 million people get €60 million for Dublin Bus. When rural transport and Bus Éireann are included, the figure is about €53 million for 3 million people. As such, €3 is spent on a Dublin person for every €1 spent on a rural person. That just includes buses, never mind trains.

Ms Anne Graham: We have had this argument before. We do not agree with that way of analysing how public transport is delivered. We believe it should be considered on the basis of passenger journeys. We examine the gaps where services are needed and consider the costs of providing them, rather than what each member of population is getting. We try to improve services where there are gaps. The NTA or the operators identify the gaps and we fill them, where we have the funding to do so.

Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív: Does the witness not represent a National Transport Authority? Should that body not provide a national integrated transport service? That would not be a service based on economics, but a public service for all the people who live and pay taxes in this State.

Ms Anne Graham: We do not disagree with the Deputy. I have been outlining how we go

about doing that. We have all said that there are gaps in services. We are trying to address those gaps and provide as much service as we can with the funding that we have. We have had quite a bit of success in filling those gaps in recent years. I am not saying that it is a perfect service by any means. We have a long way to go to address the type of issues Deputy Ó Cuív has previously raised with us, including evening and weekend services. That is a work in progress.

I will move on to Senator Coffey's questions. The NTA does engage in demographic projection and the rural-proofing of our proposals to the regional assemblies. We are careful to ensure that what we put forward has due regard for demographics but also meets the needs of rural towns and villages and improves public transport in those areas. Outside of the greater Dublin area, GDA, our role in support of assemblies arises from our statutory duty to assist and co-operate in the preparation of the regional spatial and economic strategies, RSEs. We are required to prepare a report setting out the issues which, in our opinion, should be considered by the regional assemblies in making a regional spatial and economic strategy. The eastern regional assembly is slightly different because we have special functions concerning the GDA, but for the others we set out what we believe are the transport issues that the regional assembly should address.

In regard to the co-ordination of existing services, we recognise that there is potential to link rural towns and services more. We engage with transport operators continually. If they identify gaps, we work with the operators to see if they can fill them. If the operator is a licensed service, we see if they are willing to meet the needs without a subsidy. Alternatively, we sometimes have to subsidise a service in order to make those links. Our Local Link services have really been fantastic at making those links, particularly in rural areas, and we want to develop that a lot further. If there are specific instances of a lack of transport links, I ask members to bring them to our attention because we rely on people highlighting these needs. We will then see if there is anything we can do in that area.

We recognise that we do not have enough cycling infrastructure. Our function in this regard is focused on the cities, because that is our arrangement with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport.

The national development plan now requires that no 100% diesel-fuelled fleet is purchased for public transport after July 2019, so we have to move. We were already considering moving to a low-emission fleet. Starting this year, we hope to begin the procurement of a low-emission diesel fleet for our bus services.

Ms Margaret Malone: On the connectivity issue, we have recently issued a request through the rural transport programme for applications for evening and night-time services, particularly for Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday evenings. This is partly aimed at promoting social inclusion, but it is also intended to connect with existing services in the area, including commuter services. It is intended that people will be able to stay out or travel into a town in the evening and get home at a certain time. That connectivity issue is very much on our radar.

Deputy Seán Canney: I would just like clarification on what Ms Malone mentioned about the software, the maps and that kind of thing. She said that she hopes to be able to bring forward something which the rural link companies can use. Is there a timeframe for that? That would make life an awful lot easier for them and it would make them more efficient in their work. It would also give them a greater picture of what they can do to link into every other service. It is a small thing but I would appreciate if it could be done sooner rather than later. I thank both the witnesses for their responses.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Many of the questions I had have been raised. Ms Graham has outlined the sense that there are still gaps. Obviously the NTA is working to improve them. With that, I want to start off on a positive note and say that the NTA has listened to concerns about the extension of the 440 bus route, the Westport to Athlone route, which is obviously very important for County Roscommon. It serves many towns and villages and it provides for return services daily. We need the Local Link services to interface with that as much as possible.

My question is on the tendering process. I recently met the manager of our Local Link service and I believe there is anxiety around the retendering process. The sense I got from the discussion is that there will be a wait before further Local Link services are introduced. Am I correct in that? Are we waiting for the tendering process to take place before further services are introduced or can new services be introduced at the present time?

Ms Margaret Malone: We are accepting applications all of the time.

Senator Maura Hopkins: Okay. I would also like to emphasise the important work which Local Link services do. For example, there is a service in Tulsk which supports a day centre and a rural school. It also integrates locals with towns. We obviously need to see more of that, but it is a very good example of trying to be efficient and trying to link as many people as possible to the places to which they need to go. That was my one concern around that tendering process. I had a sense that people were waiting to see how the tendering process progresses before further routes were introduced. I really just wanted clarification on that.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I was interested to hear about bus shelters. There are many small towns in rural parts of Ireland in which there is not even a sign for the bus stop, never mind a bus shelter. When will that be addressed? How much of a roll-out of bus shelters will there be? I welcome the extra carriages which I believe are being put on Iarnród Éireann's Sligo route. That is welcome. We have overcrowding on the Westport route. It does not seem to be being addressed at certain times. There has been talk over recent months that the Dublin to Belfast route will be going down the road towards going electric. Why is there no talk at all about electrifying the route out as far as Maynooth and then reverting to diesel out to the west? It does not seem that investment will be put into that.

On rural transport, there are some very good examples, for example, in Ballinamore. There is a great woman, Camilla Kelly, who works on the Sligo, Leitrim and Roscommon areas. Some great projects have been rolled out which suit both people who are working and people who want to go shopping. Why is there such a discrepancy in different parts of the country? There can be a good system which brings people to work on a return train journey in some counties, but in other counties the system only works for the bingo run. I mean no disrespect by that. It needs to be done, but the system only works for the bingo run and the shopping on Friday. Other than that there is nothing. The system does not cater for workers or anything. Why is that the situation in some counties? To be honest about it, there are many places where one would not see a bus within a five or six mile radius from one end of the year to the other. What can be done to address that?

On rail, I listened with interest to what was said when the western rail corridor was brought up. Ms Graham has seen the rail review. The document states that three different routes are for the chop. We need to nail this down. I am in full support of rail, but there is no good in having formulas of words and in bringing out documents which say that we will have a review and this, that and the other. At the end of the day, the time has come for straight answers on the western rail corridor and on the line in Tipperary. We need a straight answer as to whether investment

will be given or not. Wording in documents is not what we want. We want either to get pounds, shillings and pence to deliver something or to move on. Where is Ms Graham on this? Does she agree with what I am saying? Is she saying that this committee needs to bring in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to nail this down once and for all? This sort of nod and wink approach has been going on almost since I was a young fella, and that is a while ago. Either rail projects are being done or they are not. We need to nail it down one way or the other.

Ms Graham touched on Dublin Bus. The information I have is that, while rural people are being told that they will not be able to buy a diesel car in the next ten, 15 or 20 years even if they are travelling long distances, Dublin Bus is currently buying diesel buses and was buying diesel buses last year. If I was trying to show the way in something, I would be damn sure that public transport should be the first to lead the way. Why is this continuing? Perhaps it is down to money. That is fully understandable. To put it simply, there would be nine buses where there were ten if we were to change over to the gas system. Is this the reason? Is it down to money? Who is going to make the decisions on the way forward in respect of buses? I note that Ms Graham said 2019 or 2020. If we are bringing out documents about climate change and all this craic, which I see plenty of within the Dáil, why is the State not leading the way rather than putting the onus onto the person who may have no bus, who may have to travel a distance to work in a rural part of Ireland, and who may not have the money to be changing over all this stuff? Why is the State not showing the way first? At least we could then point to what we have done. That is not happening. Will Ms Graham give me her opinion on that?

On the Luas or tram-type systems, I know that Dublin Airport is being touted. State land could be had for something like €200 million, rather than €4 billion, which would allow the DART to shoot out to Malahide and then across, bringing in the Swords area and out towards the airport. Why was that not looked at? It would be simpler and quicker. In Galway there does not seem to be a system. I am sure the NTA is aware of the transport problems in Parkmore. We do not seem to have a bus or a park-and-ride system set up that would help alleviate the problem. Galway is losing jobs because of the transport situation. When do the witnesses envisage a Luas-type system in that city, or are we living in fairyland world whereby we will say it will happen in 2030 or 2040 and we will not be here when it will happen?

Chairman: We are under a tight time constraint as we must vacate the room by 1.15 p.m. because another committee is coming in to use the room. I have a couple of questions, Deputy Collins indicated to me earlier and we also have Deputy Healy-Rae. I will take everyone but we need to be short. Perhaps the witnesses will answer our questions in writing if possible.

I want to come back to the rural transport programme and the one I know best is in County Clare. Clarebus has 170 services a week and had 54,500 passenger trips last year alone. It has 11 low-floored, easily accessible buses, which are wonderful. It operates out of Feakle in rural east Clare. It is a wonderful organisation and I pay tribute to it. Its fleet of 11 buses is under huge pressure from wear and tear over many years. It bought those buses using funding. Local Link is a national movement and it is funded throughout the country. The organisations involved need backup to keep improving their fleets. I ask the NTA to look at this.

With regard to routes, a timely turnaround is needed when a new route is proposed. A route was proposed by Clarebus from Kilkee to Kilrush and back to Ennis. It has been lodged for months and nothing has been heard back. It is needed. Will the NTA look at this? Coincidentally, another route has been proposed in north Clare, from Ballyvaughan to Lisdoonvarna to Ennistymon, Corofin, Ruan and back to Ennis. Again it is a wonderful route, but I ask for timely turnaround on these issues.

I ask Deputy Collins to be mindful of the time-----

Deputy Michael Collins: I will.

Chairman: -----and then we will have Deputy Healy-Rae.

Deputy Michael Collins: I will keep it strictly to a few minutes. I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee. I have a few issues to raise and I will start with Local Link Cork because time is of the essence. I am involved in Local Link Cork and I have seen the incredible delivery it has given to the people throughout west Cork. In fairness, the NTA deserves praise for giving sufficient funding to Local Link Cork, but I have to say the manager, David O'Brien, and the chairman of the company, Nealie O'Leary, have delivered meticulously. I can be very critical at times on certain things that happen in rural Ireland, but I cannot say anything about this because I never hear anybody complain. Cork is a huge sprawling county with people from Bere Island into Kilcrohane, Ballydehob, Lisheen and Skibbereen. A new service from Clonakilty to Kinsale was funded recently by the NTA. It has increased many services into Timoleague, Kilbrittain, Barryroe and Courtmacsherry. On the other side we have Bantry, Drimoleague and Dunmanway. The service is second to none. I concur with the Chairman, in that we have our own fleet of buses and they are ageing to a point, and this may be an area where stronger funds need to be directed going down the road, but the delivery on the ground is second to none.

There is one issue that-----

Chairman: I am sorry Deputy Collins, but we are under massive time constraints because the next meeting will begin and the room needs to be set up for it. Unfortunately, we just do not have the time.

Deputy Michael Collins: Give me a minute and a half and I will finish.

Chairman: We just do not have the time.

Deputy Michael Collins: Give me as minute and a half and I will finish on this.

Chairman: Just finish on this.

Deputy Michael Collins: The cost of bus and rail tickets is a serious issue, for many young people in particular. I would appreciate the NTA looking into this because in rural Ireland young people totally depend on a bus service, particularly with car insurance being so expensive. It is nearly an impossibility for people to get on the road. They are totally dependent on bus and rail. Recently, I raised in the Dáil the issue of a lack of rail. We had rail going to Schull and Mizen Head and throughout west Cork in the 1850s. I am looking to see whether we can have rail coming as far as Bandon, which would open up west Cork. We also need to deliver a transport service for people with disabilities over 18 years of age. They are entitled to a free service when they are aged 17 years and 364 days, but once they reach their 18th birthday they are given an automatic ticket on a bus. Most of these people cannot go on a bus on their own. No service is available for elderly people who are unable to travel throughout west Cork for four hours a day. This is an area for which I would like funding to be provided to Local Link Cork.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy for being brief. Unfortunately, I cannot bring in Deputy Healy-Rae.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I could take half a minute, instead of the Chairman speaking.

Chairman: Half a minute, go on.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: What provision is being made for rural bus providers to cater for disabled people wishing to access transport? How can it be fair that a company in Kerry, which I will not name and that has State money, can tender against private contractors for bus runs and community runs? This has been raised in the Chamber and I want to raise it again because it is absolutely unfair on private contractors. I am a contractor but I am not raising this for myself. It is for others.

Chairman: I thank the Deputies for their co-operation. Ms Graham will come back in writing on the questions.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: We do not have a meeting every week and the fact we have to pack up at 1.15 p.m. must be addressed. We have not received answers. We deserve to be able to challenge points at the meeting. Writing a letter back to someone is like me writing a letter to Santa, as people can write whatever they want.

Chairman: We can have another meeting if that is what people want, but unfortunately today-----

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Other committee meetings continue.

Chairman: Unfortunately, today we are under time constraints. We can see the clerk coming in for the next meeting.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: I am not saying anything about the clerk coming in, and I am not criticising the clerk.

Chairman: That is just the situation.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: What I am saying is that if a meeting goes on for four hours, it goes on for four hours. We should not be turfed out after an hour and three quarters.

Chairman: I would much rather if we had longer, absolutely.

Deputy Michael Collins: It has been good to have the NTA here today but we need more time, in fairness.

Chairman: We could possibly invite the NTA back.

Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice: Will we have the answers back from the NTA for the next meeting?

Chairman: We would like to get answers to the questions we have asked. I have proposed that the NTA answer in writing and the witnesses have agreed to do this. We can possibly discuss in private session whether we will bring the NTA before us again. I thank the witnesses for their contribution today and for answering the questions. Unfortunately, we had a time constraint today. It is something we will revisit.

I propose that the committee publishes the opening statements and documentation supplied by the NTA. Is that agreed? Agreed.

28 MARCH 2018

The joint committee adjourned at 1.20 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Wednesday, 25 April 2018.