

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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*Dé Máirt, 23 Deireadh Fómhair 2018*

*Tuesday, 23 October 2018*

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The Joint Committee met at 7 p.m.

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### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Michael Collins,	Senator Maura Hopkins,
Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice,	Senator Grace O'Sullivan.
Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív,	

In attendance: Deputies Danny Healy-Rae and Michael Healy-Rae and Senator John Dolan.

SENATOR PAUDIE COFFEY IN THE CHAIR.

### **Business of Joint Committee**

**Clerk to the Committee:** The Chairman has given notice that he is unavoidably absent from the meeting. In that case, according to Standing Orders for the Dáil and the Seanad, the joint committee must proceed at once to elect one of its members as Acting Chairman.

**Senator Grace O’Sullivan:** I propose Senator Paudie Coffey.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I second Senator Grace O’Sullivan’s proposal.

**Clerk to the Committee:** Is that agreed? Agreed.

*Senator Paudie Coffey took the Chair.*

### **Regional and Rural Transport Policy: Discussion**

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am delighted to and happily step in as Acting Chairman. The Chairman, Deputy Carey, is actually in the United Kingdom on Oireachtas business. He is with the delegation to the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly.

I remind members, delegates and those in the Visitors Gallery to turn off their mobile phones or switch them to flight mode. Mobile phones interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the proceedings of the meeting. Television, radio, Internet streaming and Internet protocol television, IPTV, coverage of the meeting can also be adversely affected.

The purpose of the meeting is to engage with officials from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport on the matter of regional and rural transport policy. I extend a warm welcome to our guests, Ms Deirdre Hanlon, assistant secretary with responsibility for public transport, sustainability and climate change; Mr. Kevin Doyle, principal officer with responsibility for public transport and corporate services; Mr. Garret Doocey, principal officer with responsibility for public transport investment, and Mr. Dominic Mullaney, principal adviser on roads policy.

It is proposed that the opening statement and any other document supplied by the officials to the committee will be published on its website after the meeting. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Following the meeting the committee will meet for a short time in private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

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 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.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I thank the Acting Chairman for giving us the opportunity to present this opening statement on behalf of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. The Department has been invited by the joint committee to answer questions on transport policy in rural and regional areas and assist it in its consideration of the matter. I am joined by some of my colleagues in the Department working across the area of land transport. Mr. Kevin Doyle and Mr. Garrett Doocey deal with matters related to public transport policy, while Mr. Dominic Mullaney deals with matters related to roads policy.

The committee has had several discussions on rural and regional transport policy and will be aware that there are many actors in the transport arena in Ireland. In addition, there have been several changes in the way public transport is organised and governed in the past decade. Against this backdrop, it might be useful for the committee if I were to start by outlining briefly how some of the State institutions in the public transport area are organised, including the Department, and provide a summary of their respective roles.

As the committee will be aware, the Minister and the Department have responsibility for three overarching themes - policy and statutory frameworks, aggregate funding and corporate governance in State transport bodies, in which the Minister is a shareholder. In fulfilling these responsibilities we work on a number of fronts. We develop transport policy and also provide a transport perspective and input when other relevant Government policies are being devised. We develop the statutory and legislative frameworks to govern the transport sector. They are often seen as they are brought to the Houses of the Oireachtas to be promulgated into law or as policy statements.

Through our Vote, we channel aggregate Exchequer funding for the transport sector. The Department's total voted allocation in 2018 is around €2 billion. Of this, €1.6 billion relates to land transport. Committee members might be interested to know that a piece of analysis conducted a few years ago under the auspices of the Department indicated that more than three quarters of the spend on land transport at the time was occurring outside the greater Dublin area.

In the public transport area, that is, bus and rail services, funding from the Department flows mainly to the National Transport Authority. The funding is for investment in infrastructure and public transport service support.

With regard to the investment in roads that the Department supports, funding flows from it to Transport Infrastructure Ireland - one of our State bodies - and the relevant local authorities. Members will be aware that during the years of the fiscal and economic crisis which followed the banking crisis of 2008, many areas of Government expenditure were reduced in order for the State to regain fiscal stability. In the area of transport, this curtailment affected both current and capital budgets that were available to support services and invest in infrastructure. It impacted on roads and public transport. At the time, the Department undertook an analysis to advise Government and the Minister on how best we could prioritise transport capital investment in these circumstances. The approach adopted was published in 2015 in the strategic

framework for investment in land transport SFILT, report. Ultimately, the report came up with one very clear conclusion, namely, that the key priority had to be very much to direct the funding we have into maintaining the existing and very extensive road and rail networks we have throughout the country in order that they remain operational and safe. There were some lower-order priorities, but this was identified as the number one priority.

Since then, it has been a priority to return to the levels of maintenance and safety investment required to keep the networks at what we call a steady state of service and reliability. Annual budget allocations have happily been increasing in more recent years and are scheduled and profiled to rise further over the coming periods. This is enabling us to regain and achieve what we call the steady-state investment level. Together with this, we are enabled to undertake a number of targeted new projects under the national development plan and in line with the strategic objectives that have been agreed by Government in the national planning framework. The Department also oversees the corporate sector in the State bodies involved with transport and exercise a shareholder role on behalf of the Minister in respect of the State-owned service provider, Córas Iompair Éireann, CIÉ, and its subsidiaries.

Another significant actor in the sector, which the committee has already met in recent months, is the National Transport Authority, NTA. The latter is a relatively new body on the transport scene. It was established approximately ten years ago under legislation passed by the Oireachtas. It acts as an independent body with regulatory, funding and strategy development roles and now has a considerable role in the public transport sector. Among its statutory functions, as the committee will be aware, the NTA is responsible for: regulating and contracting all PSO bus and rail services; allocating PSO funding to the operators in accordance with their contracts; licensing and regulating commercial bus services, that is, services that can be run on a profitable basis and that do not require public subvention support; regulating taxi services throughout the country; developing integrated ticketing; and some strategic transport planning.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland is another body under the aegis of the Department. Its main function is around infrastructure and providing an integrated approach to the future development and operation of the national roads network and light rail infrastructure.

There is another body I wish to mention because it has a vital role, although it probably does not come up for mention as often as the others. I refer to the Commission for Railway Regulation, CRR. It was set up by the Oireachtas under 2005 legislation and is the national body with responsibility for oversight and authorisations in the very important area of rail safety. In more recent years, it has also had a role in some economic aspects of the running of railways and facilitating market access.

In many respects, our national regulatory framework for public transport reflects EU law that applies across all member states and, therefore, like other member states, Ireland now has independent transport-focused authorities that are responsible for matters such as the allocation of funding and licensing - roles carried out by the NTA - and issues such as the oversight of safety, for which the CRR is responsible. These are functions that in previous years - going back some decades - were all exercised under the ambit of the Department.

The most visible set of actors in the State sector dealing with public transport is probably the long-standing CIÉ and its three operating subsidiaries: Bus Átha Cliath in Dublin, Bus Éireann, operating throughout the country, and Iarnród Éireann, operating the rail service throughout the country. They are visible because these are the companies that actually provide the services to passengers. They are the ones passengers can see daily and with which passengers and many

of us identify. The companies are responsible for running all their services, making decisions as to how they operate them and deciding on strategy, etc., in respect of the commercial aspects of their operations.

What I have described are the State operators in the sector. There are many non-State participants, the obvious ones being the passengers. Among the service providers there are many private firms and community bodies involved in transport provision. They do this under relevant regulatory, licensing or funding arrangements with the NTA.

The committee is primarily concerned with transport matters that affect rural areas and regional travel. Regarding the work of the Minister and the Department, our remit for policy development and overall aggregate transport funding is probably the most relevant to the context of support for transport in rural and regional areas. Members will probably be aware that on the policy front, A Programme for a Partnership Government, running over the Government's lifetime, contains a number of commitments that are relevant to what we are talking about, in particular the area of public transport area. One of the commitments in which I am sure the committee is very interested is to look at how best to improve the integration of services in the rural transport network and to provide a report on this to the Oireachtas committees. The matter is being examined and developed by the Department in the context of a broader piece of work that we have under way, which is to review public transport policy more generally. This review of public transport policy is another commitment in the programme for Government, which asks us "to ensure services are sustainable into the future and are meeting the needs of a modern economy".

As a key part of this policy review process, the committee may be aware that the Minister hosted a round-table discussion involving a very broad range of organisations and individuals closely linked to the public transport sector in May. Specifically regarding rural transport, these included representatives of the Rural Transport Network and Irish Rural Link. The purpose of the discussion was to give all participants the opportunity to outline their perspectives on key public transport policy issues and, equally, to ensure that all those involved were in the room at the same time in order that they could hear the perspectives of others and engage in a dialogue about the challenges of achieving appropriate policy balances. The discussions, papers and presentations made at that event are forming the basis of a public consultation that we plan to undertake very shortly. The public consultation will feed into the work the Department is doing on reviewing public transport policy, including the rural transport dimension, and we hope the upshot of this will be the development of a public transport policy statement.

This transport policy review work is taking place against the backdrop of another piece of work in which we were heavily involved, which is a noticeable policy development that came to some fruition earlier this year. I refer to the recently agreed Project Ireland 2040 plan. The latter was developed by means of a cross-Government initiative led by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and involving other Departments and Ministers, including ourselves. The plan was published earlier this year and it comprises two elements.

First, there is a new national planning framework, which sets the vision and policy direction in which the Government sees Ireland developing over the next 20 or 25 years. Alongside that is a new capital development plan, which is the strategic capital investment plan for infrastructure for the first ten years of the longer-term vision statement. Transport is a key element of national infrastructure. It is a critical component of how we plan for the country's future development. Therefore, transport features strongly in Project Ireland 2040. Equally, Project Ireland 2040 will influence and shape how we develop transport over the next number of years.

The Exchequer provides considerable funding for public transport. This includes subvention support, which is provided via the National Transport Authority, NTA. This goes towards the public service obligation, PSO, operations of Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, both of which have very substantial operations and services across rural Ireland and to facilitate regional connectivity. It also provides investment for their infrastructure. Exchequer funding also supports the rural transport programme, which is obviously specific to rural areas. That is aimed at addressing issues of social isolation through providing a public transport service. It is very much tailored to local needs. This funding is also channelled by the NTA. Since 2012 that body has had national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the rural transport programme. Members will probably be more familiar with it under the rural transport programme's new branding, which is the Local Link brand.

The delivery of demand-responsive transport services has been and remains the cornerstone of the Local Link programme. In tandem with this, there has been an increasing focus on trying to provide some regular commuter services. This has occurred since 2016, and it responds to identified local demands that have cropped up over the course of the delivery of the Local Link programme. These scheduled services are high-frequency services, running as often as seven days a week depending on where they are. They are designed to facilitate regular access to education, employment and healthcare in addition to recreational opportunities. Key features include connectivity with other public transport services and better linkage of services between and within towns and villages throughout Ireland. The NTA tells us that since it began opening scheduled services under the rural transport programme in 2016, 60 such regular rural services have been introduced into the network, which is managed by the Local Link offices.

One of the priority areas under the national planning framework is the essential requirement to enhance and upgrade accessibility between urban areas of population and their regions and hinterlands, while trying to initiate the development of more compact growth within urban areas. Compact growth, improved public transport and decarbonisation of car journeys are all necessary elements of our transition to a low-carbon future.

Another major objective of the framework is to make substantial progress in linking regions and urban areas. That does not just mean linking them to Dublin, but also linking them with each other and with local areas of significant interest. Project Ireland 2040 recognises that significant investment in public transport will be required to accommodate changes in growth and provide more choice for the travelling public, improving the quality of people's lives. The plan builds on this investment. In June, the Minister and Minister of State at the Department launched "Linking People and Places", which involves investment of €8.6 billion specifically in public transport. The aim is to link more people and more places, as the title says, while also improving the quality of life, easing congestion in our cities and doing our part to deliver a low-carbon society.

New major public transport programmes to be delivered under the national development plan, NDP, will be fully accessible for people with disabilities. This has been done as part of the normal design. Designing for accessibility is part of how projects are designed nowadays. In tandem with that there will be a continued investment programme to retrofit existing older public transport facilities to enhance their accessibility features.

One of the flagship investments that will be delivered within Project Ireland 2040 and the ten-year NDP horizon is BusConnects. This will apply in Ireland's cities. It will commence roll-out in Dublin, followed by the other major cities starting with Galway. It is a key investment priority for public transport. It will address congestion in the short to medium term and is

therefore a key project that we wish to see developed. The programme of BusConnects in the regional cities will include new bus fleets, bus lanes with segregated cycling facilities, revised bus service networks and park-and-ride facilities. The objective is to deliver a bus system that will enable more people to travel by bus than ever before, to make the bus an attractive option and to allow commuting by bus to become a viable choice for employees, students, shoppers and visitors.

With regard to the inter-urban rail network, the funding priority in the NDP and the planning framework is to protect the investment that has already been made over several decades in the development of the railway system by funding maintenance and safety projects that are needed to maintain safety and service levels across all rail operations in the State.

Turning briefly to roads, the sheer scale of Ireland's road network tends not to be very well known. Our roads have a combined length of 100,000 km. This is twice the EU norm on a *per capita* basis. The road network is really the workhorse of economic and social infrastructure throughout the country. Most of our freight is carried on it, all of our bus services rely on it and the people of Ireland rely on the road network to link regional and local areas and to connect communities. Maintaining and renewing the road network is recognised in the NDP as being of critical importance. Within available budgets, both Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and the Department are very focused on maintaining the network in as serviceable a condition as possible. In the case of regional and local roads, the main grant programmes operated by the Department are targeted at specific policy objectives. One of these is pavement sealing. This protects the surface of the road from water damage. Another such objective is road strengthening. This is based on giving the road a condition rating. It is intended to lengthen the life of road pavements.

These grants, which are intended to supplement the local authority's own resources, are allocated on the basis of the length of the road network within a local area of responsibility. It is done this way because that is seen as the fairest and most equitable basis for allocation. The committee might be interested to note that the Department's grant funding for regional and local roads is principally directed to local authorities outside of Dublin. This reflects the fact that since the revision of the arrangements for the retention of local property tax, carried out in 2015, the Dublin councils no longer receive any grant assistance from the Department under the main road categories.

In addition to substantial support for the maintenance of the road network, the NDP lists 23 new national road schemes. They are already at the stages of planning, design or construction. These include things like the strategic road link between Cork and Limerick. At regional and local level, another 13 significant road improvement projects are currently being advanced under the NDP.

Together, all of these schemes will better link local communities. They will reduce congestion and contribute to the local economies and society of their areas. Work is also under way on appraisal and early planning work related to a pipeline of road projects identified as suitable for future development. Overall the Department works on providing the general policy context for all transport in Ireland, including land transport in rural areas and connectivity within and between regions. The road network and the public transport networks are integral to this and they each received substantial levels of support from the State each year. This is set to continue and be enhanced into the foreseeable future and is closely linked to key outcomes that have been identified by the Government in Project Ireland 2040, the development and investment strategy plan.

We hope we can assist the committee in its deliberations by explaining and discussing the policy context for land transport in Ireland. As mentioned earlier in my statement, as we are currently embarked on reviewing public transport, including rural transport policy, we hope that in the course of discussions this evening, we will learn from hearing members' views and will be able to take on board those views and experiences to help inform the work we are doing on our policy review.

I thank the Acting Chairman.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I thank Ms Hanlon for a wide-ranging and comprehensive opening statement. We will open the debate to members to ask question. Every member is offering. I will take contributions from three members at a time. I know that many will have similar concerns and questions. I call on Deputy Ó Cuív, to be followed by Senator Hopkins and Deputy Michael Collins.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I thank Ms Hanlon for coming before the committee today. I have read her script carefully and it is clear she has set out an overall policy remit, not choosing a specific item here or there. I will try to keep my focus on policy.

First, has the Department a policy on public transport fares to ensure the setting of fares is evidence-based and that there is an equality between rural and urban fares? I received the most extraordinary statement from the NTA dated 16 October 2018 stating that as is common practice internationally, different fares apply in city areas reflecting the different operation characteristic in those areas as opposed to rural areas. I do not care what they do internationally. I do not live in an international area, I live in Ireland. I do not care what irrational policies they have anywhere else, I like to see Irish policy being rational.

Let me give Ms Hanlon a simple example of what is happening all over the country. If one takes the train from Dublin to Sallins, that journey is considered to be within the urban area and is half the cost of taking the train to Newbridge, which falls into the rural category. By going to the next station, the fare is suddenly doubled. When one asks the NTA or authorities, their response is that the way it was and that is the way it is and that is the way it will be forever, Amen. That is not a rational decision. On an expressway bus route, one can travel from Galway to Dublin for €20 but a bus from Galway to Carraroe costs something similar. I do not want to be fobbed off with the answer that this is a decision for the NTA, but I want to know whether the Minister has a policy set out for the NTA that all fare should be based on the same rationale and one cannot double the rate per kilometre just because one must travel a further distances down the road.

Is there a ministerial policy that lays down that Iarnród Éireann must do what it is meant to do, that is, provide on the railway lines it owns efficient national services and not just concentrate on a few routes?

From a study I have done it would appear there is a clear relationship between frequency, fares, timetabling and journey distances and when one puts all those factors together, one gets the passengers. I have looked on a spot basis, but has the Department looked at the massive latent potential arising from the interplay of those four factors? For example, there is a frequent train service from Athenry to Galway because there is the Limerick train. There are 399 people travelling on the train from Athenry, which has a population of 3,950, to Galway city and making the return journey every day. If one compares that service with the service from Clonmel to Waterford, one will find that practically nobody is travelling on that train, even though the

population of Waterford is 17,140 and one would think that four times the number travelling from Athenry would be travelling, which is more than 1,000.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Waterford city has a population of more than 50,000.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I meant the travelling population from Clonmel to Waterford. The population of Clonmel, which is 17,140, is four times the population of Athenry but as the Chairman knows, nobody is using the train. That is not surprising because the train leaves at 10.38 a.m. and arrives at 11.29 a.m. Similarly, one would leave at 7.45 p.m. and would get home at 8.45 p.m. Given a very small town like Athenry has achieved such numbers, has the Department conducted a study on the potential, should the four parameters I mentioned be coordinated? I think one would find similar outcomes on the east coast, where there are frequent services into Dublin.

I have two more questions. Has the Department developed or is it developing a commuter rail policy in line with the spatial strategy? Not everybody wants to live in an area of housing density, and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport should forget that long-time dream that will not happen because people do not do what the Department wants them to do. They will do what they want. If people want to live in Tuam, they will live in Tuam, and travel to work. The same applies in every area. If they want to live in “Cloneedebonk”, they will live there. That is the way it is. I am focusing on policy. Allowing that my assessment of what people will really do is correct, has the Department a plan to develop commuter policy into the cities of Galway, Waterford, Cork and Limerick along the existing rail network, including open and closed railway lines? There are three classes of railway lines, open, semi-open - I count Nenagh to Limerick as semi-open and Limerick Junction to Waterford as semi-open - and real open railway lines. Is the Department developing a policy on this?

There is a little known provision in law in rural areas for rural hackney cars, Public Service Obligation, PSO, vehicles. It is nearly impossible to get this licence. How many PSO vehicles have active licences? I got an answer before and it was minuscule. Is it intended to review the PSO vehicle licence to ensure there would be an attractive arrangement for public service vehicles in every small country area, particularly since the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport was diligent in introducing the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 2018? I am absolutely against drink-driving and I wish we could do something about the people who are driving when five times over the limit, but if one goes out for a meal or an event in a rural area, there is no service that will bring people the four or five miles to their home. When one tries to ensure there are local PSO vehicle licences, one is told there are five taxi licences, but those with a taxi licence are working in the city as they are not confined to a local area and are not available when one needs them. Will the Department review that and will the officials look at a policy of introducing an attractive PSO local-based licence system for new entrants, which would mean that such a licenceholder would have to pick up and deliver a person within a certain radius? This would fill a very big black hole in terms of rural transport services that people living in urban areas take for granted.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I thank Deputy Ó Cuív. I ask the witnesses to note those question and I now call on Senator Hopkins.

**Senator Maura Hopkins:** I thank Ms Hanlon for her presentation. One of my questions is about the road network. I am from the west where there are huge concerns about the need to develop a fit-for-purpose road network. I live very near the N5. Everybody is aware of the

need to upgrade both that road and the N4. The current map of Ireland shows that there is very little motorway access north of the M6. What policy is there to support the development of road infrastructure in the west? I am aware that work is ongoing on the N5 and the N4, but it cannot happen fast enough. We must have fit-for-purpose road infrastructure to facilitate both individuals and businesses. That is critical.

My second point is related to what Deputy Ó Cuív mentioned about timetables. This morning I took the train from Castlerea to Dublin, but if I wish to get home this evening, the last train leaves at 6.15 p.m. We live in changing times and many people have to and do commute. Many would use public transport if the timetables met their needs. The Department must play a more active role in facilitating greater efficiency in having timetables that meet people's needs. As Deputy Ó Cuív gave another example, we are not talking about the matter in isolation. There are challenges in trying to meet people's needs. Obviously, we wish to create employment in rural areas, but we must deal with the reality that many people commute.

I emphasise the importance of Local Link and the improvements that have taken place in its infrastructure. Last week I was in a school in Tulsk where the Local Link bus service has been very beneficial in bringing children from the school to an after-school childcare centre. That is just one example of where the service is supporting families. There are other examples where it links with bus services and towns. I believe that as the service is developed more people will use it. Improvements have been made, but can the officials address my concerns about train services and the road network?

The document mentions that there have been round-table discussions which will result in a public transport policy statement. As I am a practical person, what will that mean? Ms Hanlon has said there is a particular emphasis on rural areas. What will that mean for people living in these areas? How will it translate into or deliver better services for them?

**Deputy Michael Collins:** I thank Ms Hanlon for her presentation. There are a few issues of concern. I would love to talk about rail services, but, unfortunately, there is no rail service west of Cork city. I cannot talk about it being early or late because we do not have one. When we had a discussion with representatives from Bus Éireann, they gave an indication that they would link bus services with rail services from Cork, but that has not happened. Do the officials have any indication that it will happen in the future? As it appears that there will never be a railway line running through places such as Bandon, Clonakilty or west Cork, why is there no bus service linking people living in west Cork with the rail service every morning? Such a service would help workers and reduce the numbers travelling to and from work in their cars.

Another issue is the cost of fares for those living in rural communities. I hear about it from many young people who are in college or the cities. They find that fares in the cities are much cheaper than they are in rural areas, particularly west Cork. Yesterday I was talking to an operator, Damien Long in Skibbereen. He is willing to provide a service in west Cork to take people to the city early in the morning to work. The service would be in competition with Bus Éireann, but competition is the lifeblood of trading. However, he needs a licence. If he, Cremins Coaches or any other operator in west Cork wishes to provide such a service, we should encourage it. He is willing to offer it at a much cheaper rate. Why has it or something similar not been progressed? Bus Éireann has been given ample time to reduce fares to favourable rates, but that has not happened. Perhaps the officials might elaborate further on the matter.

The other issue is transport for people with disabilities who are over 18 years of age. In the last two and a half years I have raised this issue in the Dáil with the former Taoiseach, Deputy

Enda Kenny, and the current Taoiseach. In west Cork - I can only talk about my constituency - if somebody is 18 years of age, he or she will not be provided with a transport service. He or she will receive a public bus pass, but that is not sufficient for many people with disabilities. People are driving here, there and everywhere for up to four hours a day to take their children to and from training or other facilities. When I mention it to the Minister of State, Deputy Finian McGrath, he tells me that it is not an issue in Dublin. Obviously, in Dublin they are being collected from their home, which is correct. However, it is an issue in west Cork. The previous Taoiseach sidelined it as not being an issue and when I raised it today the Taoiseach sidelined it and said I should deal with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. The bottom line is that once people with disabilities reach the age of 18 years, they are left totally alone, as are their parents. It is extremely stressful for their parents, most of whom might be in the 60 to 70 years age bracket. They are travelling every morning and evening and it could take up to two hours to travel each way to and from west Cork. This issue must be examined because something could be done. There are many taxis and buses that are probably paid for by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport or the HSE and they are crossing paths, but nobody is talking to anybody. Local Link has a huge chance to play a role in organising and co-ordinating such services. Obviously, it would take a little funding to put a service together, but money might be saved in the long term and everybody might be looked after. We read in the newspapers last week about Sarah Dullea from Dunmanway, a very successful business woman who has spina bifida. She cannot avail of public transport from Dunmanway because Bus Éireann has told her that it cannot collect her at her bus stop in Dunmanway owing to accessibility issues. We have signed agreements that we are now compliant with disabilities requirements in the European Union, but we are not. We are very far from it. Perhaps the officials might enlighten me on that transport issue.

I will comment briefly on roads. As we do not have rail services, people must use the roads in travelling to and from the city and places such as Bandon, Clonakilty, Skibbereen, Bantry, Castletownbere and the peninsulas. We have not received what I would call decent money. For as long as I can remember, money has not been spent on the N71 and the R586, other than on fire-fighting repairs. I was very young when the Skibbereen bypass was constructed. It was a fabulous bypass, but that is the last time a real amount of money was spent in west Cork. Let us take as an example when someone is travelling to Bandon and has to take the R586 in travelling between Ballineen and Enniskeane. There are two major factories, Grainger Sawmills Limited and the Carbery factory in Ballineen. Lorries are travelling at a speed of 25 to 30 km per hour and cars have to travel for 15 to 20 km behind them. There are no passing bays. The situation is the same if one travels from Bandon to Clonakilty and Clonakilty to Skibbereen.

I am not here to criticise anybody. However, I must face the electorate at some stage, whether it will be in one month or two years hence, and the first issues that will be raised are broadband and roads. Mobile phone coverage might be the third. I have no answers. I have been here for two and a half years seeking answers and trying to see if we can create simple solutions such as providing passing bays on the N71 and the R586. I am not looking for flyovers or anything else, only common sense. Reference was made to an announcement by the Minister, Deputy Ross, and the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, of an investment of €8.6 billion in the report, Linking People and Places. A bridge in Lyre in Clonakilty that was severely damaged six or seven years ago as a result of bad weather has not been replaced. It has resulted in the community being split up and people having to drive a few miles in one direction or the other but no consideration has been given to replacing that bridge. It was probably built in the 1900s and money was found to construct it then, but in 2018 no money can be found to repair it. The community keep asking me why money has not been spent on repairing that bridge as it has

been blocked up for the past few years. Small measures such as that one would mean a lot.

A transportation plan is being drawn up for Castletownbere. Will the officials examine the way plans are developed in the Department in terms of working with the local communities as there is a great deal of resentment to that plan? Some parts of it might be excellent but nobody sat down with the community and teased through the difficulties. The officials will say they consulted the community, they advertised what is proposed in a notice displayed on a wall, which I saw, but they need to talk to the community. We are now at gridlock and it is left to politicians like me to try to resolve very serious issues for people whose businesses are haemorrhaging in rural Ireland. They are afraid there will be further closures if they do not resist much of what is proposed in the plan. Those issues could have been noted at the beginning of the process and now councillors are being asked to oppose the plan. It comes back to officials sitting down with the local community and teasing out the issues. That can be done in many communities but if people feel they are being ignored, that will not happen.

The officials might say I am viewing developments in a negative sense but I am not. I see many improvements in towns like Drimoleague where a great deal of money has been spent on a fabulous resurfacing project. Similar investment has been made on the N71 in Leap in west Cork, but we are firefighting. All we are doing is repairing damage. We are not looking to the future. West Cork has been neglected for a long time and it needs to be prioritised. Funds need to be moved from the second part of Ireland, which is Dublin, and we need to focus on the other part of Ireland, which is rural Ireland. I would appreciate if the witnesses would consider those points.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Quite a number of issues were raised by the three members to which the delegates might respond.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** A wide range of heartfelt issues were raised by the Deputies and Senator and they have spoken from their experience in their areas. I will deal with them in the order they were raised, cluster some of them where points were made regarding interventions in a few areas, and I will ask my colleague to comment on the road items.

The issue of public transport fares was raised by Deputies Ó Cuív and Michael Collins. The Public Transport Regulation Act 2009 specifically provides that one of the functions to be carried out not by the Minister of our Department but by the independent National Transport Authority, NTA, is to regulate, set and determine fares. It does that typically by way of an annual statement. It issued its fares determination sometime last week or the previous wee,. That is an exercise of powers the Oireachtas conferred on it and that it has specifically stated should no longer be exercised by the Minister of our Department but by an independent authority and that it should be done in this way. Matters about fares and the fairness of them-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** We are not talking about anybody setting a specific fare. Could the NTA decide tomorrow, as it does every year, to have outrageous fares for rural Ireland and outrageously smaller fares in urban Ireland because it does not like rural people? Will the Minister not intervene there? Has he no policy role whatsoever there?

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** The Deputy should speak through the Chair. Allow the witness to respond.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Can I get a clear yes or no answer to that question?

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Okay. Allow the witness to continue with-

out interruption. I can allow the Members to come back in if they want further clarification.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** The legislation states that fare setting is done by the National Transport Authority.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Does that include fare policy, the big policy? Is the answer to that yes or no?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Regarding the setting of fares and the reasons fares are set, the legislation sets out the responsibilities of the NTA in that respect. They are not matters in which it is proper for the Minister to make an intervention.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Change that law and we will make it proper.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** The laws that are set by the Oireachtas are the laws that-----

*(Interruptions).*

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We will allow the witness to continue without interruption and Deputy Ó Cuív can come back in later.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** It is a statutory function of the NTA. It does not arbitrarily set fares. It published a document spanning 50 to 80 pages about two weeks ago setting out its explanation of the changes it had made to fares and its approach and strategy with respect to fares over a period. As I understand it, it is seeking over time to move to having fares that are relatively comparable on a distance basis or on like-for-like journeys. Obviously, the experience the Deputy has raised with us would be at variance with that and we can bring that to the attention of the NTA. However, overall, the approach as to how it is to be dealt with has been decided by the Oireachtas and that is what happens. The NTA sets its fares and publishes them annually. They are available on its website. They are published and made public together with an explanation of the rationale for them and the longer-term strategy the authority is following regarding the setting of fares.

Regarding other matters that were raised, Deputy Ó Cuív asked if there is a policy on Iarnród Éireann providing efficient national services. Yes, the expectation of Government is that Iarnród Éireann, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of CIE that is fully owned by the Minister for Transport on behalf of the people, would provide transport services on the rail network that it has not run and it does provide services on a national basis. It provides many types of services, including commuter services, particularly around the cities, notably the DART. As referenced by the Deputy, an increasing commuter-type service is being built up in or around Galway. Commuter services around Cork have also been developed in recent years. In addition to those services, Iarnród Éireann runs the InterCity services.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** There is no commuter service around Galway.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Pardon?

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** What is the commuter service into Galway?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I was referring to the fact that the Deputy referenced the services that are run on the line into Galway from Oranmore and from Athenry, and that there is now a frequency of services between all of the trains that are run that are helping to make it more

useful-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I have the service on my app but there are no commuter services. A commuter service means there are regular trains coming into the city at commuter times. There is no such commuter service. Two trains come into the city in the morning and two trains depart from the city in the evening. One goes to Dublin and one goes to Limerick. By chance people can get on those trains but they cannot be said to be a commuter service.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** The Deputy has made his point.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** The idea that the company is developing a commuter services if it happens to run two InterCity trains into the city-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** The Deputy has made his point. I ask Ms Hanlon to continue.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** My point is that passengers are choosing to use the trains in certain ways. They live in certain areas, work in other areas or commute for education purposes, and they are availing of the services that are operating. InterCity services are run right across the network and then, on parts of the network, services are not run between cities but between large towns and these provide facilities for all passengers who want to travel between those points along the lines.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** On that point, both Deputy Ó Cuív and Senator Hopkins raised the scheduling and timing of commuter services and how they match the needs of modern society. Has Ms O'Hanlon a view on that?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** That is an interesting set of points and one that has come up from a few members of the committee. It is one we will refer back to our colleagues in Iarnród Éireann and the National Transport Authority.

Timetabling issues are core operational issues for the transport companies. Timetabling is done primarily by the public service transport providers and, in the particular case raised, by the rail company. Overall, especially in the bus area, timetabling is overseen by the NTA. The authority has a role but there is no role for Ministers or Departments in respect of operational matters. Yet, the fact that Deputies and Senators are raising this as a point is one of the things we are interested in hearing about today and it will feed back into our thinking about the development of services, public transport policy, the approaches that can best be developed for the future and how public transport can best be articulated for the public.

The Deputy is correct in respect of the point about rural hackneys. The rural hackney licence was an innovation introduced by the transport regulator several years ago in or around 2012. It was a response to the fact that in rural areas there was an identified issue about the availability of taxi services. It was thought that this might provide an additional feature that could be availed of by some people. It has not proven popular. Deputy Ó Cuív asked whether there is a proposal to review it. Some review work is under way with the taxi advisory committee and the National Transport Authority, which is the statutory regulator for taxis. In the course of this work one of the issues they will look at is the fact that the rural hackney licence, although introduced as an innovation, has not been taken up much. They will examine the reasons and whether there are other ways of approaching the matter that could be useful to pursue. Some suggestions were made in the course of comments today. We will reference this back to those involved in the review.

Other points were raised. I will not go over the points on the LocalLink service again but I referenced the service in the opening statement. There has been strong development of the service. There seems to be strong and positive feedback about it throughout the country. Obviously, that is a good thing but there is cause for more. We have been able to provide additional funding for the service through a combination of specific funding for the rural transport programme and through the public service obligation programme as well. Communities throughout the country are seeing the benefits. Small interventions can have a major effect and impact on linking people and places. That was the phrase the Minister of State chose when launching the transport part of the national development plan. That is the critical theme those involved are trying to speak to in developing these proposals.

Senator Hopkins asked about the policy statement that we are working on bringing forward and whether it will translate directly into benefits for rural Ireland or rural people. She asked how they will know when it is done and whether they will see the benefits. I suppose what we are talking about with a policy statement is a gathering together and articulation of State policy or Government policy in respect of a particular area. In this case, it is useful to look at public transport and other areas of our Department. Public transport is an area where we have not yet pulled together one single cohesive statement synthesising the policy. We have any number of policy documents here, there and everywhere but we do not have a synthesis. The Department has worked on that approach in recent years. It has been done for aviation policy. There is a single document called the national aviation strategy. We have a national tourism strategy. Recently, only this summer, a national sport policy document was pulled together by the Department synthesising the approach to things. It was launched by the Minister and Minister of State. The aim for public transport is to do something similar.

Of itself, a policy statement does not necessarily make anyone's life any better but it provides in a single place a coherent and easily accessible definition of what we are trying to do. It enables a discussion on what we should be doing as we come to formulate policy and then it allows for Government to agree on the key principles. These are not likely to be principles alien to what has been done heretofore, but the statement represents a synthesis, an articulation and a setting down in one place at one time of what is expected to be at the core. It offers guidance for Government, policy-makers and the plethora of agencies, including State agencies, working in the sector. It guides them for the future. It is a something of a reference point they can use as a compass to check they are navigating in the right direction.

Deputy Collins asked about bus services linking with rail. Again, that is in or around timetabling so it is not a matter the Department deals with directly, but it is interesting to hear that perspective and to hear of the real need to provide connectivity and interconnection by ensuring the various strands and facets of public transport that we provide link up with one another. The NTA has a specific role in the integration of transport. That was seen by the legislators and policy developers around 2008 and 2009 when the NTA legislation was being developed. This is critical because it helps us to get beyond the sum of the parts. If we have a bus service providing a given level of service and a rail service provider another level, then they are good. If we can have some level of integration that makes sense and that still has a healthy competitive tension then we can get better outcomes. We will reference that matter to the NTA to examine for the Deputy.

The Deputy also asked about potential bus licensing for a commercial operator interested in providing a bus service. This is something the NTA does, although going back some years it would previously have been done by the Department. The NTA runs this now. A good deal of

information is available on the NTA website if parties are interested in developing a proposal for a bus route and have ideas. The website provides guidance on how to make applications. It also gives an outline of the timeframe for making an application, the timeframe within which an applicant can expect to have a licence application turned around and when the applicant can expect to have a response.

The question of disability and transport services was raised. I only touched on this briefly in the opening statement because of the length of other matters but there is an increasing drive to improve the accessibility of public transport. There have been strong improvements over several years and the Department has become more involved with stakeholders in the sector by engaging with them regularly to get a better understanding of the needs and how they can best be dealt with through the public transport systems we have. We are not there yet. There are elements of the system that are not yet fully working or are not working as cogently as we would expect. That said, within the cities, there is 100% accessibility on the urban transport fleet.

There is substantial accessibility at bus stops. In the context of the urban transport fleet, there are a small number of bus stops that have still to be upgraded. By and large, there is a good story within the cities. Around the country the situation is not as good but it is improving over time. Within its network, as Bus Éireann replaces its coaches, it is replacing them with coaches that have improved accessibility. It has gotten to a level now where 86% of its coach fleet is accessible. That said, we are back to the same issue. Is the bus stop compatible with an accessible coach? It tends to be that journeys between bus stations are accessible but if one is getting off at other points in between places, which many people are, accessibility is not as good. For that reason, the NTA is rolling out a programme to improve the accessibility of bus stops throughout the country. It is trying to do it on a route basis. The routes it has picked to start with are the Dublin-Donegal routes where there is no alternative public transport service and no rail service. It is trying to start it there. It is scheduling to develop it around the country. I do not know the precise pattern on which it is doing it. I am not aware of what the plans are specifically.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I will interrupt Ms O’Hanlon briefly. The committee has a specific remit in terms of rural services. The Deputy referred to the case of a disabled lady in west Cork who is finding it very difficult to get transport support. Is there anything Ms O’Hanlon can tell the committee? Is the Department or NTA planning an evaluation of disability services to address the concerns the Deputy has raised?

**Deputy Michael Collins:** There are places that have no service at all.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** There is no service or support at all.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** There is no service or support in west Cork.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** I will address that. It is an issue, as Deputy Collins said. When people with disabilities turn 18 years of age, all of a sudden they do not have transport, particularly in places like west Cork. One of the things the NTA is doing, which is part of its strategy statement and plan for the next four years, is the integration of the non-emergency HSE transport services with the LocalLink services. It is something it is looking for to give a better opportunity for better services in that regard. It is doing a pilot with the HSE. I think the Cork-Kerry region is the planned area to look at. It is specifically with the HSE and relating to people with disabilities. That might assist in some way but we will certainly bring it back to the NTA. We have also met with the HSE in that regard but we are leaving it to both the HSE and the NTA to

run this pilot and hopefully it might achieve some results.

**Deputy Michael Collins:** That is perfect. I appreciate it.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We will move on to the next group of questions, if that is all right. Before I do, I will note Ms O'Hanlon's title, which is assistant secretary for public transport, sustainability and climate change. It is something we should mention in the committee. We all know the energy, agriculture and transport sectors contribute a lot to our carbon emissions. I have a brief question on sustainability policy. With regard to the potential for electric vehicles in the public transport fleet, what is the view of the Department on motivating our public transport agencies to improve their carbon emission footprint? Will Ms O'Hanlon give a view on that? Senator O'Sullivan will agree with me on some of this. With regard to cycling infrastructure in our towns and villages, where there are new roads or upgrades of roads, there should be adequate provision in our Estimates for cycling infrastructure to try to improve access for cycling and sustainability. Will Ms O'Hanlon note some of those questions?

I call on Senator O'Sullivan, who will be followed by Deputies Fitzmaurice and Danny Healy-Rae.

**Senator Grace O'Sullivan:** I thank Ms O'Hanlon for her presentation. I will refer to the comment made by Deputy Ó Cuív about fares. Should we be looking at affordability in terms of equality so there is a fair regime throughout the country so people in rural areas are not disadvantaged? It might be something we could look at in the committee. If the NTA has put out its fare regime, we should look at it and make sure there is no inequality.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** That is a welcome proposal. The Department can answer but it would be in our interest to have the NTA in specifically to talk about fares and affordability in the regional context.

**Senator Grace O'Sullivan:** Exactly. I am a Green Party member. We were quite disappointed with the recent budget in terms of the focus on public transport and the allocation of funds to the areas of cycling and walking. I want to press Ms O'Hanlon a little bit more in terms of the Department's policy on sustainability. With regard to our carbon emissions, what is the policy of the Department in terms of transitioning away from oil-burning modes of transport? What is the policy with regard to supporting electrical vehicles? What is the Department's policy on supporting bicycles with regard to schemes in Dublin and in cities like Cork where there is a very efficient system at the train stations? It is an example of smart connectivity where people can benefit from using public transport. I lived in the Netherlands for nine years. It is very frustrating to be here in Ireland - I am from Tramore - because the opportunity to use public transport is restricted by timing. With rail services, the last train in the evening is around 6 o'clock, which is a pity. The morning schedule is excellent but the evening one is not. What is the Department doing to try to create a better system where people can use public transport, have connectivity and avoid congestion? Congestion is an enormous problem in this country. Trying to access Dublin is a disaster. Galway is a disaster. The congestion is desperate. When people are sitting in congested traffic, not only is there frustration but they are burning fossil fuels that are leading to the acceleration of climate change. What is the Department doing? Ms O'Hanlon's remit is sustainability and climate. What is the Department doing in terms of mitigation policies around extreme weather events? In Waterford, when there are heavy rains the train station floods. What moneys have been set aside? Is the Department adapting or mitigating in this regard?

The freight train between Ballina and Waterford ended service in May 2018. It seems regressive that we are pushing away from using systems of transport. In that case, one could have taken the train from Rosslare through to Waterford and up to Ballina. What will happen with that railway line? Could it be used for public transport services because, again, tourism forms part of the Department's remit? Could tourists be brought by rail from Rosslare along the Wild Atlantic Way via Waterford? We could probably still do it. What is the policy on closed and abandoned railway lines in the context of greenway development?

On procurement and the use of EV buses, if one travels to Nijmegen or anywhere else in the Netherlands, one will see that the shift to electric buses has already been made. What can we do to speed up the process?

What is the strategy for the future for the rail line running from Waterford to Limerick Junction? Has there been any discussion in the Department on connecting Waterford, Limerick and Galway on the rail network?

Having regard to climate change, cost, affordability and the difficulties experienced by students in renting, what do the officials think about making public transport in all its forms free for students? Do they think this would be a realistic idea, given the pressure exerted by affordability, to encourage young people to use public transport?

It is funny that I am raising the issue of BlaBlaCar-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Will the Senator clarify her comment?

**Senator Grace O'Sullivan:** It is funny because I am from Waterford. BlaBlaCar is an international car pooling mechanism that is used throughout Europe. My children use it all the time when abroad. It is such an efficient system. Are the officials aware of it? Is there any opportunity for us to encourage a company such as BlaBlaCar to operate in Ireland in an effort to be more efficient in car usage? It is a brilliant mechanism in the context of affordability. If people are operating on very tight budgets, they could go online and link up with one or two others and car pool. It is a really good mechanism.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I thank Ms Hanlon for her presentation. She spoke about the programme for Government in reference to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. In it there is a commitment that Ireland will make an application to the European Union for Trans-European Transport Networks, TEN-T, funding for services in the west. However, nothing has been done in that regard. Why not? Freedom of information requests have been forwarded to the Department, but it seems to be very reluctant to provide information.

From what the officials have said, the priority when it comes to funding for the inter-urban rail network under the national development plan is to protect investment already made in the network by funding maintenance and safety projects which are needed to maintain service levels in railway operations. If we are to move to the wonderland world about which everybody goes on where we will move towards the use of electric vehicles from Dublin to Cork, Belfast, Galway or Westport, from speaking to people in Iarnród Éireann, it appears that the cost will be €3 billion. Is that money available?

I do not want the officials to box from my next question because I have been trying to get to the root of it for about six months. There is a rail corridor from Limerick to Galway and talk of a rail review of services connecting Athenry, Tuam and Claremorris. When representatives of the NTA appeared before us, they said the review would cover the eastern side of the coun-

try. Two groups have appeared before the joint committee that I have tried to nail down to get a straight answer. It has been alleged that a rail review is ongoing. Do the officials agree that when it comes to funding, the Department has no intention of opening the rail corridor because their statement is very clear? I have spoken to Barry Kenny and in detail about services to places such as Longford and Athlone and the use of high speed trains, but we need to make sure we are not talking about apples and oranges. The Netherlands is the same size as Munster and has a population three and a half times the size of that of Munster, yet it is more economical to run trains around it. We need to make sure we will not get carried away. I fully understand Ireland is more remote, but we need to nail down an answer to the question as to whether there will be a western rail corridor? I have been waiting for an answer to that question for about two years.

Do the officials agree that emissions from Euro 6 engines are the same as for gas engines? Has the Department carried out research into the use of bio-diesel buses? It is my understanding there is a company in England, 20% of the buses of which are electric, and that after three years, it is getting rid of the lot because the batteries have been giving ferocious trouble. Will we jump into the sea and be unable to swim when we spend a lot of money? Has the issue been fully researched and is the system workable?

On transport policy in Galway, I do not think the west matters to the Department for the simple reason that there is no Luas service there. It is like the words of Nanci Griffith's song "From A Distance". Next week we are going to An Bord Pleanála to consider the outer bypass. We will probably travel around the world and back again, with people objecting to the project which might proceed in seven or eight years time after a heap of court cases. The situation is chronic and I live 40 miles from Galway, but the officials might not know about it because they do not live there. I live 112 or 118 miles from Dublin and can get to Leinster House faster than I can to the county council building in Galway. Is it not a fierce denunciation of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport that a city such as Galway to which the biggest companies have come does not have a rail network and infrastructure that can handle the volume of traffic going into it? In case the officials do not know, Galway city is losing jobs, even in areas where it is growing. I am not criticising a Government; it is due to the lack of infrastructure.

Every year we meet business people in the west. Senator Hopkins will also raise this issue. There are companies in Westport that tell us that 20% of their goods are damaged by the time they reach Dublin because the road from Westport to Mullingar is a disaster. The officials spoke about the quantities of goods being transported by road. At the same time, there are many small towns to which Expressway services have been cut. We should bear in mind that we are talking about the need to get people to use buses instead of their cars. At the same time, we have problems with haulage services on the rail network because the carriage of passengers must be prioritised.

The Department is examining the position regarding hackneys. I have dealt with a licence. Prior to making an application, the person applying must go to the local authority for a letter stating that there is a need in an area and, after three months, he or she receives a lovely letter stating that a study is required. These people operate on a voluntary basis and they are needed by communities. When the letter to which I refer is issued, a community group must formulate a study to prove that someone is needed to provide a service in an area where there is currently none. People are sick to their back teeth of the paperwork involved. I can answer the question on this because I dealt with a licence application. We compiled a study, which we were then told was out of date even though there was no mode of public or private transport in the area. People must still get a community group to carry out an analysis - without funding - of why an

area needs someone to bring a few people home from the pub.

Last night, I was speaking to a guy who bought a new bus. Under the rural transport scheme, it is now compulsory that buses must be wheelchair accessible. That is good and I agree with it. If, however, someone wants to bring US tourists from Kerry to Donegal and he or she buys a new bus, there is nothing in writing about it having to be wheelchair accessible. Whether a bus owner gets the VAT back depends on the length of the bus. Under the rural transport scheme, making a bus wheelchair accessible costs €6,000. This means it would cost €12,000 to accommodate two wheelchairs and the bus owner will not get the VAT back. If we are trying to incentivise people in rural areas to buy proper buses in order that they might provide local transport, why are we driving them away? At the same time, depending on the size of the bus and whether there is a big bumper on it, people will get the VAT back. Our guests know that LocalLink transport providers use smaller 18 or 20-seater buses because they will not bring 53-seaters down a bog road. They must go to all the expense. It probably costs the Department and the NTA more because there is no incentive.

Our guests referred to 100,000 km of road network throughout the country. Galway has one 20th of the overall total. Why is County Galway less funded per kilometre of road than 99% of the remainder of the country? We have had departmental officials speak on this. We can speak about property tax and that we are getting €12.5 million from central government but €14.5 million was collected in property tax so the local authority gave back an extra €1.5 million.

Our guests referred to Cork and Mallow. Is there any vision to put in place what I would call a proper road from Mullingar to Westport? I know our guests will speak about Collooney and Tarmonbarry but they are only pieces. What I mean by a proper road is a dual carriageway at minimum. Will this also be the case from the Tuam motorway up to Letterkenny? The motorway is exceptionally good. It has provided a connection all the way down. When the route from Cork to Mallow is completed, it will be a fine road. If we look at the area that includes Sligo we do not have a proper bus service in Galway or all of the towns that will be made cities under the 2040 plan. We have no plan whatsoever for a Luas or tram system. The witnesses spoke about park and ride, which is a great idea, but seeing it will be believing it. Where is the vision? The start to the vision is in the first question I asked about the TEN-T funding. I know the ifs and percentages involved. I am not asking about them. It is written in the programme for Government but we are two and a half years into that so why has it not been put in place to go from the west to the north of Ireland?

**Chairman:** The Deputy asked many questions over a wide range of topics. I ask the delegation to bank them. Various members have asked questions that have given an interesting insight into rural concerns and I ask our guests to take them on board.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** As we are speaking about transport and school transport, I must declare an interest in case someone says I have a conflict. I have a small bus transport service. My father operated it before me since 1956.

My question is on the rule operated by Bus Éireann whereby private contractors providing school transport cannot have buses older than 20 years. If they are older than 20 years, they are off the road. How is it that until very recently Bus Éireann was using buses that were more than 20 years old? Perhaps they are off the road now. I have been advised that they were on the road until very recently.

There was a big hullabaloo, instigated by the Minister, Deputy Ross, and some Fine Gael

Ministers, which involved propaganda about an evening service operated by Irish Rural Link to bring people out and home. In Kerry, eight services were to operate. Seven of the services were on a once-a-week basis and the other was once a month to bring card players from Castlegregory to Croghane. A promise was given that this pilot service would be extended but I do not see any mention of it in any budget or hear any talk that the service is to be enhanced. What is the position in this regard?

There is no test centre for buses or lorries in south Kerry, which means people who want to have their vehicles tested must leave Valencia or Cahersiveen and travel to north Kerry or to Cork, whichever is nearer. Many of these operators are asking for this service to be provided in the southern half of the county. Who makes decisions in this regard? Is it the Department that decides where test centres are located?

Three-year road funding was announced recently but regional roads have been put together with local roads. It has been highlighted by our local authority for many years that regional roads should be given funding of their own because they take the bigger part of the local road funding in any three-year period. Many members of Kerry County Council are asking for separate funding for regional roads because they are longer and wider and take a sizeable chunk of the funding from local link roads and long cul-de-sac byroads.

There are two types of funding, one for road paving and the other for road strengthening. Road strengthening is great when we get funding. Many who see us doing road paving, which is to seal a road surface, ask why we are spending money on a good road when their roads are in way worse shape. The relevant Department, which I am sure is that of our guests, has insisted that funding of €50,000 be put aside in each engineering area should bad weather come and damage roads. It is very hard to explain this. I refer to prioritisation on the list and to what is included in the roads programme. When people who travel on a road that is very bad ask what the €50,000 is for, we have to tell them it is being kept for bad weather or flooding. They then say that they do not have to wait for their road to get bad because it is already in bad shape and they ask why the money cannot be spent on it. If there was bad weather or extreme circumstances in the past, the Exchequer provided funding to help. The current arrangement is diminishing the amount of money we receive. It is difficult to explain to people who must travel on an already bad road that we are waiting for some other road to get bad in order that the money might be spent on it.

How are national primary route projects selected? IBEC tells us that we have fewer projects than any other country in Europe. It keeps pointing out that interest rates have never been lower and that money is easily obtained for these projects. I am asking how the projects are selected because the Killarney bypass was promised in 2003. In 2004, there was a big presentation in what was then the Great Southern Hotel and the project was to proceed. The name of the hotel changed for a while and now it is the Great Southern Hotel again but we still do not have the Killarney bypass. Some 18,500 vehicles travel on the ring road. It is chock-a-block. It has been determined that the road is no longer safe in view of the volume of traffic. I ask that the project to which I refer be progressed and prioritised. We are now hoping and taking for granted that Macroom bypass will go ahead. The existing road serves the traffic coming in from the Moll's Gap side. If the bypass were put in place from Castlough to Lissivigeen, it would help the people. It would take all the traffic around Kenmare Place that wants to go on to Tralee or up the country and, likewise, the traffic coming in on the N22. The town is absolutely choking. It is good that there is traffic but it is felt that the town will lose out eventually because people are not happy to be sitting in their cars for perhaps an hour and a half or two hours between 3

p.m. and 7 p.m on warm evenings. No one is happy with that.

I want to ask a question that contractors ask me. How is school transport funding given to the operator, Bus Éireann? Is it subsidising other services of Bus Éireann?

I, like many throughout the country, am very upset about all the talk of climate change, carbon tax and the big cry since the budget-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** If the Deputy has a specific point on public transport and climate change, we will take it, but we are not widening the debate.

**Deputy Danny Healy-Rae:** Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice raised the issue earlier and I agree with him. There is a lot of talk about climate change and electric vehicles and it is said that a certain percentage of the bus fleet should be battery operated. It is now a fact and it is coming home to roost that batteries, even in cars, are giving a lot of trouble. Will this be another ridiculous experiment that will cost the Exchequer, taxpayers and fare payers? Road hauliers and others were before the committee and complained that the Euro 6 diesel engine does not affect the climate and that there are no emissions from it. Why, when we have something right, do we have to experiment, make changes and go down some other road about which we are not certain? The signs are that battery-operated vehicles will not last. I spoke earlier about Bus Éireann vehicles being over 20 years of age. If the officials expect buses operated by battery will last 20 years or more, they need to think again because it will not happen. There is so much talk about climate change. If we were reduce our emissions altogether, our contribution would amount to only 0.13% in the worldwide context.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We will ask the officials to respond regarding the future fuelling of public transport and to outline the thinking in the Department in this regard. I thank the Deputy for his views that matter.

I am conscious of time and want to give every member an opportunity to ask questions. Senator Dolan will forgive me for making some comments before I call him. Most of what I had to say has been covered so I will be very brief. We have spoken a lot about connectivity for regions and rural areas, be it in the context of broadband, road or rail. It is essential that, whatever policies we devise, we improve regional connectivity in the first instance. If our regional connectivity is good, local access will be better.

I note the comments on Project Ireland 2040 and the national development plan. One of the regional cities identified for substantial urban growth is Waterford. Of all the access routes to Waterford from other cities, the only good one is that from Dublin. The N25 to Cork is dilapidated. There are road works in Castlemartyr that have been going on for ever. I remember travelling to Munster finals in the early 1980s and there were road works there. I am now almost 50 and there are still road works going on. Why is the N25, a primary national road, in what seems to be a very poor state?

The N24 connects two cities, Limerick and Waterford, whose populations are estimated to almost double by 2040. The N24 is one of the worst national routes in the country in terms of its surface, the number of bends, the number of accidents on it and the number of villages through which it runs. It is a terrible road connecting two of the cities for which we have such high ambitions. How are we going to connect the cities with proper national primary routes and, by extension, improve access to those networks in the regions? It is 2018 and the N24 and N25 are in a deplorable state. I would like to hear the views of the officials from the Department on

how we are going to improve that in accordance with the ambition already outlined in Project Ireland 2040 and the national development plan. It is essential that we do so. I apologise to Senator Dolan.

**Senator Grace O’Sullivan:** I have to follow up very quickly. I refer to the issue of the University Hospital Waterford, which relies on-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** The cardiac issue.

**Senator Grace O’Sullivan:** -----that route from Waterford to Cork. The bottleneck in-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Castlemartyr.

**Senator Grace O’Sullivan:** -----Castlemartyr is dreadful. There are major health and safety issues that need to be addressed.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I apologise to Senator Dolan and I call him now.

**Senator John Dolan:** I thank the Acting Chairman and Waterford has still not brought home an All-Ireland after all that travelling.

*(Interruptions).*

**Senator John Dolan:** I thank our guests for attending and for engaging with the committee. I would also like to say a word of appreciation because a number of things have happened for people with disabilities, although there is much more that must happen. The increase in the parking fine for people wrongly using disabled parking bays has been a great fillip and morale boost. Much more can be done there as well but credit where credit is due. The appointment of approximately half a dozen people with disabilities to a slew of public transport boards is a move in the right direction. That is also welcome.

I want to start, believe it or not, with Article 9 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. At the start of Article 9 it is stated that parties - that means Ireland since April - to the convention “shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications ... both in urban and in rural areas”. We are referring, in particular, to rural Ireland here today. The article also states, “These measures, which shall include the identification and elimination of obstacles and barriers to accessibility, shall apply to [a slew of things we will not go into]”. On 19 April last, Ireland lodged the papers with the United Nations in New York. On 19 April 2020, two years from now, Ireland will make its first report on progress made. Does the Department have an implementation plan to make Article 9 accessibility happen? What is the Department’s intention? What does it hope to be reporting in respect of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in April 2020?

We mentioned the rural aspects. Approximately 37% of the population lives in rural Ireland. That is 228,000 people with disabilities and their families. I state that to make it clear. The NTA is mentioned in the Department’s presentation. I will say again - sadly and clearly - that I have no confidence in the NTA. That is based on what I have seen of its understanding of and empathy with the issue of providing inclusive transport solutions for people with disabili-

ties. My evidence comes from March 2017, when the NTA advised the Minister - and the rest of us - during the Bus Éireann strike. Three sets of Bus Éireann vehicles were being taken off of three routes, leaving three operators with licences to operate those routes. The NTA stated at the time that there would be no diminution in service. It was interesting that it could say this when all of the buses left on the routes were not wheelchair accessible. What was even worse - and this goes back to points raised by colleagues to my left - was that they were not required to be accessible. I refer to licences that are being given to bus companies. I am not getting into public versus private, I am just talking about Joe Bloggs who is in a wheelchair or who has a mobility impairment. He does not or should not need to know the logo on the bus to be able to get the bus from Clonmel to Dublin and out to the airport. That was one of the routes involved.

The other instance to which I wish to refer occurred on 18 July last when representatives from the NTA were before the committee. I asked about BusConnects. The eye of that storm at the moment is in Dublin but, as has been said, it is due to go nationwide in the fullness of time. There was no engagement with people with disabilities or their representative organisations until two days before the meeting in question. That engagement happened because a person with a disability on a national disability inclusion strategy committee pushed for it. The horse was well gone by then. I am not sure if it was 60 or 80 buses, I forget the exact number, but they had been ordered from Wrightbus in Ballymena, delivered, paid for and liveried. Everything had been done. The day before the meeting, people with disabilities, visual impairments, physical impairments and hearing impairments got their first chance to look at those buses and point out a number of things. The committee was told that some of the things could be resolved but the solutions were being retrofitted to something that should already have been done. There has been a disability access committee in the Department since the 1980s. This is not new. Some 20 years ago, 100 buses came into the fleet thanks to an Exchequer grant of £1.5 million. That was unprecedented at the time. Not one of those buses was accessible. Now, 20 years later, the same thing is happening. The consultant appointed to the BusConnects project was not asked by the Department, the NTA or whomever, if he or she had any experience of providing accessible public transport systems.

Those are my reasons for saying that I have no confidence in the NTA. I do not see any change. Such an important body was being dismissive, I will use that term, because it could not even indicate or provide an estimate regarding the number of disabled people with mobility impairments who currently have a single bus journey from start to finish but who will have to take a second bus as a result of BusConnects being put in place. I refer to the number of people who would have to get off one bus and onto a second. We could ask the drivers on the routes and I am sure they could nearly tell us passengers' names and where they get on and off. It is quite dismissive of the whole project Ireland has taken on. I would be interested in any comment the Department has to make on that point.

Wheelchair accessibility is available on a number of Bus Éireann coaches on the Expressway regional service. I will qualify that by saying that it is when the services operate the way they should and to the 24-hour rule, etc. The number of routes is limited, however, due to constraints with accessible bus stops. This has already been touched on. The introduction of additional fully accessible routes is dependent on the production of suitably accessible bus stops. Each wheelchair-accessible coach has one wheelchair space which must be booked 24 hours in advance using the reservation system. There are still routinely issues. It sticks in my craw that members of the public still have to give 24 hours' notice to use a public bus or train but that is the case. When they do that, they still have the fingers on both hands crossed that the bus, when it gets there, will be accessible. Even if they get to where they are going, they then

have a bigger plight wondering if they will get home. That is reality for people with mobility impairments. There are many different issues but the coaches are now accessible. The figure of 86% was mentioned. There is still the issue of the bus stops along the routes. I will return to that in a moment.

There are six Expressway routes that are wheelchair accessible. The routes in question are Dublin to Belfast, Dublin to Waterford, Dublin to Limerick, Dublin to Galway, Dublin to Letterkenny and Waterford to Cork.

I want to start with, believe or not,

All but one of the seven public service obligation, PSO, routes serve Dublin and the Dublin hinterland. The one that does not runs from Galway to Ballina. I refer to the routes from Navan to Dublin, Navan to DCU, Trim to Dublin, Drogheda to Blanchardstown and Dublin to Kells. There is a strong pull into and around Dublin city. There is an equity issue here, and other committee members have raised that in other ways. Whether it is in regard to people with disabilities or others, there is a huge drag in and around Dublin. I can understand that, but those of us involved in public policy have to create a counter-drag running the other way so that people can move around.

The Chair raised the N24. We need the Saw Doctors to do something about the N25 and the N24. I know the N24 well. I come from Tipperary town. There was a big protest in Tipperary at the weekend. A greater number of people than the town's population came out and protested about jobs and other issues. The state of roads and the lack of a bypass were some of those issues. Public transport is not just about transport. It is about people's social and economic lives. On the outskirts of that town, there is a rail junction, Limerick Junction, which horizontally and vertically links Dublin, Cork, Limerick, the area beyond it and Waterford. That town is dying on its knees. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and agencies under its aegis could do some very practical things. They could provide the bypass, address the state of roads in and around the town and make strategic use of the fact that north, south, east and west are connected through Limerick Junction.

Finally, I wish to ask some very specific questions connected to some of the things I have raised already. What level of engagement does the Department have with local authorities throughout the country with regard to the creation of wheelchair accessible bus stops? That is part of the conundrum. The whole fleet could be accessible, but the bus stops in rural and regional Ireland must also be accessible. Local authorities bear a responsibility too. What percentage of the LocalLink fleet is wheelchair accessible? Has there been any progress in inserting a protocol to the effect that no new public service licences will be issued to operators unless they have a 100% accessible fleet? It is unfair to the public purse and the public service that we are licensing private operators while the public transport operator has at least one hand tied behind its back. A private operator can just rock up with an inaccessible bus. Quite apart from people with disability issues I do not see the sense in that. Obviously my concern is for people with disabilities. Can the officials revert to the committee with figures on disability awareness training undertaken by Irish Rail, Bus Éireann and LocalLink staff and on how often refresher training is delivered? Go raibh maith agat. I thank the witnesses.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I thank the Senator for his advocacy on behalf of those with disabilities. It is important we bring that into the wider context.

**Senator John Dolan:** We will all be going there some day.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Definitely. We have had a lot of wide-ranging questions and comprehensive engagement. There are good insights into what members are seeing on the ground concerning access to services and where investment is needed. We need to return to local, national and regional roads as well, as I mentioned. We would be interested to hear the officials' responses. I am conscious of time and I thank the officials for their continued engagement with the committee.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Perhaps an appropriate way forward would be for me to address the climate and green issues together. I will then hand over to my colleague to address roads and disability. I will wrap up by addressing various other issues.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** That would be great. I thank Ms Hanlon.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** In regard to sustainability and public transport, we take the view that of its nature public transport is more accessible, more sustainable, more environmentally friendly, greener and better in terms of liveability in cities and other areas than private car use. There is a considerable level of State investment in providing rural transport now and in the future. There are several motivations for that, one of which might broadly be termed the green agenda, that is, a policy direction towards more sustainable and environmentally friendly approaches to life in Ireland.

On the question of the public transport fleet and the type of fleet it is appropriate to bring forward, let us start by looking at emissions. Transport emissions account for 20% of Ireland's emissions. Just 1% of that is public transport. It is very low. One could ask if it matters whether it is made greener. As some of the members of the committee have correctly pointed out, the standards of transport vehicles change as they move up the European emission standards classes. We were at euro 3, euro 4 and euro 5. Euro 6 is the norm nowadays. Moving up the standards, vehicles become more sustainable and environmentally friendly and have fewer emissions and better exhaust profiles. It is getting better all the time.

That said, a leadership role must be taken by the public transport sector. While its own emissions might not be at a tipping point concerning Ireland's emissions generally, the fact that so much public funding goes into the area suggests that it should be leading rather than following. Public transport should be demonstrating possibilities to other parts of the economy, particularly private personal car use and private business vehicle use, whether heavy-duty vehicles or lighter-duty goods vehicles are concerned. There are initiatives around this. A commitment has been made in the national development plan that by the middle of next year there will be no more purchases of diesel-only fleet for urban public transport services. That sends a very strong signal. To support that, not just in regard to immediate purchases but throughout the coming period, the Department is researching these issues internationally, looking at evidence from other jurisdictions, what they have done, how they have got on and the experience they have had. We are examining whether other jurisdictions have taken a straight route or done about turns on the way. In addition to that and to hearing from the manufacturers, we want to test it for ourselves. We want to test the technology on our roads, on hilly and flat bus routes and on routes where a vehicle has to stop ten times going down a street because of traffic, traffic lights or whatever. That is a piece of work the Department has commissioned. A set of trials will be rolled out. They will start within a few weeks, certainly before the end of the year, and they will run for a fixed number of weeks.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Ms Hanlon said that there will be no diesel-only buses from next year. What does she mean by that? Will the Department be buying diesel-electric

vehicles or electric-only vehicles after that? A few weeks of trials do not test anything about how a vehicle performs. The battery performance of electric vehicles must be tested for three years. I presume Ms Hanlon is aware that the transport budget will need to accommodate an automatic 20% rise in fuel costs. If the Department buys biodiesel or electric-diesel buses or vehicles with two different types of fuel, its budget will fuel eight buses instead of ten. That is going by the prices. Has a budget been laid out? Costs are 20% higher. Is Ms Hanlon confident the Department will not be buying a pig in a bag? I have had machinery all my life and I know that weeks of use do not test something. Things should be tested for three years or perhaps five years in order to find out whether they are going to rob or make a person.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I will incorporate those points into my response. Alternative fuel technologies and different types of buses are more expensive than conventional diesel buses at the moment, so they will cost more. The Government is aware of that, and has been aware of that since it made its commitment to move away from diesel-only buses. We have not started to prescribe the precise technologies to be purchased. I was trying to explain that there are horses for courses in this. A number of technologies are available, for example, hybrid electric vehicles, being part electric and part diesel, fully electric, either via battery or by plug-in, hydrogen vehicles and CNG, or compressed natural gas-powered vehicles. A range of buses will be tested in the trials mentioned to see which are suited to particular types of routes. We want to find out whether the technology appropriate for hilly terrain is also appropriate for driving in flat areas or in congested urban areas where one is starting and stopping regularly. This is not the be all and end all. It is only one component of the research we are doing, but I am talking about it because it will be done over the next few weeks. We will run these different types of buses under simulated conditions on real Irish bus routes. We are not talking about bus routes in a foreign city that we are being told about by manufacturers, but rather we will find out for ourselves and actually measure what is coming from the tailpipe.

This is a practical move by the Department which will support the trial and testing of innovative solutions where we just do not know the absolute, definitive best answer, and no one else can give us the answer. Members of the committee are raising very real points about this approach. Considerable experience has been built up internationally, but it is not entirely conclusive. We are trying to add to it with our own analysis and understanding and to help inform decisions so that better purchasing decisions are made over time. Indeed, we expect technologies to develop further as we go into the future, so we do not expect that we will definitively come up with the correct answer at a particular point in time which will forever after be the approach we slavishly taken.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Ms Hanlon has said that the Department intends to get rid of diesel. A euro 6 engine has been proven, without a doubt, to be the same as gas in terms of emissions at the moment. I am sure it will be tested by the Department as part of its testing process. Why are the gas engines being tested while the euro 6 engines are being ruled out? Perhaps the euro 7 will be even better than gas. Why has that decision been made?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** It is a policy of the Government that we should move away from a diesel-only fleet for urban areas and from purchasing a new diesel-only fleet for those areas. We will measure not only the carbon emissions but also the emissions of nitrous oxide, sulphur oxide emissions and the particulate matter. There are impacts on two fronts, and we want to try to get measures on both. One is the impact on climate, which largely comes from carbon, and the other is the impact on air quality. Air quality impacts are more acute in areas where there is congestion and places where there is a higher proximity to people and buildings. Technologies,

which might not cause the same impact on air quality in rural areas, might have a larger impact on air quality in urban areas.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am conscious that we could delve very deeply into this debate, but I am also conscious of the time. Following on from Deputy Fitzmaurice's contribution, is there a timeframe for the Department's evaluations? When does the Department expect to report on its various experimental tests? Will it be done by the end of this year or spring of next year?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** As far as I know, testing will begin in the coming weeks. I believe it will be running for a number of weeks beginning in late November and the beginning of December. We will report on the outcomes after that. I would expect initial outputs to be available in early spring. Those results will help to inform purchasing decisions going forward, but there may need to be further analysis.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Will the Department also take into account the associated infrastructure required to support that type of technology?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Yes.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** If gas infrastructure is required to run gas vehicles there will be a big demand for it because we do not have that infrastructure. It is important that is evaluated.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** One of the issues is reliability and the level of re-charging required for particular vehicles.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am conscious that another committee exists which can deal with this matter in far more depth. This committee is interested in this area in terms of connectivity and fuel technology. We would be interested to hear the outcome of the testing to be done when it is completed.

**Senator Grace O'Sullivan:** I am interested in the testing in general. Where will it be carried out? Will it be carried out in different locations around the country? What are the parameters for that testing?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I believe it is being carried out largely in Dublin and Cork on particular routes which have been chosen because of the variation between them and the range of testing conditions that can be captured.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Who is carrying out the testing on behalf of the Department?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** It is being run in conjunction with Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann. A company has been employed by the Department to carry out the actual measurement.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am anxious to hear responses about investment in rural, regional and national roads and rural link and on the issues of disability discussed.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** The N4 and the N5 were mentioned. In terms of the N4, the route between Collooney and Castlebaldwin, tenders have been received and it is expected that contract will be awarded and the project will be under way before Christmas. The next project on the list is the N5, between Westport and Turlough. We expect that the contract for that project

will be awarded next year. The route between Ballaghaderreen and Scramogue is on the N5. It has recently gone to An Bord Pleanála, and we await the outcome.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Why are they all single-lane roads?

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** They are not. Collooney to Castlebaldwin is-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I am talking about the routes from Westport and Ballaghaderreen.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** Westport to Turlough is a dual road. Ballaghaderreen to Scramogue is a single lane road. The simple reason is that the decision is made based on the volume of traffic, especially heavy goods vehicles, HGVs. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has to go to An Bord Pleanála, justify the land take and the proposed road, and has to make a call on what capacity will be needed on these roads in the future.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Does Mr. Mullaney remember the roads needs assessment of many years ago? There was a big-----

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** Yes.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** If one looks at that, it was proposed that the road from Athlone to Ballinasloe had the least amount of traffic and that it should be a single carriageway. Would it not be beautiful to travel out of Galway on the dual carriageway, onto the single carriageway and then back onto the dual? Over half of the national primary routes are already duelled. Is it within the policy remit of the Department to decide that all national primary roads, which are being upgraded, are to be duelled? Can that be done? The other road it could apply to is the one in Dromod.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** It is within the Department's remit. The Government made a decision that the Dublin, Waterford, Limerick, Cork and Galway roads would all be dual carriageways.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** That is just as well.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** There were some sections where the traffic figures did not justify a dual carriageway but TII was able to use the decision to go in and-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I am a believer in building for the future, not for today. Everybody is talking about balanced regional development but we will not get that if a company is struggling or a businessman is behind the 35X but when he is trying to get to Castlebar, Waterford, Donegal or anywhere in Ireland. I spoke to a person who met their boss from America and who hired a helicopter to bring them to Donegal because they were afraid that if they were on the road too long, the boss would pull the investment. It is about jobs in these areas. I do not know why we cannot make the decision. It is our business, as public representatives, to bring in something to ensure that we have dual carriageways. I am not looking for a motorway everywhere but a road on which one can overtake with some comfort and not be stuck behind something all day.

Under the transport regulations, it is illegal to drive a tractor on the hard shoulder so one has to stay on the road and block everything. Frustration builds and people take risks by overtaking at the wrong time, which leads to crashes. I do not know why, for the sake of the extra few euro it costs to purchase land compulsorily, we do not have a structure north, south, east and west to

tie the A5 at Aughnacloy into the M1. We need a vision so that everyone from Donegal to the south of Wexford and Kerry has the opportunity to bring industry to their regions. I drive to Dublin every day and the Dublin-Galway road is the greatest road that was ever built. That is what gets people moving.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** The Deputy's points are well made but I want to hear the responses.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I want to clarify what we are talking about. We are discussing national primary roads. I understand that the N11 is almost finished.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** Yes.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** The M1 is done and a bit of the M2 has been done but one can go down the M1 and then go across. The M3 is great down to Virginia, when it runs into the bog. On the N4, one gets to Mullingar and then runs into the bog. That is also the case with the N5. The N6, N7, N8 and the N9-N10 have been done and the N11 is almost done. All that remains to be done are the Waterford to Cork and Waterford to Limerick routes. Cork to Limerick will be a dual carriageway and will be done, as will Cork to Killarney and back to Adare, by which time virtually the whole south of the country will be done, with a bit more to do in Wexford. Then we will go into the black hole of Ireland, which is from Tuam to Letterkenny. One way to measure a road is to count the 50 km/h speed limits on it. If the Acting Chairman drives from Waterford to Limerick, he will see that a speed limit of 50 km/h applies on the final 16 km, which would drive one nuts. The wear and tear on vehicles is phenomenal in such circumstances. Does the Department think the Government made a good decision to forget about doing patches on the M6, the M7, the M8 and the M9 up to the Border but to do it all instead?

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** In retrospect, it was the right decision.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Am I right in thinking that a national primary road is up to the number 50, be that M50 or N50?

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** Yes.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** There are very few of them.

**Mr. Dominic Mullaney:** Yes, but other projects are in for appraisal, such as those relating to the N24 and N25. The N4 Mullingar to Longford road will probably be a dual carriageway. There is also the N4 Carrick on Shannon to Dromod and the N25 to New Ross. The N11 public private partnership project from Gorey to Enniscorthy is being done, as is the N30 off it. The N24, from Waterford to Cahir to Limerick Junction, is to be appraised by TII. The cross-section has not been decided yet and is still in its early stages. The N25 Waterford to Glenmore is also to be appraised under the national development plan, as is Carrigtwohill to Midleton. The N22 from Ballyvourney to Macroom was mentioned earlier, as was the Westport job, and they will start construction next year.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We also spoke about disability access and about Irish Rural Link and LocalLink.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** Senator Dolan raised a number of issues regarding disability access, including Article 9 of the UN convention. We have the implementation plan from our accessibility consultative committee and this contains all the actions we are required to take in respect

of public transport arising from the national disability inclusion strategy, comprehensive employment strategy and so on. It has been published on our website and there are a lot of actions in there. There have been successes recently but a lot of retrofitting is to be done relating to disability access.

The Senator also mentioned an issue regarding engagement with the NTA in the context of matters such as delivery of buses and so on.

**Senator John Dolan:** I also raised the issue of the reorganisation of people.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** That is certainly an issue. We have held discussions with the NTA on it and the authority engaged with the National Disability Authority, as a result of which it was able to make changes to delivery, particularly in the context of visually impaired people. The NTA is also looking to appoint a dedicated accessibility officer, which it does not have at the moment. This will be useful to do. It is looking to provide for better engagement with disability sector. We have a disability and accessibility committee and each of the transport operating companies has one. Perhaps the NTA needs one too.

The Senator also asked about bus stops. These are an issue and they are part of our retrofit programme. We have a significant capital programme over the next number of years to deal with the antiquated infrastructure which we have in some cases, and it is being rolled out on a route by route basis. We have done Dublin to Donegal and Dublin to Letterkenny. The NTA plan is to have accessible bus stops in 43 towns with populations of over 5,000 people by 2021. It will mean one such stop in each direction so there will be a total of 86 accessible bus stops.

Approximately 69% of LocalLink services are defined as fully or partially accessible. The NTA is now retendering in respect of the more than 1,000 routes on the LocalLink service. One of the conditions it is putting on that is that all those services must be wheelchair accessible within two years. The existing services must remain accessible; the other 31% must be accessible within two years.

On commercial operators, as the Senator mentioned, this is certainly an issue on coaches. Bus Éireann Expressway services have to be wheelchair accessible. There is no requirement on commercial bus operators to provide wheelchair accessible coaches.

**Senator John Dolan:** Does Mr. Doyle mean that the Department does not put a requirement on them?

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** Exactly.

**Senator John Dolan:** That is the nub of my question.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** There is none. The NTA will publish proposals for consultation shortly which will set out minimum accessibility standards for commercial public transport services. I understand it will engage in that consultation towards the end of this year. That will guide future ways of dealing with the licensing of commercial operators and whether there should be a requirement on them to provide accessible coaches.

**Senator John Dolan:** If they are being contracted to provide a public service and we have decided that these services should be accessible, there are accessible buses. Surely there is no other decision but that this should be done. The only row should be about how quickly it would happen.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** In this case, we are talking about the licensing of commercial bus operations. The NTA has a certain role-----

**Senator John Dolan:** To provide the public service.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** It also provides public service obligation contracts for Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann, and many private operators are using those as well. They must be wheelchair accessible. However, in the commercial sphere, there is no requirement currently. That is something the NTA is examining.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Has Mr. Doyle taken on board my question regarding the length of the buses? This issue will lead to LocalLink prices increasing. Buses must be wheelchair accessible, which costs €6,000. The cost is €12,000 for most buses now. The cost is down to the length of the vehicle. It does not have to be used for bringing Yanks around the country and, depending on the length of the bus, the operator will get back the VAT on that cost. Can the Department not communicate with the Department of Finance with a view to offering some incentive in regard to claiming back the VAT? First, we would have a better standard of bus and, second, they will be more accessible for people with disabilities. The only criteria currently in that regard is the length of the bus and if it is an inch one way or the other, the operator is out.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I am not familiar with VAT rules relating to transport services because they do not come within the remit of our Department. From what the Deputy is saying, however, this is an issue that affects the people who are trying to provide transport services and, therefore, it is real in their world. It happens to be transport but it is VAT law, which is tax. It is administered by the Revenue Commissioners and the rules are set by the Minister for Finance.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Is there any way the Department could contact the Department of Finance and inform it that there is a problem in this regard and that the operators need a break.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I am not aware of the problem other than as a result of the Deputy raising it here. We will talk to them and see what the matter is-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** If Ms Hanlon carries out a search on Google, she will find the criteria.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am sorry to interrupt again but members have a number of genuine concerns that are affecting access to rural transport and making rural transport work. The specific remit of this committee is to try to identify either blockages or the areas where funding is required. I know Ms Hanlon will note it and take it on board but, in a general sense, it is important that departmental officials recognise the concerns of the members.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Yes.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** In our guests' engagement with the various State agencies - and we will have their representatives before the committee and will have an opportunity to put questions - it is important that this issue be flagged. If we want access and connectivity to rural transport to work, we will have to address the concerns members are raising. That is the general gist of it. To wrap up, could we have some-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I wish to raise an issue briefly. We must flag the fact that there

needs to be a policy to the effect that services will be provided late in the evening. We will be commemorating the centenary of the First Dáil on 21 January 2019. The general election took place on 15 December 1918 and the results were not in until the end of the year, with Christmas in between, yet those involved managed to set up a Dáil, with translation and stenography services and everything else in place, within 21 days. That monumental decision 100 years ago will be commemorated by this institution in January. I approached Bus Éireann on the issue of getting late night services to Carraroe, although it could have been to any Carraroe in the country, because the last bus leaves Galway at 6 p.m. In early spring, Bus Éireann put a proposal to the NTA, and the service was meant to be in place in September. Bus Éireann assured me it was ready to rock and roll. If the first Dáil could be set up within 21 days, will our guests explain why, as I have been informed, it will take until January to put this service in place? Bus Éireann has just put in a revised timetable. Will somebody explain to me what has gone wrong in the past 100 years? We could set up the First Dáil in 21 days and we cannot reconfigure a bus timetable to provide a vital service, which has taken eight, nine or ten months to set up. Something is wrong in this country. Nothing seems to get done.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I have to interrupt the Deputy. He has made that point well. It is an operational matter for Bus Éireann.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** No. When I was a Minister-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Correct me if I am wrong but schedules and timetables are an operational matter for Bus Éireann.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** That is not the point. I am not asking the Department to interfere with schedules or timetables. I am asking the officials about the steps the Department intends to take to ensure that the agencies under its remit act efficiently, make decisions immediately and stop the petty carry-on over a little place.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am conscious of time.

**Senator John Dolan:** My question-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** No. I will move on.

**Senator John Dolan:** One of the questions was not responded to.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I have a list of them and we will try to get to them. Specific questions were put. Deputy Fitzmaurice had one regarding the western rail corridor.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** TEN-T funding in terms of the western rail corridor.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I would like to hear the answers to two questions put by Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. He said that buses older than 20 years are not allowed to be used in the private sector and asked if this is also the case in the public sector. He also asked about access to vehicle test centres in the regions, which is important.

Senator Dolan asked specific questions on Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

**Senator John Dolan:** That has been dealt with. We can pick up on it. I made comments on disability awareness training and I sought a response. The current 24-hour waiting period

when booking wheelchair-accessible transport is not acceptable. People still routinely ring up to book that and it does not happen for them even though a bus or train with the necessary ramps is available. We need to have a zero-tolerance policy in terms of people booking wheelchair-accessible transport 24 hours in advance who still cannot get that bus or train.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We will try to get a response on that.

For the officials' information, we devoted a full meeting to discuss a flooding issue on the Galway to Limerick railway line at Ballycar. I understand there has not been a resolution in respect of that matter. We engaged with all of the agencies but none of them is taking ownership of it. Do the officials from the Department have any information with regard to finding a resolution in respect of that issue? This is a primary railway route from Galway to Limerick - two of our main cities identified under Project Ireland 2040 - and it is unacceptable that it is being shut down due to flooding. If the officials have some information on that, we would appreciate their response. We will hear final answers now, and I thank the officials.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** To use a technical transport phrase, I gather the Acting Chairman would prefer a whistlestop tour in terms of answers to-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I would prefer brief, specific responses if that is possible.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** If the Acting Chairman wants more information, he can ask me another question. I will go backwards through the questions.

We are aware of the issue of flooding at Ballycar. Progress seems to have been made on it in that the bodies involved are working together with Clare County Council. Irish Rail is involved, as are some consultants who are looking at the issue. The issue seems to be one of flooding in the area. It affects the rail line but it also affects other things in the area. They are considering what would be the best approach to bring forward. It is heartening that matters seem to be moving in that those involved are working together, co-operating and looking jointly at identifying the best way forward. We await the outcome of that.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae asked about the ages of school buses being 20 years or older depending on whether they were operated by or on contract to Bus Éireann. The school bus system is a matter for the Minister for Education and Skills and his Department. Bus Éireann operates it for the Minister as his agent. It is not a matter in which our Department has a role or knowledge.

I do not know the answer about the question on test centres for heavy vehicles and buses. We can find out. It is not in the public transport remit so I am not aware.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Will Ms Hanlon ask her colleagues to respond to the committee?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I will write to the clerk and let them know whether that is our responsibility or that of someone else.

There is a commitment in the programme for Government that the costings of proposals for the extension of the western rail corridor northwards from the existing part of the project that was opened in 2010 would be examined. The programme for Government also makes a commitment that in the meantime, there would be no development which would preclude its

bringing into service for rail purposes in the future.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Is the Department doing the review?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** It is more than a decade since the project was last examined and costings put in place, and those costings are affected by several things. A new road is running along it and what the McCann report described as its most potentially economic part has already opened. Therefore, during the summer the Government decided that the business case must be revisited. It is not sufficiently robust on which to base a decision.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** My memory was that the most viable part of that line was from Athenry to Tuam. I clearly recall that when it came to us for a decision by Cabinet, one of my colleagues said we should not have done the Ennis to Athenry segment but should have done the Athenry to Tuam segment. We can check that out.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** My recollection is that the McCann report identified the piece that already has been built as that piece which connects Limerick and Galway and that the economic benefit one would derive from that is stronger than the potential economic benefit from the others because none of the possible future phases would connect areas that already are centres of such economic activity and population density. Therefore the benefit to come from it would not be as strong.

The Deputy asked who is doing it.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Who is doing it? Where are they at? My understanding is that it was nearly done. When is it being done?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Irish Rail has been told by Government to do the review. It is out to tender for assistance with economic expertise and technical help to compile a business case. We expect it will be a couple of months. Alongside the business case, which comprises the technical financial procedures that are required in accordance with the public spending code, Irish Rail also has been told to carry out a consultation. There is a wide variety of views as to what is the best use of that alignment, be that for rail, greenway, something else or nothing at all.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Ms Hanlon should wait one second. In the part of her statement that I read back to her, it says the priority is to look after the existing network. Where does the money come from?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** What I said was that was the priority set when times were hard and we had to cut very deeply into capital budgets. We asked what was the best thing to do and it was to hunker down and keep the existing extensive network running. Now that more capital funding is coming forward and being profiled under the national development plan, we can do that. We have reached the steady state of keeping the existing networks going and we can undertake targeted additional projects. Several of those projects are specifically set out in the national development plan, such as the metro, BusConnects and the DART expansion, but there is also scope for more. What is happening in respect of the western rail corridor is that the Government has told Irish Rail to do an up-to-date robust business case and return with it. When Irish Rail returns with that, in accordance with the programme for Government commitment there will be an independent review and peer assessment of the Irish Rail case because there is a significant degree of dispute as to the robustness and quality of figures that are being put forward by different parties.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** How long does Ms Hanlon estimate this will take?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Irish Rail is getting consultants on board around now.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I know. In addition to costing money, they take a long time. When will we know one way or the other?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** We expect the consultants' report to come within approximately three months from when they start work.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** When will that be?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I imagine it will be in or around the end of the year. Irish Rail must also do a consultation but it can run that alongside the business case. The two do not need to be sequential; they can be concurrent. Then Irish Rail can return to Government and then the Government can assess the appropriate action.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Where are we in respect of TEN-T?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** There is a commitment in the programme for Government that a concept called the western arc, to which the Deputy referred, would be put forward by Government to the European Commission proposing its inclusion as part of the core network of TEN-T. Work in that regard is under way in the Department.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Nothing has been done. Files have been requested from the Department. There was a commitment that this would be done within a certain length of time from the Government taking office. People have requested files and from the information received, the Department has done nothing on the matter. Why is there a blank on the west of Ireland under the TEN-T programme?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I understand that the approach is being prepared at the moment. It is expected that something can be progressed to ministerial level in the coming months. At EU level, there is a requirement to review the entirety of the TEN-T network throughout the European Union. It is a network of core routes for transport, rail, road, airports and ports. That review has to be done at European level by 2023.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I was involved in the programme for Government. The commitment was that it would be within six months. I will look up the programme for Government.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Yes, it was a very short period.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** Why was it not done in that time? Why are we talking about it two and a half years later and talking about 2023? That commitment was given in the programme for Government. Why has the Department not done so?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** It is one of a number of priorities the Department is-----

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** It is obviously not that big of a priority when it relates to the west of Ireland because every other priority has been done. A rail service was put in towards Navan and that was done even though a business case for it would not stack up. It was the one thing that was put into the programme for Government for the west of Ireland. People have tried to secure information on this from the Department through freedom of information

requests but have been dilly-dallied around with and not given the information. They requested files but there is nothing on the file. There was nothing that said the Department had tried to do this TEN-T application. We keep getting fobbed off on this issue because it relates to the west of Ireland.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I will explain if I may.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We will have a final response because we have exhausted this particular issue, which is something we will revisit.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** A large amount of work has been done, which was significant to the context and quality of the case that could be put forward for TEN-T designation of that arc. That is work done in the development of a national planning framework and the national development plan which has only been completed in recent months. If one goes to the European Union to look for the inclusion of particular corridors or routes as part of a core network across Europe, one has to have as good a case as one possibly can. It bolsters one's position in making the case if one can show a national development plan which gives strength to developing networks across the regions.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** We were included in it up to 2011 or 2012. There was no big deal about it. We had a case before then.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** We are already included in the comprehensive network. The issue is whether we should be upgraded further for inclusion in the core network. The comprehensive network is still a good place to be in. The question is whether we can step into-----

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** My understanding of Trans-European Transport Networks, TEN-T, is that the fund was meant to drop money all over the place for everybody, but is there any money for the comprehensive network?

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** One can obtain funding for a study. If one is undertaking rail and road projects to connect to a place such as Derry, one has to join two countries together.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** It is difficult to give a short answer to this question.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Ms Hanlon should try to be as brief as she can.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** There are various levels of funding. Inclusion in the comprehensive or core network does not automatically lead to the giving of money, but it does mean that one can then compete in funding calls. One still has to compete with projects all across Europe.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** Will Ms Hanlon provide the committee with a more detailed update on this aspect?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** We will ask our colleagues who do that work to do so.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** There is one thing-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am moving on.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** One day I asked the Department what I thought was a simple question. I asked how much EU money had been funnelled through the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport for road and rail transport projects in the period from 2000 to 2010.

Instead of giving me the answer, I was referred to every agency within the Department's remit, all of which give the answer in different ways. I now have to sit down and spend a week trying to put all the stuff together. Is it possible to find out how much money was channelled through the Department from the European Union for road and rail infrastructure projects in the period from 2000 to 2010?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I will give a short answer which might help to explain why there was such a complicated reply. If we are undertaking projects, we fund them up-front from the Exchequer and apply for EU funding afterwards. One can obtain approval for the allocation of EU funding, but one would not hang on in waiting for it.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** With due respect-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** No interruptions, please.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** The money goes from the Exchequer through the Department's Vote to our agencies to build whatever they have been authorised to build. As they build, pay contractors or people who undertake the project, they fill in claim forms and send them to the European Union and the money comes through in due course. As they have already been funded from the Exchequer through the Department's Vote, the funds typically flow back into the Exchequer. They do not necessarily flow through the Department. That is what happens in the main, with a small number of exceptions.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** My experience of seeking EU funds includes seeking funds under the LEADER programme, for example. Exactly as Ms Hanlon says, money is given to the LEADER group and money comes back from the European Union when claims are made every quarter or six months. One then has at the bottom of the Estimate appropriations-in-aid. I could have received appropriations-in-aid, but there were other things thrown in which were not EU moneys and I could not desegregate them. Surely all of the EU payments came back into the Department as appropriations-in-aid.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** Not any more. On the whole, that approach has been changed. As far as I recall, the money tends to go to the central Exchequer, rather than through the Department.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Does the Exchequer not give it back to the Department as appropriations-in-aid?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** I do not think that happens any more.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Certainly in rural Ireland.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** A number of years ago the flow of funding was simplified to streamline the process.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Then-----

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am closing the discussion on this item.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** This is important. I need to know. Is Ms Hanlon saying the Department of Finance could tell me? Will she find out for me?

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** It would certainly know the aggregate figures, but I do not know if it divides them.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** I only wanted an aggregate figure.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** We are moving on. I am trying to focus on specific questions.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** This is relevant.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I know it is and we will come back to it. Senator Dolan asked some questions. If the officials respond to them, we will be satisfied.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** Senator Dolan asked about the advance notice period in travelling on public transport. On DART services the notice period has been reduced from 24 hours to four. It will be rolled out on the Maynooth line and may already be in place. It will be rolled out on the northern line shortly.

**Senator John Dolan:** When people give notice, it should be as rare as hen's teeth that it does not work for them, but often that is not what happens, which is unacceptable.

**Mr. Kevin Doyle:** We are assessing with Irish Rail how the pilot scheme was run and if there are issues, we encourage people to contact the company and us. If the Senator has any evidence that people have not-----

**Senator John Dolan:** My point is that people with disabilities should routinely not have to make complaints about something that they have been promised will happen. It sticks in their craw that they have to give a day's or four hours' notice. There is no excuse for it not working every time. Who will crack the whip with the public companies? To say it comes back to the disabled person is like saying it is up to an individual to keep complaining every time it does not work. The public system has picked the required number of hours, whether it be 24 or four. We have not picked it and would pick zero. We would rock up and get on the bus or train just like anyone else. The public system has put in place that backstop.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I understand specific agencies or providers are responsible. Is there an evaluation of the service, whether rail or bus, provided for vulnerable groups? I include the elderly, the disabled and the young. Is there an evaluation of the service levels provided? If there is, what are the actions taken following the evaluation to deal with the problems identified by the Senator? It is a pertinent point which the officials should take on board.

**Ms Deirdre Hanlon:** The NTA has contracts in place with the service providers, within which it has service levels which are required to be met. I am not familiar with the details of the contracts and do not know whether these items are part of those service levels, but it is something about which we could have a useful discussion with the NTA.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** That would be helpful. We need to prioritise that evaluation of the service provided. The Senator is raising an important point.

**Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice:** I propose that we decide that within three months, if all outstanding issues have not been resolved, and if they are willing, officials from the Department come back and set aside a reasonable amount of time to discuss where we are.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I am sure the officials are always willing to come back to the committee to revisit some of the issues to see whether progress has been made. That is within our remit.

## REGIONAL AND RURAL TRANSPORT POLICY: DISCUSSION

It has been a long session in which we have covered a lot of ground. There have been valuable insights given and issues identified which are of concern to members. We hope the officials will take them on board in their various engagements with service providers. We can come back to them again in the future.

I thank the officials for giving of their time and their patience. I know that we have run late, but it is an important engagement on where we are going with policy on access to public transport in the regions and rural areas. As a committee, we will continue to engage on it with various stakeholders.

**Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív:** Safe home. If any of the officials takes the Luas towards Sandyford, he or she remember that the line was closed. I was on a train on it the week before it closed. It was closed because it was said the service would never be viable. It is now the busiest railway line in the country. Those who are trying to butcher the western rail corridor should remember that.

**Acting Chairman (Senator Paudie Coffey):** I again thank the officials and wish them a safe journey home.

I propose that the committee now go into private session to conclude some business. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 10 p.m. and adjourned at 10.05 p.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 14 November 2018.