

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS LÍONRAÍ CUMARSÁIDE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

Dé Máirt, 23 Feabhra 2021

Tuesday, 23 February 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 4 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 4 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Joe Carey,	Jerry Buttimer,
Cathal Crowe,	Timmy Dooley.
Michael Lowry,	
Steven Matthews,	
James O'Connor,	
Darren O'Rourke,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú.	

Teachta/Deputy Kieran O'Donnell sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Public Consultation on the National Development Plan: Department of Transport

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senator Craughwell and Deputy Duncan Smith. The purpose of today's meeting is to examine the national development plan with a view to making a submission to Review to Renew, the public consultation on the national development plan. On behalf of the committee, I welcome the following officials from the Department of Transport to today's meeting: Mr. Kenneth Spratt, Secretary General; Ms Ethna Brogan, acting assistant secretary; Ms Joan Curry, principal officer in the finance division; Mr Garret Doocey, principal officer in the area of sustainable mobility investment and policy; and Mr Dominic Mullaney, principal officer in the area of regional and local roads. They are all very welcome and I thank them for attending at such short notice after the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, became unavailable. We look forward to the Minister coming before the committee in the near future. It is extremely important that he appear before us to provide a comprehensive overview of the national development plan. The clerk is in communication with his office. We look forward to his attendance in the very near future.

All witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that 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 or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory with regard to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction. For witnesses attending remotely outside the Leinster House campus, there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege. As such, they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness physically present does. Witnesses participating in this committee session from a jurisdiction outside the State are advised that they should be mindful of domestic law and how it may apply to the evidence they give.

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. I remind members that they are only allowed to participate in this meeting if they are physically located on the Leinster House campus. In this regard, I ask all members, prior to making their contributions, to confirm they are on the grounds of the Leinster House campus.

I welcome those watching this meeting online and inform them that Oireachtas Members and witnesses are accessing this meeting remotely. Only I, as Chairman, and staff essential to the running of the meeting are physically present in the committee room. Due to the unprecedented circumstances arising from Covid and the large number of people attending the meeting remotely, I ask everyone for forbearance should any technical issue arise.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to discuss the review of the national development plan, NDP. As he will know, today's Cabinet meeting had a delayed start time and the Minister, Deputy Ryan, thought it better that I attend the committee meeting to ensure members are updated on the review of the NDP. The Minister sends his apologies and is happy to appear before the committee at the earliest opportunity.

I am joined by my colleagues, whom the Chairman has named, and I confirm that we are all present on the grounds of Leinster House. We are in the one room but appropriately socially distanced. I am not joined by any colleagues from the Minister's other Department, the Depart-

ment of the Environment, Climate and Communications. I will try to help as much as I can on matters pertaining to that Department but I may have to revert on some matters the committee may wish to raise relating to it.

A review of the NDP is timely in view of the events that have taken place, and which are still taking place, since its launch in 2018. As part of the review, the specific remit given to the Department of Transport was to examine the Department's NDP investment plans in the light of the new programme for Government, the completion of regional spatial and economic strategies, climate action commitments and the impacts of Brexit and Covid-19. The review is broad and wide-ranging.

To be successful, a transport development plan needs to have a clear focus on long-term goals but must also be flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances. The national development plan, which is built around outcomes rather than specific projects, gives us the necessary flexibility and adaptability. The primary focus of the NDP is to absorb the estimated 1 million additional citizens who will live in this country by 2040 and to cater for everyone in a sustainable manner. Our Department's priorities are to ensure investment is geared to support the mobility needs of an increasing population, to decarbonise public transport, and to provide appropriate supports and incentives in decarbonising the private transport element of the economy. There is an excellent opportunity in the review of the NDP to accelerate decarbonisation of the transport sector and pivot strongly towards compact growth targets while also building on the progress made to date on improving regional connectivity. I look forward to engaging with the committee today on these interlinked ambitions for transport.

Our Department's submission examines the NDP at a policy level to identify revised strategic priorities rather than entering into a discussion of particular projects. The submission is underpinned by the draft national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI, which replaces the strategic investment framework for land transport, which had been in place since 2016. The primary purpose of the NIFTI will be to support, in a cost-effective and evidence-based manner, the attainment of the national strategic outcomes set out in the national planning framework.

The NIFTI sets out principles, priorities, and an evidence-based framework to inform transport investment decision-making. It sets out our four unranked priorities for transport: decarbonisation, protection and renewal, enhanced regional accessibility, and the sustainable mobility of people and goods in urban areas. These unranked priorities, which I emphasise are all of equal priority, are accompanied by modal and intervention hierarchies to assist in project identification and sequencing and in comparing projects across different transport modes. They are not, however, a substitute for the existing decision-making processes in themselves.

In shaping the Department's budget and investment strategy, our focus will be on ensuring that Ministers have the support and resources they need to focus on delivering the national planning framework's national strategic outcomes, particularly where climate change, land use and transport integration are concerned. The research makes it clear that the most productive strategy the Department can pursue, when the goal is to absorb sustainably a rapidly growing population, is to expand sustainable mobility capacity within our major cities and towns. This primary goal of compact growth inherently complements three other key national strategic outcomes: sustainable mobility; high quality international connectivity; and transition to a low-carbon and climate-resilient society. The mantra of this is first and foremost that we must redouble our efforts to improve the mobility of people and goods within cities, and within towns and villages.

What does compact growth mean in practice when combined with sustainable mobility ambitions? For areas with poor transport connectivity, it may mean adapting existing rail networks to open up neighbouring land banks, and properly integrating housing and land use. It may mean retrofitting roads to implement improved bus services, to provide a fast, reliable, comfortable and sustainable bus and associated cycle network in our major cities and towns. It means that roads are not built just to deliver private vehicle traffic but are evaluated for public transport and active travel capabilities too. Road design and retrofitting will be focused on moving several modes of transport, including cycling and walking, not just on moving cars.

We will improve sustainable access to our city centres. It is very possible this will move away from intense nine to five rush hour peaks to smaller peaks and sustained all-day use, due to the acceleration of remote working during the pandemic. We will align investment to encourage the concept of 15-minute neighbourhoods, so that it will be possible to safely walk or cycle to school, to the shops, or nearby places of employment in the largest cities and smallest urban settlements without relying on a private car. We will improve access to our international gateway airports and ports, which are all located in large conurbations. We will replace our public transport petrol and diesel fleets with low emission vehicle fleets.

As we increase population densities within cities and towns, we will continue to reinforce the need for more efficient inter-urban connections between our towns and cities, and provide the population base and density to develop improved high-quality inter-urban road and rail connections for passengers and freight. We will attract business investment and create jobs as we will have the population densities and ready-made work force to support businesses and enterprise. Rural transport between towns and villages will increasingly become more viable, with key pick-up and drop-off points along the way.

Decarbonisation is of overriding importance right across Government. It is clear decarbonisation, while rightfully seeking to arrest and redress climate change, has become an industrial revolution in its own right. It is as profound as the move from coal and steam power to oil and petrol power. It is about the most productive use of energy. Historically, industrial revolutions were the biggest drivers of productivity. When linked to open trade, they are responsible for increasing living standards in an economically sustainable manner.

The end of a primary energy system which is heavily reliant on fossil fuels is in sight. If we do not pursue sustainable technologies and a sustainable State, and devote significant public resources to this end, we will find ourselves steadily sliding down international productivity and economic rankings sooner rather than later. We will be overtaken by more enterprising countries and lose touch with developments within the EU. We have a duty of care and binding legal commitments as a country to manage our share of the biosphere, to stabilise climate change and mitigate the damage being done by carbon and other polluting emissions.

How will all of this be financed? The scale required to achieve our ambitions will be significant. The most important challenge is, perhaps, not how much we invest, but how we invest it. Our main concerns at this point are as follows: to support our Ministers in ensuring our investment strategy for transport is broadly aligned with the national planning framework, NPF, and the draft national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI; to support our Ministers in ensuring that within our investment strategies decarbonisation ambitions are built into every aspect of them; to ensure decarbonisation ambitions are measurable and quantifiable; and to ensure that at an executive level our programme governance and selection processes are robust, that they are risk managed in such a way as to identify the right projects, and that they accurately estimate and tightly manage the costs and delivery time frames of these projects.

A key task for me is to work with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform during phase 2 of the national development plan, NDP, review to ensure the budget and the capital ceilings for the next five to ten years of project delivery are broadly in line with the cost estimates of projects which we expect to come on stream over this period. At a figure of €2.5 billion for 2021, the present base level of the budget is very good, on paper. However, there are three extremely important caveats to this. The first is that we only reached this level within the last two budgets after a decade in which we invested far below the rate required commensurate with the growth in population and economy. We are, therefore, playing catch-up.

The second caveat is that the annual required baseline share of the budget for protection and renewal of our road and rail networks, which involves the maintenance of assets at a level where they do not deteriorate, is around €1 billion. In practice, this reduces the allocation available for investment in network expansion.

The third caveat is that we know in its present published form the capital budget is not enough to deliver the planned investment programmes coming down the tracks. When we enter discussions on capital ceilings for the next five to ten years, the way in which we address these three caveats will be instrumental in determining the right capital ceilings for network improvement and expansion.

Turning to the main NDP item at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, the national broadband plan, NBP, together with continued investment by commercial telecommunications operators is creating a more digitally connected Ireland. The national broadband plan will ensure that no premises, regardless of how remote it is, will be left without this vital service. Economic growth, jobs and competitiveness, balanced regional development, social inclusion, and environmental protection are all supported by high speed and robust telecommunications networks, which also provide a more equitable and sustainable future allowing rural communities to avail of the opportunities presented by the digital economy.

Data from the Commission for Communications Regulation, ComReg, published late last year showed a year-on-year increase of more than 80,000 subscriptions to fibre-to-the-premises broadband services in Ireland in 2020. This is clear evidence of the demand Irish consumers have for high-capacity connectivity once these services are available. The pace of growth in data usage is set to continue which reinforces the need for high-speed, high-capacity infrastructure. The need for access to high-speed broadband by all people has never been clearer. Recognising this, the programme for Government specifically commits to seek to accelerate the roll out of the national broadband plan. Work is under way to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of the NBP roll-out to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in later years of the current plan to an earlier date. Any change requires detailed technical, commercial and financial analysis.

I hope my remarks have thrown some light on our thinking within the Department of Transport on the review of the NDP. I look forward to providing members with as many answers to their questions as I can over the coming couple of hours.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Spratt. We will now move to members' questions. The first up is Deputy Crowe.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I confirm I am in the Leinster House complex. I thank Mr. Spratt for his overview of the works ongoing in the Department. It is a pity the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, could not be present but his reasons were legitimate. Today is a serious day on

the Covid front in terms of decision making.

Last week, there was a regrettable fiasco involving the appointment of a new chair for the Shannon Group plc. Aaron Ford had been declared the preferred candidate but three hours later his candidacy was withdrawn for reasons known to all of us here. What is the Department's plan to recommence the process to appoint a chair for the group? Is it looking at the candidate who was placed second in the original process or is it going to open things up again? I suggest the Department slows down, ever so slightly, and talks to some of the elected members here, to the chamber of commerce and to people who understand and have a passion for aviation and the industry in the mid west. My preference is that the Department would engage with us at that level and get a grasp of the type of individual we, in the mid west, would like to see at the helm of the Shannon Group. Can Mr. Spratt outline how he and his colleagues in the Department see this matter?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will not say too much on this, but what I will say is that we have a Public Appointments Service process in place which assists us with the identification and selection of board members of State companies and agencies. This process has proven to be invaluable in identifying the knowledge, skills, expertise, competencies and capabilities required in order to serve well on State boards and agencies. It is a process that is tried, tested and trusted. As is the case with all selection processes, it has identified a number of candidates qualified to be the chair of the Shannon Group. The Minister is considering what he will do next. The option is open to him to go with the second placed candidate on the Public Appointments Service order of merit, to commence a new process or do something different in terms of engaging with other parties, as was mentioned.

It is with the Minister at present. The options available have been communicated to him and he is reflecting on those.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: That is good clarification. We should go for the third option outlined by Mr. Spratt. It is important to engage, although not for too long, with elected members here and those who work in the airport who understand aviation and the role of the Shannon Group as a catalyst in the mid west in recent decades and in the coming years, as we try to re-emerge from Covid-19 and its economic ravages. That is where we need to be.

There was welcome news a couple of weeks ago. I am from Meelick and I am glad that phase 1 of the Limerick northern distributor road got the green light from the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and the Department. I am interested in phase 2 of that. It is a road to nowhere without phase 2. Does Mr. Spratt's Department have any plans to progress phase 2 from Meelick, Parteen, Clonlara and on to Limerick and the motorway from Limerick to Cork, which is seen as essential to the west of Ireland? Does the Department have plans for advancing those projects?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I am joined by my colleague, Mr. Dominic Mullaney. Mr. Mullaney has a better sense of what we are doing with each project. That said, I am not sure what level of detail we can get into. However, we will try to answer Deputy Crowe's question on the current state of the projects mentioned as best we can.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I will ask my last few questions while the audio is being rectified, so they can be answered together. There are a few key priorities in my county in terms of the national development plan. I want to put some of them to Mr. Spratt. If he does not have time today, he may come back to me in due course. These priorities include the Shannon town flood embankments and the Killaloe bypass. A contractor has been appointed there but people want

to know if it will progress. It got €4 million funding last week. How will it progress and be built? Blake's Corner and the Ennistymon inner relief road are awaiting An Bord Pleanála approval but I am anxious to hear how Mr. Spratt's Department proposes to advance it.

I refer to a crucial project. Mr. Spratt mentioned airports and the need for better connections with the existing infrastructure in the country. Quite incredibly, there is only one lane of carriageway on the N19 in and out of Shannon Airport. A large scale emergency or anything requiring evacuation is impossible. It is one of the only airports in Europe in that situation, so a dual carriageway right up to the airport terminal is needed.

The N85, which is identified as being of strategic importance in Clare, particularly the stretch around Kilnamona, is awaiting funding from Mr. Spratt's Department. It is on the desk of the Minister, Deputy Ryan. I refer finally to Doolin pier which is a gateway from County Clare and the west of Ireland to the Aran Islands and which is a hugely popular place in our county each summer. It requires upgrades and it is also with Mr. Spratt's Department.

I would like some feedback on those projects. Mr. Spratt may take my earlier comments on the new chairperson role for Shannon Group plc directly to the Minister, Deputy Ryan.

(Interruptions).

Deputy Cathal Crowe: Did I hear Mr. Mullaney say he approved all projects?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: A good try by the Deputy. I will ask Mr. Mullaney to take my chair as there seems to be in a issue with his device. I will let Mr. Mullaney try to deal with as many of the Deputy's questions as possible. I have noted all the projects of interest to the Deputy. We will get an update to him on any of the questions we cannot take now.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: I refer to the questions raised on roads. The first relates to Moyross and the Limerick northern distributor road. While Moyross could act as the first phase of such a road, they were separate schemes. Moyross was designed and approved back in 2011 or so. It has now gotten approval to go to construction. The other northern distributor road is at a much earlier stage and it needs to await the outcome of the ongoing Limerick metropolitan transport study. It will give sight of whether a roads or a public transport solution or some combination is needed in terms of the line protected in the development plan. It is at a much earlier stage. It is important for Moyross to proceed at this time and the other one will continue through the ongoing consultation process.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, has different phases for projects. The M20 is considered as phase 2. Consultants are appointed for phases 1 to 4. Consultants have been appointed for the M20. They are at phase 2 which is the options selection phase. Obviously, it involves ongoing consultations. The most up to date estimate, any new information coming to hand and the option expected to be chosen have to be checked in terms of the national development plan, NDP, review of these projects. It has not gotten to that point yet.

As the Deputy rightly said, a preliminary contract of approximately €1 million was approved for the Killaloe bypass. Early works have been carried out and fencing works are ongoing. Once that and the contract documentation are completed, I expect the council to seek approval to go to tender. It has not gotten to that stage yet. However, there is no indication the project will not go to tender. It will be confirmed, or otherwise, in the NDP review but it is well advanced and the expectation is it will proceed.

Blake's Corner was mentioned. As the Deputy said, it depends on a Bord Pleanála decision, so TII is the relevant party in terms of progressing it. The N19 to Shannon was reclassified as a national road only a few years ago. The last bit was designated as such. Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, is considering that to see what type of works are required to upgrade it. It is not as advanced as other projects mentioned.

The N85 was the last one mentioned. I am not familiar with that project. It does not feature in terms of the NDP project. It may not be of the same scale as the ones mentioned in the NDP but we will have to check the status of that one.

Chairman: I note Mr. Spratt said the Minister was very anxious to come before the committee. I will very much hold him to that. It is extremely disappointing the Minister could not make it today. I note some other Ministers are attending meetings, so the message needs to go back to the Minister that we are in discussions through the clerk. We need him to appear before the committee for the review of the national development plan, NDP. It has to happen, so I ask Mr. Spratt to bring that message back as it is very important to us. I note the Minister's commitment, but we need him to appear before the committee.

I want to discuss the review of the NDP. Mr. Spratt sent the committee two letters, the first on 18 February and the second on 23 February. The committee had asked Mr. Spratt about the review mechanism for the NDP and how it had changed. I draw his attention to the second paragraph on page five of the letter dated 18 February. It reads:

The public consultation on draft NIFTI [the national investment framework for transport in Ireland] is expected to launch in the coming months, with publication of the final framework to follow in Q2 or Q3. However, the framework is sufficiently progressed to have played an important role in the Department's engagement with the NDP Review to date. The Department and its agencies are considering investment with reference to the four priorities and two hierarchies, as well as in relation to the 10 wider National Strategic Outcomes.

That national investment framework for transport in Ireland is to replace the current strategic investment framework for land transport which went out to public consultation in August 2014 and was approved by Cabinet on 15 April 2015. Does the national investment framework for transport in Ireland require approval from Cabinet before it can be regarded as the document to look at projects under the NDP?

Furthermore, Mr. Spratt's response in the letter we received today appears to contradict what he said in the letter of 18 February.

It reads:

Pending public consultation and finalisation of NIFTI, the investment hierarchies are not currently being applied as a requirement of transport project development. If the final version of NIFTI keeps the hierarchies in a similar form to the draft framework, the updated CAF will detail what the future requirement to consider apply the hierarchies in project development will entail. For current purposes, as part of the NDP Review, the use of the hierarchies is simply to capture similar information in a consistent way for a diverse range of projects across the land transport sector.

What is the current status of the strategic investment framework for land transport approved

by Cabinet on 15 April 2015? What is the current status of the draft investment framework for transport in Ireland that is to replace it? Has a steering group been established and who is on it? I note the steering group for the previous strategic investment framework for land transport had among its members Mr. Dominic Mullaney who is with Mr. Spratt today. When was it set up and what were its findings? When is it going out to public consultation? Will it require Cabinet approval?

I note the NDP is currently under review and it is hoped to have it finalised in the summer. We could have a situation where the NDP is finalised prior to the national investment framework for transport in Ireland going out to public consultation, being finalised or being approved by Cabinet. What is the status of the strategic investment framework for land transport document approved by Cabinet on 15 April 2015? What is the status of the national investment framework for transport in Ireland? Does it require Cabinet approval before it becomes part of the process by which the Department of Transport reviews projects under the NDP?

These are technical questions, but Mr. Spratt will appreciate that they are critical to how the NDP will look in the context of projects, the changes under the reviews and the hierarchies. It is quite a different document. Can Mr. Spratt talk about both documents?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: We published the strategic framework for the investment in land transport in Ireland in 2015 so it is now six years old. We felt it was time to update that strategic framework for investment in land transport. Effectively, what we have been working on over the last couple of years is the successor to that strategic framework, which is the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI. The NIFTI is the successor, and new and improved version, of the strategic framework for land transport investment in Ireland. The Chairman is right in stating that the strategic framework for the investment in land transport in Ireland, SFILT, went to Cabinet in 2015. We will be going to Cabinet with the national investment framework for transport in Ireland very soon. It will then go out to public consultation. I should emphasise Deputy-----

Chairman: With due respect, Mr. Spratt, the strategic framework for the investment in land transport in Ireland went out to public consultation prior to going to Cabinet. I feel Mr. Spratt is putting the cart before the horse. NIFTI should go out to public consultation. The process previously was that it went out to public consultation and then came back. Has a steering group been established for the national investment framework for transport in Ireland? Surely it should out go out to public consultation first. Is the document the Department is looking at considering projects under the national development plan? I know I am going into technical detail, but it is very important because there is a seismic shift in the way projects are assessed under the national investment framework for transport in Ireland and the strategic investment framework for land transport, which is currently the Government position. Can Mr. Spratt deal with that issue?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I apologise to the Chairman. We will be going to Government with the finalised NIFTI. The finalised NIFTI will be going out to public consultation prior to it being signed off by Government. However, because of its significance, we will go to Government for information ahead of public consultation. We will bring it to the attention of the Government, ahead of publication, for consultation purposes.

We will go to Government for information, publish for public consultation, take all of the-----

Chairman: That is very different from the process previously adopted for the strategic investment framework for land transport. It was a very democratic document which went out to the public which were allowed it to have their say. It went through due process. Has a steering group been established in respect of the current national investment framework for transport in Ireland document?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: We have a steering group but I suggest that the approaches are similar. We will be going out to public consultation and will take all the feedback public representatives or any members of the public wish to offer. We will reflect on that feedback ahead of going to Government for final decision and sign off. A steering group has been established. I do not know whether Ms Curry, Ms Brogan or Mr. Doocey want to mention who is on that steering group?

Chairman: When was it established?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: Mr. Doocey can give an update on the members of the steering group.

Chairman: We have limited time. What is the role of the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, which is not Government policy, in the current review of the national development plan?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will pass over to Ms Curry to give the Chairman a bit more detail but essentially the national investment framework for transport in Ireland allows us to look at all 158 projects which are at various stages of development at the moment. It will be important for us to filter those projects. We have the programme for Government and the climate action plan. It will be important for us to bring all of our sectoral knowledge analysis to bear when we look at those 158 projects in full. It is a framework, through which we filter all those projects in accordance with various priorities.

Chairman: What is the role of the strategic framework for the investment in land transport document, which is current Government policy? What role does that play in the national development plan review?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: When the Chairman says it is current Government policy-----

Chairman: It was approved by Cabinet on 15 April 2015. The national investment framework for Transport Ireland has not been approved; it is not Government policy. It is a draft document that should go out for public consultation. The question is whether the Department is using a draft document as the basis on which to review the national development plan which has not gone out to public consultation as distinct from using the strategic framework for the investment in land transport document which is currently Government policy, approved by Cabinet. It is a pretty straightforward question. Which is it?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: As the Chairman said, the NIFTI is not yet Government policy; it has not yet been approved by Government. We have the SFILT, which is the predecessor of the NIFTI. Projects being assessed now are assessed using the existing SFILT. Once the NIFTI succeeds it and becomes the successor to the SFILT, that document will be used when considering projects. Ms Curry might like to add some details to that.

Chairman: I want to move on to other colleagues. Who is on the steering group? That is all I want to know, and I will conclude at that.

Mr. Garret Doocey: The steering group for NIFTI is comprised of relevant departmental colleagues from the Department of Transport and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It is chaired at assistant secretary level. I am on it, as is my colleague Mr Mullaney. The principal officer in our strategic research analysis division is also on it. As we mentioned, there is an external representative, one of our colleagues from the Custom House. It is a similar structure to that which would have been-----

Chairman: How long has it been established?

Mr. Garret Doocey: The NIFTI was formerly PLUTO and evolved into NIFTI. I believe it was set up at about the time of the finalisation of the national planning framework, but I would need to confirm that.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the witnesses. I have a quick follow-up question for Mr. Spratt on that. He said that the Department's submission to the national development plan was considered under the older framework and not the NIFTI. The Chairman mentioned the possibility that the national development plan is adopted before the NIFTI is adopted. What does that mean for the Department's submission and for the NDP?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will hand over to my colleague Ms Curry who is our expert on the finance side and on all matters relating to our NDP submission.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I have a related question on the common appraisal framework, CAF, and the public spending code. Are they being adapted and updated?

Ms Joan Curry: I will deal with the first question on the NIFTI and the SFILT. Both SFILT and NIFTI are used in the analysis of the projects that are presented as solutions to transport challenges. It is at the stage that a solution is being presented and how that gets analysed in terms of them progressing into the project gates and through the project system. It is a very particular tool. In drafting the national development plan and the review, we are looking at it from a broader context. We are not into the detail at present where the specific costs or the individual analysis will be, especially when we are looking at ranges of potential solutions to the challenges that are being presented. As the projects come for further analysis, the mechanism of the day as approved by Government will be used to analyse and then progress it through the public spending code gates and so on.

Regarding the review element of the national development plan that we are currently looking at, on a broad range we are checking to see whether the wider range of objectives or priorities as stated in the draft NIFTI would or could be met. There is no suggestion that they are in or out. It is just used as a broad tool. The priorities in both SFILT and NIFTI are being advanced. Therefore, directionally they are still the same and we are confident that they are aligned from that perspective.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I want to mention two projects that have been through the common appraisal framework and the public spending code, the Navan rail project and the western rail corridor. The ground seems to have shifted on how those projects should be assessed given everything that has been said heretofore. Will that be the case? How might that come about in practice?

Ms Joan Curry: If projects are being re-presented for assessment, the tool at the point in time will be applied. If they are in the process already, I imagine they will proceed. If they are coming to a new stage of it at a point in time when NIFTI is approved by Government, it

is possible there will be some revision. As projects come on stream, they will be subject to the analysis tools and the investments decisions on the day.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Mr. Spratt said it was important that the money is spent well. Of course, the overall pot of money will be important. Does he have information on that? I read some news reports suggesting that the Department might need to return funding due to how funding works on an annual basis. Is that the case? Are there concerns over whether the Department will be able to use its budget?

There is enormous ambition for transport, from the Minister and the Government. Will the Department and the various State agencies, including the NTA and TII, be fit to deliver on this ambition? Are there plans to expand their capacity and make them fit for purpose?

Ms Joan Curry: I will answer the first question and ask the Secretary General to reply to the second. From a finance perspective, we track the expenditure as it progresses month-by-month. In 2020 we had a larger than normal return to the Exchequer. We also had a capital carryover. We certainly reserved funds within the legislative parameters in order to fund projects in 2021. It is always the ambition of the Department to progress projects and spend the funds that are made available to it. We make every effort and this year will be no different.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will take the capacity question. While we would all like additional resources as things stand, we believe TII, the NTA and the Department are resourced sufficiently. It will, of course, depend on what comes out of the final review of the NDP as regards the projects that are planned, but as it stands we believe the NTA and TII are sufficiently resourced to progress the projects we anticipate. If additional resources are required, we will engage with the agencies on that with a view to ensuring we make as much progress as possible, on as many projects as possible, as quickly as possible.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I thank Mr. Spratt. I concur with my colleague Deputy Cathal Crowe and others about the importance of getting it right on the appointment of a chairperson for the Shannon Group. There needs to be more engagement and we should not rush the fences.

An interim chairperson for the Irish Aviation Authority was recently appointed. Was that a decision of the Department or was it a political decision?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: Appointments to chairperson positions are political decisions. We needed to find a chairperson in an interregnum period. As the Senator will probably be aware, the Irish Aviation Authority is being separated into a regulator and an air navigation services provider. That is all likely to happen once the legislation goes through and-----

Senator Timmy Dooley: What was the process for the appointment of an interim chairperson?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: The chairperson of the IAA resigned earlier than expected. We needed to find a chairperson-----

Senator Timmy Dooley: What was the process? I have only seven minutes and need Mr. Spratt to be succinct, if he can.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: The options facing the Minister were that we go through a Public Appointments Service process or he could try to identify somebody who would have the required knowledge, skills, expertise, competence and capability. He decided that a number of people

could fill that role and he asked the person who has accepted the post to be the chairperson.

Senator Timmy Dooley: Was anybody from the existing board approached or asked?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: As I understand it, no.

Senator Timmy Dooley: That is useful information. I thank Mr. Spratt for his presentation, which was important. In the context of priorities for investment in transport and projects generally, there are various frameworks and I am starting to lose track of all the acronyms around government at the moment. It is mind-boggling, but I understand they must exist in order for a strategic approach to be taken.

It is worth remembering that, already, 5 million people live in the State, and we are seeking over the next 20 years to prioritise investment to accommodate an increase of 1 million, while also recognising the necessity to decarbonise. I am somewhat concerned that the shift is wholly towards public transport. I accept that is not the case but we must be mindful of communities that already live and exist in the way they do. When we decarbonise and move from petrol and diesel to electric, those communities will still need significant roadways. The current crop of population, in many cases, will not move to public transport.

I understand that the patterns of development from here on will be in higher densities and brown-field sites in larger urban areas, with the capacity to utilise public transport, but we must also be mindful in our priorities of some of the projects in the more rural areas, where people live in a dispersed pattern and in villages and towns. Their experience at the moment is relatively poor in some cases, although there have been some tremendous advances. We cannot concentrate everything on the increase of 1 million citizens and forget, to some extent, about the difficulties that the existing 5 million have.

My colleague and others talked about the bypass of Killaloe, which is one such really important project. We all have concerns that it might just slip off the desk. When the current vehicular traffic is taken off the existing streets, these villages and towns will be given a chance to breathe, which will encourage more people to come back and to live within the villages, and will to some extent reduce the vehicular traffic. There is a chicken-and-egg scenario and we have to be careful with it. Mr. Spratt might comment on that.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will ask my colleague Mr. Mullaney to comment on that. I accept all of the Senator's comments. It is very important for us to ensure that our transport infrastructure provides mobility for everybody, including those who live in regional and rural areas, towns and villages throughout the country. That is uppermost in our minds. Mr. Mullaney might comment on the second part of the question.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: In respect of the Killaloe bypass, which the Senator mentioned, the preliminary contract is progressing and is due to progress further when the contract documents have been completed. The Minister had a discussion with me about projects to address congestion in towns and he has recently given approval to a project in Athy going to tender. We have not got to the point of a main tender in respect of Killaloe just yet, but judging by my conversation with him, he is very open to relieving traffic congestion within towns. I do not envisage that the NDP will contain no such bypasses. Obviously, there are commitments in the programme for Government relating to the 2:1 ratio and so on. It is a question of evaluating what projects are ready to go, which have got approval from An Bord Pleanála, what the estimated cost is and to confirm they are still good value for money.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I thank the witnesses for their attendance. Given the impact that Covid-19 is having on the economic fortunes of the country, what impact will it have on funding for the new national development plan? Mr. Spratt spoke about the issue of remote working. What impact will that have on the national development plan?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: Covid-19 has resulted in increased remote working and learning but we need to remember that travel for work accounts for less than one quarter of all travel. Having said that, the National Transport Authority has very good models that it uses to predict and forecast transport demand. While Covid-19 will have an impact on future travel demand, the initial indications from the modelling the NTA and TII have done are that demand for transport and travel will still increase, albeit at a slower rate. We will need to run all our proposed projects through the modelling processes to ensure that the cost-benefit analyses hold up, and we are very conscious of that. As to the impact of Covid-19 on the funding available for the national development plan, NDP, we have to wait and see what comes out of the NDP process. We have made a fairly detailed submission to our colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and will engage with it over the coming months. We know that we will need more money than what was set out in the original NDP and these will be the series of conversations we will have with the Department over the coming months, ahead of the final publication of the revised NDP in the middle of the year.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: As regards international connectivity, given the impact Covid-19 has had on us from both a tourism and aviation perspective, has there been discussions in Government and in Mr. Spratt's Department as to how Cork and Shannon Airports can be enhanced *vis-à-vis* Dublin Airport? We need to see investment in our airports and in our ports, as we have seen from Brexit. We are an island nation and aviation is a central to us as a nation. Can Mr. Spratt comment on this point, please?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: When the crisis hit, I was leading the tourism and sport functions within the Department, so we were very much at the coalface as to the immediate impact of Covid-19. We were first and hardest hit. My heart goes out to colleagues in the tourism industry, in particular.

As regards aviation, the solution has three parts to it. First, we have to get the virus under control not just in Ireland but throughout Europe and the world in a way that will allow international travel to restart. Thankfully, we have the vaccination programme and will be able to make significant progress over the first, second and third quarters, but it will be quarter 3, or at least towards the end of the second quarter, before we start to see some sort of pick up in international travel. Colleagues in the aviation industry are hoping that the third quarter will allow a fairly significant increase in international travel. We must get the virus under control.

The second thing we must do, as the Senator quite rightly pointed out, is to ensure that our airports continue to be fit for current but also for future purpose. We have made some investments and have committed to making quite significant investments in the airports in Cork and Shannon, which the Senator mentioned. We are keeping a very close eye on that. If it is the case that additional investment is required, that is something that we are happy to consider. As I said, we are liaising very closely with the regional airports.

The third thing we need to do is to ensure that incentives, if they are needed, are in place for the airlines that come through in order to get more people flying again and, in particular, flying into this country. It is not just about doing what we can for the airlines but it is also about doing what we can for the tourism sector here in Ireland.

It is a three-part solution which in summary is to get the virus under control, make sure the airports are fit for present and future purposes and ensure the airlines can continue to fly.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: My final question is to Mr. Spratt, again. In the context of his reply, which I welcome, has any consideration been given to the resurrection of the aviation recovery task force which reported last summer. As we know, things have changed significantly since then. Has the Department given any thought to having a new recovery task force? I wish to thank Mr. Spratt for his time this afternoon.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: Not at all, Senator.

We continue to engage bilaterally with members of the task force but we very much need to get the virus under control before we can start to talk about what other things we might put in place in order to incentivise and rejuvenate the international aviation sector. While we have not had a meeting of the task force in recent weeks, once we get the virus under control, we will then need to engage collectively with the aviation sector. We would be happy to reconvene a meeting of the task force, or have it do so itself, in order to look at actions we could execute in order to get things going to the level we would like.

Chairman: I thank Senator Buttimer and call Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCathaoirleach. I have a question that I am not sure if Mr. Spratt is necessarily going to be able to answer but, in fairness, he brought the issue up. It relates to the national broadband plan. We all understand the importance of it, particularly in the context of Covid-19, etc. I met National Broadband Ireland, NBI, within the last fortnight and I raised this issue as part of a Topical Issue debate in the Dáil. I asked NBI to provide me with a note. It said that there are specific issues, some of which relate to local government, which need to be dealt with in order to facilitate an acceleration. I gave a copy of this note not only to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications but to the Tánaiste who said he was going to be having a meeting with NBI in the near future.

These are issues that need to be dealt with as quickly as possible and I restate them here. Some of them are very simple. There was an issue in respect of Safe Pass but I believe that has now been dealt with. This was holding up contractors from abroad from coming in. There may be a wider issue in that we are taking contractors from abroad. I was led to believe that they were going through quarantine. If, however, there is a skill set shortage, that is also something that we need to look at in our planning for the future.

Like every other part of society, there was an issue where teams were held up due to Covid-19. This slowdown means they need some form of a moratorium as regards tree or hedge-row trimming. There may be options within the Wildlife (Amendment) Act which will allow for this.

NBI needs clarity on this but one of the big issues it had was that it needed a faster roll-out of the section 254 guidelines on the erection of poles, which is something that must be issued to all local authorities and which allows for a speedy planning process.

On road opening licences, NBI said it has difficulties in that it may have an initial plan and everything has been allowed for, but that a route may need to be changed. Changing a route could mean a new permission needs to be applied for which can take anything from days up to eight weeks. That is an issue both with local authorities and with Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. What it is really talking about is a permitting or licensing system that will allow

for this to happen in real time and that will allow NBI to sign off with the local authority or TII towards the end of the process.

We are dealing with something people and the Minister are talking about as being as important as rural electrification, so anything that needs to be done has to be done. We are told that all areas of Government are willing to put their shoulders to the wheel to deliver on this, so we need to ensure it happens. All I need to know is that this is being dealt with and that there will be some sort of streamlined process to deal with it. This is probably not the place to deal with it and nor is the Dáil but we have the tools. I do not know what sort of an answer Mr. Spratt can give me on this issue but I need it to be moved on.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I thank the Deputy. He is correct in that this is an issue that is relevant to my counterpart in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. I will make contact with him immediately after this session to let him know the Deputy raised this issue and that it is of serious concern to him. I will ask his office to contact the Deputy directly, so that he can get from the Deputy whatever material he has. This can be followed up at Secretary General level in order to get some status update for the Deputy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I really appreciate that. I have sent the material on to the Minister's office but I have no difficulty in sending on this information again. As opposed to sending on my own notes, I made a point of providing the notes provided to me by NBI so that nothing would be lost in translation as sometimes people say I am not always as clear as I should be.

I will move on to high quality international connectivity and beyond that to connectivity on this island, given the issues we have had. We have had conversations before on the impact of the pandemic and of Brexit. I know the Department would have had a view that a huge number of issues were caused by a lack of preparation in Britain, not only at governmental level but also at company level. I know issues were brought to the Department and the Revenue Commissioners by hauliers and people involved in the movement of freight. Last week at this committee, I asked representatives of Rosslare Europort about those issues. They said an awful lot had been dealt with but the added cost is obviously an issue. Mr. Spratt might comment also on any other wider planning we have regarding Brexit.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I thank the Deputy. There is no doubt about it. While we in this country were getting Brexit-ready for approximately two years, and while every politician was trying to ensure his or her constituents were alert to what needed to be done to get Brexit-ready, it is very clear that the same message was not being given in GB.

We have found that GB exporters into the European Union were not at all prepared, or at least the vast majority were not prepared, for what emerged on 1 January this year. It is the case that Irish exporters into Britain were very well-prepared and knew what they needed to do in terms of complying with the new customs requirements over there. However, GB exporters into the European Union and into Ireland were not ready for the application of the European Union customs code. That gave rise to all sorts of problems in that people did not have the required Revenue documentation prepared, which prevented them from actually boarding ferries. It meant that hauliers and trucks were refused access and refused boarding onto ferries. The preparations that were put in place by the Revenue Commissioners, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the ports here in Ireland meant that problems were identified in GB rather than at our ports.

We are continuing to engage with the ferry companies, hauliers and logistics companies to

see how we can ensure we make the importation of goods from GB as smooth as possible. The hauliers and logistics, freight and ferry companies understand this inside out. They really understand their business and have been trying as best they can to engage with the GB exporters. It is still the case, however, that some of the GB exporters have not got the expertise in place from a customs clearance perspective. It is still the case that freight movements from the island of Britain to Ireland are significantly down on what they would normally be. We are, however, continuing to engage as best we can. Government is encouraging the Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to engage and liaise as best they can with the hauliers, freight and logistic companies and exporters to try to get that back to some sort of normality. I have to say, however, that the Revenue Commissioners have an obligation to ensure they protect the Single Market and apply the European Union customs code. They are doing that in a way they would like to be as flexible as possible, but there is only so much they can do.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept that Brexit is a disaster, but Mr. Spratt happy enough that everything is being done that can be done at this end to facilitate hauliers, ferry companies and all the rest of it?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: We are trying. We met with the ferry companies last week and we are meeting with them again to see what else we might be able to do. A meeting was held with me and my counterpart in the Revenue Commissioners, Mr. Gerry Harrahill, and the Secretary General at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Mr. Brendan Gleeson. The three of us met with the chief executives of the ferry companies last week. There was not much great news in terms of additional things we could do at that meeting. However, we want to meet with them again next week to take stock of the developments and see if there is anything else we might be able to do.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: On cross-Border planning with regard to Review to Renew, Mr. Jim Meade from Iarnród Éireann appeared before the committee and spoke about cross-Border planning regarding rail. That seems to be moving on. It is not the timeline I would like to see on it, particularly as regards the Enterprise service between Dublin and Belfast. He spoke about how pricing will also be looked at and that he was dealing with the National Transport Authority, NTA. However, I am also thinking of big cross-Border projects such as the Narrow Water Bridge project and the likes of the A5. It is important that general planning is taken into account. We are an island here. I would appreciate if Mr. Spratt could give an update on that.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will ask my colleague, Mr. Doocey, who would be most expert of us on that, to come in.

Mr. Garret Doocey: I thank the Deputy for the question. I volunteered myself before the Deputy finished his question so there are some aspects of it that I may need to pass back to Mr. Spratt in terms of the A5 project and the Narrow Water Bridge. However, I can certainly give an outline based on my knowledge of it as well and the work that is under way in terms of the North South Ministerial Council and sectoral meetings, etc.

In terms of rail connectivity, the Deputy mentioned his conversation last week with Mr. Meade of Irish Rail. A number of initiatives are under way with regard to rail, as the Deputy is probably aware. Discussions have been ongoing, both in terms of the rail companies and at a departmental level between ourselves and our colleagues in the Department for Infrastructure in Belfast, as regards the upgrade and expansion of the Enterprise service. We understand a proposal is being favourably reviewed at the minute by the relevant EU body. We expect that we

will see some progress regarding that over the funding period 2021 to 2027. That will require additional support through our national development plan, NDP, review as well. It is, however, of significant assistance to us in terms of that project.

Separate to that, there are also ongoing discussions with our colleagues in Belfast as regards the proposed strategic rail review, which is looking at the railway sector on the island of Ireland in its entirety and considering what elements of the rail network might be suitable for higher speed rail in the future. Obviously, a prime candidate for that is what is traditionally known as the core corridor, that is, the Dublin-Belfast corridor. That is another aspect of ongoing work we have close engagement with our colleagues in Belfast on.

I will hand over to Mr. Mullaney, who will fill the Deputy in on the A5 project and Narrow Water Bridge aspects.

Chairman: I am conscious of other members. I will ask Mr. Mullaney to be brief.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: Regarding the A5 project, essentially, we are in the hands of the Northern Ireland people. It is a planning issue. A second inquiry was held and an interim inspectorate report is coming from that inquiry. It is with the Minister, Nichola Mallon, up there. Essentially, we are dependent on the planning obstacles being cleared and the legal obstacles being overcome before it can proceed. We have made provision for it in our budget, but obviously we have no direct control over it.

In terms of the Narrow Water Bridge, different options are being looked at and there have been recent meetings between the Minister and his counterpart. Once again, there are discussions as to what type of bridge should be built, for example, should it be an opening span and should it be high level or low level. These issues have not been put to bed yet but it may well be that the next stage will be to engage a consultant to examine all these various issues in more detail so political decisions can then be made on them.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank the witnesses for their attendance and submissions in advance. National and international objectives are to reduce CO2 emissions by 51% and onwards then towards carbon neutrality. That requires us to look at things we have done in the past in a completely different way. That includes transport and ways we might have looked at things in 2015 and decisions that were made then. We have agreed to that and it is in the programme for Government. Many governments throughout Europe have agreed to and are following the science on that. The Department of Transport should be no different. How do the Department officials compare the cost-benefit analysis of a rail project with a road project? By this I mean the carbon calculated for the production or construction of the project plus the carbon output that would be locked in by its construction and the carbon emissions over the lifetime of the project. It would mean a comparison between pouring hundreds of kilometres of tarmac and new concrete as against investment in a rail project, increasing rail frequency on an existing rail line or reopening a rail line that may have been closed in the past.

Mr. Garret Doocey: I thank the Deputy for the question. In the context of project appraisal, the issue of carbon savings and carbon emissions forms part of the quantified analysis of every preliminary business case submitted to the Department. The business cases go through the public spending code decision gates for detailed business cases and, prior to that, procurement strategy. As they come through the project decision gates, the business cases that are developed for each of our projects are required under the public spending code and the common appraisal framework to demonstrate and quantify their carbon emission savings. The earlier stage may

be somewhat linked to some of the Deputy's thoughts in his question. This is where we would see elements of the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI, coming into play because it allows us to take a whole-of-transport perspective on various issues and to consider within a common framework what various interventions could do in those investment hierarchies. Once a project enters an actual appraisal process, this is elaborated on and it goes into much more granular detail. There is a dual aspect to it.

Deputy Steven Matthews: Does the Department apply a cost per tonne of carbon to each project or is this too simplistic a way to look at it?

Mr. Garret Doocey: Various parameter values are set out in the common appraisal framework developed under the overarching public spending code framework. I do not have the values to hand but specific parameter values are established in the common appraisal framework and public spending code that must be applied to all transport projects and programmes.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank Mr. Doocey. To go back to earlier comments about rural transport, investment in rural transport is critical and it requires compact growth of these towns so we have the ability to provide viable services. We cannot leave rural Ireland as car dependent and locked into car use. We need to have compact growth in our towns and villages so that rural bus services and linkages to other transport hubs become viable. This requires action at local level on zoning when local authorities carry out their planning processes. This is critical. There needs to be common purpose between transport planning and land use planning. My feeling is that while perhaps they have not gone in separate directions in the past they have not always spoken to each other. I saw it in Wicklow recently with regard to the regional spatial economic strategy, when we could not include the railway in how we would look at the N11 upgrade.

Bypasses will be necessary because they can bring a bit of life and vitality and put people first in town centres where we can remove the traffic that is choking town centres. Where they are necessary, the current model seems to be the type 2 dual carriageway bypass. Would the Department consider that there might be a requirement to look at others such as type 3, which is the 2+1 carriageway method, that might have slower speeds but would include a safety measure and would be cheaper? Do the witnesses think we need to reconsider the bypass design model we have?

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: While in one sense the type 3 bypass might seem attractive, it has many disadvantages in so far as it switches from two lanes back to one. The difference between a type 2 bypass and the 2+2 is 4 m or 5 m of cross section. A lot is lost by going to the 2+1. The 2+1 was used in certain situations when retrofitting certain roads but I am not sure it will be the preferred type in future. We have to look very closely at whether a single carriageway is sufficient before we go to a 2+2 or a dual carriageway. Perhaps we have to look at the ultimate capacity of a single carriageway because there are towns that would benefit from a bypass but it does not have to be a new dual carriageway or motorway from end to end along a route to give relief to a town. This is something that will have to come into the equation when considering the scope of a road project. Perhaps we also have to worry that if we provide a dual carriageway to cater for future capacity there is the old adage that traffic will always come along to fill what is built and it is self-fulfilling. It is only when projects are individually examined and local needs are looked at that we can make decisions on these.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank Mr. Mullaney and I get what he is saying with regard to the 2+1 meaning a reduction of only 5 m. However, depending on the length of the bypass

it can be quite expensive. The Transport Infrastructure Ireland document submitted to us recently included the costs of some road projects. Even if we were to reduce the cost of a bypass by 20%, there would be an accumulative saving. Slowing down speeds is not such a bad thing either in terms of emissions. As Mr. Mullaney pointed out quite rightly, we have to be aware of induced demand. If a big flashy two-lane dual carriageway is built, it will induce demand. It will not achieve the purpose of reducing emissions, but will encourage more car usage. I suggest even those smaller savings could be invested in public transport systems for the rural areas and rural towns we will be bypassing, which would serve a greater population and would be of better benefit in the public interest.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: To pick up on the Deputy's remarks on the importance of land use, planning and transport planning, it is the case that quite a lot of our development is road-led development. We are very keen to do as much as we can to switch away from road-led development to sustainable mobility-led development. Obviously it will be a combination of road and sustainable mobility but we link in very closely with our colleagues at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, citing them in our thinking and our submission with regard to the national development plan, to ensure we are aligned on it. We are trying to make as much use as possible of the approaches to transport development and land use.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank Mr Spratt. It is encouraging to see greater consideration of transport-oriented development. I see there is progress being made in this area and I acknowledge it.

Deputy Joe Carey: I confirm I am in the campus of Leinster House. The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has committed to meeting the Shannon Airport Oireachtas group later this week to discuss the issues on the appointment of the chair of the Shannon Group. I very much welcome this and I look forward to the Minister honouring this commitment. We are an island nation and air connectivity is critical. Several weeks ago, we heard from the Irish Air Line Pilots Association, IALPA, which made the point that last year was extremely difficult for the aviation industry and a second year with very little revenue coming in will be fatal for the industry. Its representatives also made the point that other jurisdictions and governments have stepped up and capitalised airlines. Lufthansa got €10 billion, Air France got €7 billion and BA got €2.5 billion. Even the UK Government has provided Ryanair with a loan of €670 million, given the impact and the influence that airline has on its economy. I welcome the fact the State has offered or given a loan to Aer Lingus over three years but there is need for State intervention and capitalisation of our airlines, Aer Lingus and Ryanair. I ask Mr. Spratt has he had engagement with the airlines in this regard. To what extent will the Department capitalise airlines to make sure they survive because they are in terminal decline and are burning cash? The reality is we will not have an airline industry unless we have State support. That approach has been taken by other jurisdictions. I would like to hear from Mr. Spratt on that.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I thank the Deputy for that. We are staying as tight and as close as we can to the airlines. We are trying to understand the challenges they are facing. They asked us to help them with their engagements with regard to the recent loan they secured. It took quite some time for the discussions and the negotiations on that loan to come to fruition. Thankfully, that loan has now been secured by Aer Lingus. We were happy to help where we could on that, albeit that we did not do a huge amount other than encourage the parties to engage.

Obviously, it is a competitive marketplace. It is a matter for the airlines to do whatever it is they need to do to raise the capital they need should they be able to do that. So far, the airlines with which we have engaged have been able to find their own solutions. It is important for us

as civil servants to be mindful of the need to protect public moneys and the public purse and that is something that we are very mindful of. Obviously, our colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform would be very mindful of that as well. While it is the case that we are engaging with the airlines on the challenges they are facing, there is only so much we can do given that it is a competitive marketplace.

As I mentioned at the outset, the solution to the aviation sector is to get the virus under control so that we can get people flying again. That is where the Government's strong efforts are at present. The other two parts of that solution are making sure our airports are fit for present and future purposes, and making sure the airlines continue to fly with some sort of incentive schemes when it is the case that people are able to fly again. We will be working closely with the airlines on that third part of the solution.

Deputy Joe Carey: Going back to Mr. Spratt's opening statement, what role has the strategy investment framework for land transport in the current review of the national development plan? Equally, what role, if any, does the new national investment framework for transport in Ireland play?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I might hand over to Ms Curry, who is our expert on the two frameworks: the strategy investment framework for land transport, SIFLT, which is the existing one, and the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI, which is the successor which is being finalised at present.

Ms Joan Curry: The SIFLT and the NIFTI, as it progresses through its public consultation and, hopefully, through the Government approval phase, are the two tools that are used in the assessment of the projects when they are presented for analysis at the point in time where there are solutions being generated for a particular transport problem.

In terms of our review of the national development plan, NDP, we are looking at it more broadly. We are looking at the suite of potential solutions or projects that could address and deal with the priorities that the programme for Government, the national planning framework, NPF, and the climate action plan have set out for us in terms of targets. We have used the framework of NIFTI just as a general lens through which all of the projects are being looked at from a comparable basis. They are not being assessed in terms of progress, approval or otherwise. It is just that they are being looked at through a common lens. When the time comes for any of those projects to come on stream as solutions to a transport challenge of the time, they will progress through either SIFLT or NIFTI, depending on the point in time they come on stream. In the context of the NDP, NIFTI, which is broadly aligned from an investment priority perspective, is just ensuring that the projects from a general speech are capable of being prepared in a common filter.

Chairman: Ms Curry's reception was very poor. I would say further contributors will have to check when they speak first. We did not pick up many of the comments. Does Deputy Carey wish to proceed with another question?

Deputy Joe Carey: The NIFTI one has not yet gone out to public consultation and it is forming the basis of a review of the national development plan. It has not gone to Cabinet and it has not got Cabinet approval. How can it play a role when it has not gone through that formal process?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: We have sent in our submission at this stage to the Department of

Public Expenditure and Reform, but there are two elements projects that are being considered need to go through. The first is either the SIFLT or the NIFTI, that is, the investment framework. The second is the detailed emissions modelling. We need to understand what the emissions impacts are of projects. Another piece of work that we will have to do, by the way, is demand management, that is, the kinds of things we can do to reduce demand. I guess we have been trying and not succeeding - my apologies for that - to emphasise that all of these projects will be put through one of those frameworks. If it is the case that the NIFTI continues through to public consultation, gets signed off on by Government and gets published, that would be the framework that is in place. That is the framework-----

Deputy Joe Carey: With respect, there is a commitment to have the national development plan reviewed by the second quarter of this year. If one looks at the NIFTI process, it has not even gone out to public consultation yet and it is still having a bearing on the review of this critical plan.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: We have not used NIFTI to filter our NDP review. Our submission was based on what the problems are and what, at a high level, the possible solutions are. NIFTI comes in much later as a project is-----

Chairman: Sorry, can I interrupt in that context? In the Department's submission, in its letter of 18 February, Mr. Spratt states that the outcome will be apparent in the Department's own forthcoming submission in the following manner and that the impact of the Department's draft sectoral strategy, the NIFTI, will be set out in detail. It makes no reference to the strategic investment framework for land transportation. The question Deputy Carey was asking, which others, including Deputy O'Rourke, and I were also asking, was whether the national development plan, with its many key projects, could be revised based on the Department's use of the NIFTI document prior to the NIFTI plan going out for public consultation and prior to its being adopted formally by the Government. Could the national development plan be reviewed and finalised prior to NIFTI becoming Government policy, yet with NIFTI being a key, dominant feature of the Department's assessment of projects?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: That cannot happen. It will not happen.

Chairman: Could the national development plan be revised prior to the NIFTI plan going out for public consultation?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: "No" is the short answer.

Chairman: How can Mr. Spratt guarantee that when he is saying NIFTI is to go out for public consultation only in the second or third quarter? We have been told that the national development plan is expected to be revised by the summer.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: NIFTI will be going out for public consultation in this quarter, before the end of March. It will probably be out for public consultation for four weeks. We expect it to be out for public consultation before the end of March, and we will be looking for replies before the end of April. That is our intention. We will have received the inputs by the end of April and we expect to have the NIFTI published before the national development plan is finalised and published.

Chairman: Is the Secretary General comfortable with providing the committee with a copy of his submission?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I can check with the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform whether it would be appropriate to provide to the committee a copy of our submission at this stage. If it is acceptable to them, it would be no problem.

Chairman: Does Deputy Carey wish to conclude?

Deputy Joe Carey: I, too, would like a copy of the submission. I thank the Chairman for allowing me to contribute and I thank Mr. Spratt for his engagement.

Deputy James O'Connor: I confirm I am within the Leinster House complex. It is great to have the Secretary General here again. I thank him and his officials for participating.

This national development plan process is probably the most important since the foundation of the State, or since such plans were implemented, particularly given that we are facing an unprecedented climate emergency, a major transition towards electric vehicles and the ramifications of a pandemic for our transport infrastructure, on land, sea and air, in the context of expanding global trade and a number of other factors that are having an enormous impact on transport and logistics in Ireland. Therefore, the discussion we want to have with Mr. Spratt is critical.

In recent days, there have been very interesting proposals from the UK on the prospect of a direct connection between Great Britain and the island of Ireland in the North. Did the Department have any discussion yet with its British counterpart on the potential, under our national development plan, to liaise with the British Government on the potential for a direct land connection, via a tunnel or whatever is being proposed, that would link UK transport infrastructure to ours in the Republic?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will ask my colleague Mr. Garret Doocey to take that question.

Mr. Garret Doocey: I thank the Deputy for the question. On the proposal by the UK government, there was a high-level meeting a number of weeks ago between the Minister and Sir Peter Hendy, chairperson of the UK connectivity review project. I am not quite sure of the title of the group. At the meeting, Sir Hendy would have referred to the work he is required to undertake on behalf of the UK Government. There has been no formal request for our thoughts on the proposal other than the engagement at ministerial level with Sir Hendy.

As I said earlier, we are about to launch a strategic review of the rail network of the island of Ireland. There may be an opportunity in that review to consider future improvements to the rail network. We are engaging on that issue.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank Mr. Doocey. I heard quite a bit of the earlier contribution on the rail review. It will be quite interesting. As Fianna Fáil transport spokesperson, I suggest that the prospect of utilising the review to link our rail network to that of the UK should be considered strongly. There were strong proposals on Beaufort's Dyke in the Irish Sea. I am aware issues arise there over the dumping of munitions from the Second World War and the dumping of hazardous waste. The infrastructure project is a very significant one, and we should not waste an opportunity to have eventually a direct connection between places such as Edinburgh and Glasgow and the rail network here in Ireland.

My next question is for Mr. Doocey, if that is acceptable to Mr. Spratt. Does the Department feel it is sustainable to continue having a rail network that is divided in that passengers who arrive by train in Heuston from all over the south and east cannot connect directly with Connolly

Station? That is a major stumbling block. It does not make a great deal of sense to me if we are to be considering the possibility of having high-speed rail connections. Would it not make sense to have a multi-city system whereby a passenger could get on a train in Cork and go all the way to Belfast directly without having to change or get a Luas across the city? There were plans for an interconnector based on the DART. There has still been no redevelopment despite plans to go back to the drawing board in this regard, but I would not mind hearing the Department's thoughts on having a direct connection between the Heuston and Connolly lines.

Mr. Garret Doocey: There are two aspects to the question. We consider those sorts of issues to fall within the strategic rail review, which we hope to launch this year. Aspects such as interurban connectivity, regional connectivity, connectivity to our ports and airports, and the potential for freight all fall within what we hope will be examined as part of the strategic rail review. Regarding a connection between Heuston and Connolly, the Luas line is already in place, obviously, but I realise that is not exactly what the Deputy was talking about in outlining his concept of interconnectivity. However, we hope to capture what he is talking about in our strategic rail review, which will be a significant review of the rail network and the opportunities it provides to us.

Deputy James O'Connor: To be crystal clear, in case I was not already, I was talking about staying on the same train when it arrives in Heuston. Perhaps there could be an underground connection allowing the train to continue to Connolly. I acknowledge that the Phoenix Park tunnel is a little bit back from Heuston, which is a shame in that it does not allow direct connectivity, as such. In the context of future high-speed rail development, however, we cannot avoid this conversation. It has to be had.

Regarding the UK's suggestion on a direct rail connection between Great Britain and the island of Ireland in the vicinity of Belfast, the prospect is quite an exciting one that we should not be passing on.

On road projects, will Mr. Spratt state whether there was any conversation on Castlemartyr? One of the officials gave a direct insight into some other projects that are being progressed at the minute but I am wondering whether there are any developments on the N25 corridor around Castlemartyr and Killeagh and on funding being approved in that regard.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will ask Mr. Mullaney to cover those questions because they relate to specific projects. He would have a better handle on them than I would.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: The Deputy asked about the N25. Transport Infrastructure Ireland has a proposed scheme. One of the pipeline schemes it is considering is Waterford to Glenmore. It is being funded in the current year and is at phase 2.

Deputy James O'Connor: I was asking about Castlemartyr in east Cork. That section of road is a long distance away from the section of road between Middleton and Youghal I am referring to. The Minister, Deputy Ryan, recently had discussions with the Department on this. Is any specific update available on Castlemartyr?

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: As the Deputy said, it is a separate section of road. My understanding is that Transport Infrastructure Ireland is considering it. However, it would be safer if I were to come back to the Deputy on this, in order to check the exact position rather than give misinformation.

Deputy James O'Connor: I will be corresponding with Mr. Mullaney on that tomorrow.

Chairman: We have approximately ten minutes left. I propose members take one minute each. I want to make some concluding remarks to Mr. Spratt.

We look forward to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, coming before us. The national development plan, NDP, is a significant document for Ireland. We want to get the review right and want a sustainable model. We welcome Mr. Spratt's public confirmation that the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI, will now go to public consultation. That is the way it should be in a normal democratic process such as the strategic investment framework for land transport which was approved by Cabinet on 15 April 2105. We expect NIFTI to be similarly approved by Cabinet and that it would feed into the review of the national development plan.

Mr. Spratt spoke about moving away from road. What is the Department's public position on roads given the fact we have electric cars coming on stream? The carbon footprint will go down with electric cars and buses must use roads.

How much do the economic benefits of projects factor into the Department's deliberation on proposals? I have not seen this in the documents. I have seen references to road versus role. We all want to decarbonise but this is about an integrated model that works.

I welcome that the Minister, Deputy Ryan, will come before us shortly. I also welcome that the national investment framework for transport in Ireland will now go to public consultation. Mr. Spratt might make us aware when this happens. He might also discuss with the Minister the possibility of our getting a copy of the submission made in the NDP so that we are informed in our submission and thinking.

I ask Mr. Spratt to briefly respond to those questions. I will then call on Deputy O'Rourke and Deputy Carey.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: We may get a note to the Chairman on the strategic investment framework for land transport, SIFLT, and the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI. I apologise for the confusion our submissions to the committee on the role of the existing SILFT and NIFTI's successor seem to have caused-----

Chairman: There was no confusion. The national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI, has not gone to public consultation. That needs to happen. Mr. Spratt has now given us a confirmation that it will happen. The public can have a huge input. We want to get this right. We cannot have a document that forms a centrefold of how we appraise documents that has neither gone to public consultation nor is Government policy.

Current Government policy is the strategic investment framework for land transport. We want a process where we get absolute buy-in from everyone. We are all moving to a stage where we want to meet carbon targets but in a way that is sustainable for everyone.

I ask Mr. Spratt to quickly address the issue on electric cars and roads as I am caught for time. He can come back to us on the Minister, Deputy Ryan, providing a copy of the submission and an up to date note on the NIFTI public consultation process.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: We have huge ambitions when it comes to electric and low emission vehicles, for the movement of goods as well-----

Chairman: Mr. Spratt is not anti-road. The Department is not anti-road. Is that correct?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: The Department is absolutely not anti-road.

Chairman: Great.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I mentioned roads when I tried to emphasise that most current development was road-led development. I said sustainable mobility-led development as well as road-led development would be needed. Roads will be a hugely important part of our transport infrastructure forevermore.

As I said, we have approximately 160 projects at various stages across our agencies. Each of those projects has to go through a cost benefit analysis. That has always been the case and will continue to be so when it comes to the public spending code.

I will come back to the Chairman on the submission of our material to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform-----

Chairman: I ask Mr. Spratt to update us on the timescale for the public consultation on the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI.

Deputy O'Rourke and Deputy Carey have two minutes each.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Much of this has been quite technical but members of the committee are following it in great detail.

I ask about those assessments and the measurement of carbon. The common appraisal framework was updated in October to take time into account comparing a bus network to a rail network, to cars or an alternative. Is it being updated as well? Mr. Spratt stated in his opening statement that some of the Department's priorities were to ensure "decarbonisation ambitions are built into every aspect" and "are measurable and quantifiable". How are we quantifying the decarbonisation effort for big infrastructure projects and is that changing?

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will ask my colleague Mr. Doocey to take that.

Chairman: Unfortunately, Mr. Doocey has only one minute to respond.

Mr. Garret Doocey: The short answer is the common appraisal framework is under review and will be updated. That review and update is a natural consequence of the review of the public spending code. As the Deputy is aware, the public spending code was updated in December 2019. It has a knock-on effect in terms of sectoral appraisal guidelines such as CAF, which needs to be updated and to take into account other developments such as the value of time, a specific update the Deputy referenced. The common appraisal framework is being updated. I expect the updated CAF to be available this year. However, I must clarify that with my relevant colleagues in the Department, in terms of exact timings.

Chairman: Deputy Carey has two minutes.

Deputy Joe Carey: Can I have an update on the Shannon crossing? It is a key project in County Clare and the mid-west region. It incorporates the Killaloe bypass and upgrading of the R494.

Mr. Kenneth Spratt: I will ask Mr. Mullaney to take that question.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: As the Deputy said, there are three parts to it, the Shannon crossing, the Killaloe bypass and the R494 upgrade which links it back to the M7. It is hoped to do it as one project. The preliminary works are being undertaken at present. At the same time as

that, contract documents are being prepared. Once they are ready, they are sent to us. We need to do a final check before they go to tender. It is progressing and there are works going on at the moment.

I will briefly clarify a previous question. Deputy O'Connor asked about a particular section of road. In fact, I think he was talking about the Carrigtohill to Midleton section.

Deputy James O'Connor: No. It was Castlemartyr.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: To clarify, that is at phase two in terms of TII's programme, so it is at route option stage. Does that answer the Deputy's question?

Deputy James O'Connor: No. Mr. Mullaney has the wrong section of road again. It is between Midleton and Youghal, specifically Castlemartyr. TII had allocated €100,000 for a study on it.

Mr. Dominic Mullaney: I can come back to the Deputy on that.

Chairman: Mr. Mullaney can communicate directly with Deputy O'Connor on that.

I thank all the witnesses for attending today's engagement with the committee. The next meeting of the joint committee will be a private virtual one tomorrow. I thank Mr. Spratt and his colleagues for coming in at such short notice.

The joint committee adjourned at 6.01 p.m. *sine die*.