

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS LÍONRAÍ CUMARSÁIDE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

Dé Máirt, 20 Aibreán 2021

Tuesday, 20 April 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

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

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

Engagement with Chairpersons Designate of Bus Éireann, Bus Átha Cliath and Iarnród Éireann

Chairman: I ask those who are appearing remotely to put their microphones on mute when others are speaking as it interferes with the sound.

The purpose of today's meeting is to engage with the chairperson designate of CIÉ, Ms Fiona Ross; the chairperson designate of Bus Éireann, Mr. Aidan Murphy; the chairperson designate of Bus Átha Cliath, Mr. Ultan Courtney; and the chairperson designate of Iarnród Éireann, Mr. Frank Allen, in order to discuss their strategic priorities for the roles and their views on the challenges facing their organisations. I welcome all of them to today's meeting and thank them for attending at such extremely short notice. We all appreciate that it is difficult during these Covid times.

I will read the note on privilege. All witnesses are again 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 your statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, you will be directed to discontinue your remarks. It is imperative that you comply with any such direction.

For witnesses attending remotely outside of the Leinster House campus, there are some limitations to parliamentary privilege and 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 also be mindful of their domestic law and how it may apply to evidence they give.

Members are reminded of 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 of the constitutional requirement that members must be physically present within the confines of the place where Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House or in the convention centre in Dublin in order to participate in public meetings. I will not permit a member to participate where they do not adhere to this constitutional requirement. Unfortunately, it is a rule we need to apply. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting. In this regard I ask any member participating via Microsoft Teams that prior to making his or her contribution to the meeting he or she should confirm that he or she is in the grounds of the Leinster House campus.

I now call on Ms Ross, chairperson designate of CIÉ to make her opening statement. She has five minutes.

Ms Fiona Ross: I am grateful for the invitation to attend the committee meeting today. I am honoured that the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, has nominated me to serve a second term as chair of the CIÉ group. CIÉ's statutory mandate is to provide socially necessary bus and rail transport in a well-functioning, integrated manner which contributes to balanced regional economic development and social cohesion at a reasonable cost.

Under legislation, CIÉ has devolved certain of its statutory functions to three operating subsidiaries - Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann. Therefore, CIÉ's role as parent is to foster the autonomy of these operating subsidiaries while providing necessary co-ordination

in regard to financial sustainability and other shared issues. I am delighted that my fellow chairpersons are with me today and the committee will hear from them in due course.

As members will be aware, the arrival of Covid-19 in early 2020 has impacted on all aspects of our business and personal lives. I am very proud of the role CIÉ has played during these difficult times. Keeping our services running safely helped maintain a semblance of normality in very difficult times, but most importantly ensured that key workers could get to their place of work. We now have a unique challenge to recover our business and to ensure the post-pandemic recovery is sustainable.

As a result of the pandemic, the financial sustainability of the group in the short to medium term has obviously been a key focus of the CIÉ board in 2020 and up to today in 2021. As requested by the board, CIÉ has developed a focused two-year strategy, which was approved by the board in December 2020. The magnitude of the sudden impact of Covid-19 on the group's finances has necessitated the adoption of this strategy, which is primarily focused on ensuring the financial stability of the group, while also progressing wider strategic goals where possible.

In addition to the revenue shortfall, the other very significant challenge facing the group is the scale of our pension deficit. This pension deficit is a key component of the weakness in the group's financial position. The accrued liabilities of the scheme have increased significantly in 2020 and exceeded the scheme's assets by €970 million at the end of 2020. This highlights the group's exposure to the very significant challenges and the value of the scheme's liabilities. This is a priority concern for CIÉ as it puts at risk the long-run security of pension provision for our workforce.

My fellow board members and I know it is increasingly important that measures are taken to further de-risk the schemes and provide for long-run sustainability of pension provision. In order to meet the minimum funding standard, within a timeframe to be agreed with the Pensions Authority, revised funding proposals from the trustees and committee of the CIÉ 1951 superannuation scheme and regular wages scheme are required to be submitted which address the existing deficits in both schemes.

We have made good progress in 2019 and 2020, and the proposals which emerged from the Workplace Relations Commission-facilitated process represent the optimum that can be achieved in the matter. These proposals were accepted by members of the regular wages scheme in June 2020. The regular wages scheme is primarily composed of 6,500 of our front-line workers.

A Labour Court recommendation on proposals for the 1951 scheme, which has approximately 2,200 members, has been accepted by CIÉ and the CIÉ board as the sole basis for developing a revised funding proposal for this scheme. A ballot of members is currently under way.

Ensuring the financial security of the group will allow CIÉ to play a leading role in the nation's recovery post Covid and help deliver a more sustainable future.

The CIÉ Group plays an integral role in delivering a national strategy for decarbonisation. We are prioritising our climate change responsibilities. Being the largest public transport provider and one of the largest landowners in Ireland, the CIÉ Group is in a unique position to provide smarter travel options and contribute to a sustainable economy. The CIÉ Group has adopted the UN sustainability development goals, STGs, and our new sustainability strategy is aimed at aligning our business processes with the STGs and the public targets outlined in the

climate action plan.

CIÉ is also committed to integrating transport orientated development, TOD, whenever feasible, utilising the extensive and centrally located property holdings in the CIÉ Group portfolio. We have the potential to optimise the provision of housing, employment and urban spaces in close proximity to the frequent, high-quality transport services which are necessary to support TOD.

Our development objectives prioritise compact growth and access to well-designed mobility hubs, creating the conditions necessary for modal shift.

We are working on a ten-year plan for the delivery of flagship projects such as the Heuston Station master plan, Colbert Station, in Limerick, Connolly Station, Kent Station and Ceannt Station, in Galway.

On behalf of the board I would like to express my thanks to the Minister, Deputy Ryan, and the officials in the Department of Transport for their support in 2020, particularly given the financial challenges of the group as a result of the pandemic. I would also like to thank officials in the National Transport Authority, NTA, and NewEra with whom we have regular contact. I pay tribute to the operating companies and all CIÉ employees. While the pandemic has presented major challenges for the group, it is individuals and families across the country who have borne huge personal cost. They are in our thoughts today. I would be happy to take any questions at a later stage.

Chairman: I thank Ms Ross. I call Mr. Ultan Courtney who has five minutes.

Mr. Ultan Courtney: I thank the Chairman. It is a great honour to be nominated for reappointment as chairman to the board of Dublin Bus by the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan. I thank the Chairman and the members of the committee for the invitation to speak to them today. I will go straight to the key issues as we have only a short amount of time. My personal circumstances are outlined in the statement provided.

It would be remiss of me as chair not to acknowledge the wider context within which we now live. Dublin Bus, like all businesses, operates today in a world dominated by Covid-19. The pandemic has revealed how valuable it is for companies to have operational expertise, plan for the long term and recognise certain risks before they arise.

At Dublin Bus we have long embraced this approach and the effectiveness of this has been seen in our ability to react quickly and effectively to the pandemic. In that sense we are very fortunate as a business because even at times like this our mission and our purpose is very clear. It is keeping our services running and supporting others in doing their vital front-line jobs. Many long-standing customers give up their seats to allow front-line workers get to work safely and I would like to thank them today. We look forward to shortly welcoming back all our customers to our services.

From providing 45 million essential journeys from March 2020 to year end to delivering innovative solutions such as our free shuttle service for Mater hospital employees, Dublin Bus as a public transport company has shown its flexibility and resilience in the face of this unprecedented challenge. This proactive approach has been underpinned by a culture of safety, which has ensured that our buses remain safe for our customers making essential journeys and our 3,500 employees.

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As chairman, I would like to put on record my thanks for the dedication, support and professionalism of our employees, trade unions, the National Transport Authority and the Government, without which we would not be in a position to provide continuous service for essential workers and all our customers through every phase of this pandemic.

With regard to sustainability for the long term, the relationship between good public transport and a successful economy is mutual and necessary. Today, Ireland has one of the most open economies in the world, meaning if we are to get a headstart on the post-pandemic economic recovery we need to begin the work of building a world class, zero-carbon public transport system now.

The pandemic has offered us a glimpse of what is possible for our city with less congested roads providing faster, more reliable and sustainable journeys for our customers. We do, however, risk a return to the unsustainable city hampered by congestion if we do not prioritise public transport.

At the heart of prioritising public transport, and delivering a more sustainable Dublin, is the delivery of several major transport projects. Of particular interest and importance to Dublin Bus is the €2 billion BusConnects project, as noted in the National Development Plan 2018 – 2027, and the recently published Climate Action Plan 2021. As chairman of Dublin Bus, I am delighted that the company is assisting the NTA and the State with the delivery of some key elements of this project.

With regard to investment and recovery, an efficient, functioning public transport system fuels economic growth, speeds up urban development and has the power to transform day-to-day life. The greater Dublin area, GDA, is the economic heart of the island of Ireland. Good quality urban bus public transport is a key economic enabler for the GDA. Public transport in Ireland has seen some very notable positives in recent years. Customer and service have grown steadily, reaching a high of 290 million passenger journeys in 2019, with 142 million journeys on Dublin Bus.

It is critical that we are ambitious and invest in our public transport infrastructure to ensure it meets the needs of people, supports economic renewal and meets our social and environmental aspirations, which are representative of a modern European capital city. In 2021, we will all start to benefit from this investment approach with 219 electric hybrid buses due to enter service.

The coming years will see Dublin Bus operate in an environment where economic and social development has a significant impact on the role of the bus in public transport. This means Dublin Bus, as Ireland's largest public transport provider, must be proactive in providing the city with modern, dynamic mobility solutions. I am confident of our ability to do this. Beyond that I believe continued investment in public transport will transform Dublin for the better. Dublin can be one of Europe's most sustainable cities. It can be an example to others of how to manage growth in a balanced and sustainable way. We can live, work, play, travel and enjoy all the benefits of our community and our vibrant economy without causing harm to the environment around us. We can all do this while enhancing our quality of life if we work together for the betterment of our city, region and people. I look forward to making my contribution to the company and to the city by providing strategic support, direction, and guidance over the coming year. I look forward to answering any questions.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Courtney. I call Mr. Murphy, chair designate of Bus Éireann, who

has five minutes.

Mr. Aidan Murphy: I thank the chairman and members of the committee for the opportunity to address them today. I was appointed chairperson of Bus Éireann in July 2014, having joined the board in April 2013. It has been a great privilege and, subject to the endorsement of this committee, I am honoured to accept the appointment by the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to serve one additional year.

The business of Bus Éireann, given our national reach and range of services, is unparalleled by any transport company in Ireland. More than 2,700 people help to deliver Bus Éireann services across our school transport, commercial Expressway and public service obligation, PSO, routes, supported by thousands of people indirectly employed as contractors and suppliers.

Just before the Covid-19 pandemic, we were proud that, following very challenging times for the company in 2016 and 2017, Bus Éireann had achieved its highest passenger growth in more than a decade to almost 90 million passenger trips. In 2019, the company returned a modest profit and the benefits of this renewed growth and momentum had begun to reverberate among our customers, employees and stakeholders across the country with investment in new services, new vehicles, new facilities and new jobs.

Of course, 2020 was a year like no other. In the most difficult of circumstances Bus Éireann successfully delivered safe, essential services when these services were needed most. The company's response to Covid-19 has exemplified its service ethos and commitment and the values in which we take pride – safety, collaboration, customer first, performance and forward thinking.

Public transport was one of the sectors most affected by Covid-19. While services continued, as essential to the functioning of society and particularly for front-line workers in health-care, retail and food, usage patterns changed dramatically and suddenly. Revenues collapsed by more than 90% in a week and have oscillated between 50% and 90% below normal for the past 13 months.

Bus Éireann collaborated extensively with key stakeholders - the trade unions, the National Transport Authority, the Departments of Transport and Education and CIÉ - to act immediately on the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHET, to swiftly implement the recommended safety measures to ensure we could maintain services for essential journeys.

The decision by our board to steadfastly support the call by Government to maintain services for essential journeys depleted the net asset position of the company and created financial pressure, but it was the right thing to do for both our customers and employees and the right decision as a national State company during our nation's critical time of need. I am particularly grateful to all our staff who collaborated effectively to keep our customers and each other safe during this crisis. Despite the exceptional Covid-19 safety performance of public transport in Ireland, customer confidence will take some time to recover. I am certain that with the vaccination programme gaining pace and the determination and resilience to continue investment in public transport service and innovation, a full recovery can be achieved within the next two years.

As a commercial semi-State company, our goal and remit is to also deliver sustainable earnings on a consistent basis. We are delighted to have introduced the single most significant

enhancement of PSO services as part of a fiscal stimulus announced by the Government. New services were introduced to Dundalk, Drogheda, Navan, Ballina, Limerick and Cork with the support of funding from the NTA. These new services are important facilitators of economic and social recovery and regeneration.

We had to take decisive action in relation to certain costs, unfunded activity and unsustainable routes to ensure we could continue to deliver services for both our customers and stakeholders over the longer term. The board took the necessary and prudent decisions to safeguard the company throughout this crisis, including the difficult decision to withdraw from four Expressway routes. This decision was taken to avoid unsustainable future losses and protect services for the remaining 150 communities that rely on other Expressway services throughout the network.

Extreme revenue loss had a catastrophic impact on our balance sheet, requiring emergency funding and support. That support came through extensive dialogue with our stakeholders, including the Department of Transport. Our holding company, CIÉ, provided essential liquidity support. Through the NTA, we accessed funding to address the revenue deficit for both our PSO services and Expressway services, the latter by way of a temporary support made available to all commercial bus operators.

The commercial support enabled the recovery of costs of service provision from when it took effect in August 2020, which has allowed us to continue providing services on the vast majority of our Expressway routes. Funding agreed by the Department of Education to protect school transport contractors when schools were forced to close between March and June also ensured the school transport scheme continued to be delivered as schools reopened. We will seek to strengthen the balance sheet in 2021 through recapitalisation to ensure the business is more strongly positioned for defence and growth in the future. The strength of our collaboration and partnerships with all stakeholders has helped us deliver on wider social and economic objectives, keeping communities connected, and the focus now is ensuring our business remains sustainable as we look to the future.

Safety remains our chief priority and the board and executive are committed to delivering the safest transport system possible. In 2020, in addition to implementing all the Covid-19 measures required to adhere to public health advice, we delivered significant improvements on all safety metrics for collisions, passenger and employee accidents.

As a board, we recognise that the shift towards greener production and consumption cannot be delayed until economies are revived. The national development plan and climate action plan published by the Government set out ambitious projects and targets and, in 2020, Bus Éireann began to catalyse a transformation that amalgamates investment in the green and inclusive economic recovery. We have adopted a new sustainability strategy and this month sees the inaugural meeting of a board sustainability committee. We look forward to building and delivering on that longer-term plan, decarbonising our public transport services and delivering an improved environmental impact performance, recognising that, as a public body, the target is an absolute CO₂ reduction of 50% by 2030. The delivery of our fleet and depot capital plan and implementation of our new energy and waste management policies are critical to Bus Éireann achieving the CAP targets.

It is imperative for the board to develop strategies and plans that ensure Bus Éireann is equipped to compete effectively with bus market opening, tendering of routes and competitive pressure on inter-regional routes. Bus transport is the fastest and most flexible solution

to improving public transport usage, maximising the value of State and EU investment in road network and infrastructure. We have delivered increases of up to 70% in passenger numbers within a short time of investment in increasing frequency of buses and new routes, which demonstrates that demand is not in question. BusConnects projects for Ireland's regional cities and greater focus on the public transport needs of rural communities herald another exciting period for the sector.

I thank my fellow directors for their outstanding commitment and resolve to address every challenge presented by this pandemic, and throughout my term as chairperson. Primarily, I thank the Minister, the Departments, the NTA and CIÉ for their continued and steadfast support of Bus Éireann, as well as elected representatives, local authorities and our customers as we join together to build back better.

Mr. Frank Allen: I am honoured that the Minister, Deputy Ryan, has nominated me for reappointment as chairperson of Iarnród Éireann. The highest priority for the board and management of Iarnród Éireann at this stage of the pandemic is to ensure we continue to provide a safe travelling and work environment for customers and for our colleagues, respectively.

I pay tribute to the efforts of more than 4,000 Iarnród Éireann colleagues since March 2020. At a time of national crisis, the ethos of public service has been and continues to be to the fore, and this has been supported by our trade union colleagues. I also recognise the critical support from the Minister for Transport, Department of Transport officials and the National Transport Authority, who have ensured that we have been financially supported to maintain essential services.

Through the crisis, we have continued to focus on how rail can maximise its contribution to a sustainable future for Ireland within an integrated transport network. We recently published our strategy for 2027. Our priorities include delivering a transformative DART+ Programme to double our capacity and triple the electrification of rail in the greater Dublin area, increasing capacity on interurban services so we improve journey times and timetable offerings between cities, developing commuter rail services to meet the transport needs in our regional cities, namely, Cork, Galway, Limerick and Waterford, and complementing this through working with our colleagues in CIÉ Group Property. A further priority is investing in rail freight as a sustainable and commercially attractive alternative to road haulage for a range of sectors. We will shortly announce our strategy for rail freight. Finally, it will be a priority to continue to improve accessibility for passengers with disability on vehicles and at stations.

Iarnród Éireann is the port authority for Rosslare Europort. The port has faced the twin challenges of Brexit and Covid-19. The strategic role Rosslare can play for Irish industry has been ably demonstrated in the rapid expansion of direct services to a range of destinations in continental Europe, as well as to the UK. There are now about 34 services operating weekly between Rosslare and continental Europe. The port has emerged as the foremost roll-on, roll-off port connecting Ireland to Europe.

The board and management of Iarnród Éireann recognise we will face challenges in attracting passengers back to public transport, securing the funding for the investments we plan and in getting large volumes of goods off the roads and onto rail. However, the benefits of placing rail at the heart of mobility for our economy, our communities and the environment are enormous. I look forward to taking any questions the committee may have on any of that work.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank all the witnesses. I would like to table questions to

them all but time will constrain us. I give a huge thanks to all front-line transport workers who have served such a great and important role during Covid.

I will start with a question to Ms Ross. On the pension scheme, I was looking at the figures and the figure of greater than €975 million of a deficit is very significant. I think I am right in saying the 2019 annual report said the deficit was in the region of €777 million. That is almost \$200 million over the period of a year. Am I correct in saying that is the scale of the increase of the deficit? I ask Ms Ross to address the way out or the resolution as she sees it. Is she confident the situation can be resolved through negotiation? How does she see it being resolved?

Ms Fiona Ross: I thank the Deputy for his questions. His figures are correct. There was an increase of approximately €200 million in 2020 compared with 2019. As regards a resolution, it is a somewhat sensitive time as a ballot of the trade union members of the 1951 scheme is currently under way. The whole board of CIÉ - my three fellow chairpersons sit on the main board with me - is very confident that the Workplace Relations Commission, WRC, proposal represents the optimum way forward to get us to a minimum funding standard which, by the way, does not address the deficit as a whole but certainly allows us to move forward with our plan to improve the deficit in the future and to look at our asset allocation on the asset side of the balance sheet. It is important to note that we made great progress in 2019 and 2020. I refer to the regular wages scheme. The majority of our staff have voted in favour of that proposal and it is moving forward now to statutory instrument stage and implementation. As a board, we very much look forward to a positive outcome from the ballot but, obviously, that is not for us to say at this point in time; it is a matter for the members' discretion in terms of how they wish to vote. We certainly recognise that this is by far the biggest issue facing us in terms of the long-term financial sustainability of the group and we remain completely focused on it.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: By way of a quick follow-up question, in a best-case scenario, what sort of timeline is Ms Ross looking at to be back on balance or to address the deficit?

Ms Fiona Ross: The key factor in that regard is the outcome of the vote. If the vote is successful - we will know in a couple of weeks whether that will be the case - then we will move into the statutory instrument process in order to put together the funding proposal for the Pensions Authority and work through the paperwork, as it were, on that basis. That is obviously the most positive and immediate outlook. If the ballot is not successful, we will be into a different category of timelines. That will then come back to the board of CIÉ to work through alternative arrangements with the support of the Department and the Minister.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: It is important to emphasise that there is a resolution for the sector, but also for the workers. It is important that a resolution is found.

Moving on to Mr. Courtney and Mr. Murphy, I wish to focus on the bus sector. They referenced the climate challenges in the time ahead and the impact that will have on public transport. I ask them to address the issue of Covid as the situation stands and their response to numbers on public transport increasing and the 25% loading capacity restrictions.

I ask them to address the longer-term issues, such as responding to the climate challenge, expanding the fleet and routes, opening up opportunities for apprenticeships within their organisations, integrated ticketing, real-time information and cheaper fares or affordability, as best they can.

Mr. Ultan Courtney: I thank the Deputy for that excellent question. Dublin Bus has done

extremely well in managing the Covid situation. We all found ourselves in a situation last year where we had to do things very differently. We quickly learned how to do that. Everybody across the various organisations, including the NTA and CIÉ, as well as financially, co-operated and worked really hard to get that right. We are currently operating to a 25% limit under level 5. That will not change unless the restriction level changes. We are currently reasonably comfortable that we can manage that. We are monitoring it daily and provide information to the NTA and the Department as to what is happening. We are currently running on the basis of a Saturday service and we can and will increase that as necessary. We hold back a certain number of buses which we plug into the various routes where demand arises. It is not perfect but it is a reasonably good show. As long as the numbers stay the way they are in terms of people going back to work, we should manage. Ultimately, it will be a policy decision for the Government in terms of the level of restrictions it wishes to have in place following advice from NPHET. We are in a position to be able to manage that situation.

The second part of the Deputy's question is the really positive part. He asked about the future. Obviously, we are not sure what the future will be. It probably will be a different version of what we had in the past. We are trying to plan to make bus journeys part of passengers' choice, whereby they can decide to walk, cycle or take the bus as part of their journey. We aim to provide a clean and efficient fleet for them. Customers want reliability, efficiency and to be taken to where they wish to go in a manner that suits them. We will try to do that. We have plans in place and are working with the Department and the NTA in particular to introduce those plans. BusConnects is a key part of that. It is a significant investment by the State to ensure we have a bus service that suits the needs of the greater Dublin area. It is a constantly changing need which we have to be constantly on top of. We are working closely with the NTA to do that. With all the things customers want, such as WiFi, bus charging, regular buses and clean buses, there has been a significant transformation in the service and we continue to push for that in the future.

Mr. Aidan Murphy: Similar to what Mr. Courtney outlined in respect of Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann has responded very well to the Covid situation. We have at all times adhered to all of the NPHET guidelines. Our staff have been exemplary in terms of what they have done during that period. Obviously, we have undertaken all of the necessary measures one would expect. We are detecting pressure in terms of the 25% loading restriction. In Galway and Cork cities in particular, we have encountered some issues in terms of the 25% loading restriction in recent weeks since the easing of lockdown restrictions. That has resulted in some passengers not being able to access our services and having to wait for additional services. It will be an increasing difficulty in the coming period as the country comes out of further lockdown measures. We are in dialogue with the NTA about that and will respond as per NPHET advice.

On the second part of the Deputy's question, relating to the future, it is a very exciting future. We will be introducing three hydrogen-powered buses, hybrid buses, into Galway and other cities. That is being done in conjunction with the NTA. There will be very significant changes in the structure of the transport fleet in general. There will be further developments in that regard. The pandemic has actually accelerated some of the changes that are taking place in society and which will require a greater involvement of public transport. BusConnects, to which Mr. Courtney referred, and other developments will provide opportunities to service communities in a very different way from that which was done in the past. The changes in society can be mirrored by public transport coming to the fore and providing opportunities for communities.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Murphy. We will now move to a Fianna Fáil slot.

Senator Timmy Dooley: I thank our guests for their presentations. From my perspective and that of my party, we have no hesitation in recommending their continuation in and reappointment to their roles. They have shown a very strong understanding of public transport in their respective companies and that is to all our benefit. I join other members in expressing thanks to the front-line workers, including the witnesses and their teams who are not often recognised as front-line workers. However, that is what they have been throughout the pandemic and they deserve a debt of gratitude and support. The issues of pensions and all of that which were mentioned need to be addressed to show the support of the company and the State for the workers.

I wish to concentrate on the future. I have every expectation that the witnesses will address the fallout from Covid but the biggest challenge from my perspective and, I am sure, that of the witnesses is the requirement to become, effectively, green-friendly in the next ten years. We have decarbonisation targets for 2030 and 2050 which we must reach. If I make any critical comment about the companies it would be what I perceive to be - and the witnesses will get an opportunity to reflect upon this - the lethargy in addressing the decarbonisation of their fleets. There are financial constraints, which I am sure the witnesses will set out, but I would like to have seen the companies move more quickly in that regard, notwithstanding what the witnesses have set out just now.

The big issue - it is bigger than most - is the role the companies will play in decarbonising transport generally with the increase in activity in public transport. I would like to get the witnesses' thoughts on what else can be done by their respective companies to assist in that modal shift? Luxembourg introduced free public transport some time ago. What are the respective chairpersons' views on having a free public transport service for the next five, six or seven years, or whatever it might take, to incentivise that modal shift away from individual vehicular transport, particularly cars, and toward public transport? There is some merit to that and I would like to hear the witnesses' views on it. Will they also reflect on where they see own companies' decarbonisation and sustainability programmes for the coming years?

Ms Fiona Ross: I will bow to my colleagues around the table on the specific aspects of decarbonisation and sustainability because this can be missed at operational level. My colleagues have sight of the fleet and transport activities that we, at the holding company, do not. Essentially, the holding company employs 170 people to work on financial sustainability.

On the climate change agenda, we can talk about the specifics relating to the fleet. There is a lot of work being done on biodiversity across the group. We have talked about transport-oriented development and that can have an impact on modal shift as well.

Deputy Dooley referred to free transport. We have had an interesting situation this year where the State has, essentially, supported the transport network substantially. It has certainly given us that support and we are grateful for it in the context of having had such a significant shortfall in both passengers and in revenue. It is such a large-scale investment by the State that it would have to be compared with some of the capital investment and the longer-term plans that we have for the fleet, BusConnects and some of the big projects that Mr. Allen can discuss, such as the those within Irish Rail, and with any other expectations we have. Fundamentally, we believe that we have a great service to offer to the passengers of Ireland. Perhaps the other chairpersons will also comment about their individual companies.

Mr. Frank Allen: Decarbonising the fleet is a huge priority. Iarnród Éireann will never again buy a diesel engine. There are various things we have been doing and continue to do. We are, for example, pioneering a technology to introduce hybrid trains. This involves taking some of our existing rolling stock and retrofitting it. It is similar technology to a Prius car. That is being implemented at the moment.

The second thing we are doing, which I mentioned as one of our highest priorities, is the DART+ programme, which expands the electrification of the railway network in the greater Dublin area. This will make a huge difference in the number of trips that will be made on electric transport.

A further initiative is that we are in the market, and in the final stage of procurement, for new rolling stock. This is rolling stock that will be used for generations to come. It is entirely electrical vehicles, similar to the DART or battery electric. This means the train can operate under wires or through batteries on top, which can be charged and operate for certain distances of the journey even when there are no overhead lines.

The decarbonisation of the fleet may not be quite so apparent when one looks at a train passing. A lot has happened with the existing fleet. The new fleet we will introduce will be substantially decarbonised.

There are other initiatives I feel strongly about. We need to capture a substantial amount of freight traffic that is causing congestion on our roads, motorways and in access to ports. We are working with various third parties and we will be promoting development of rail freight, which was significant in Ireland in the past but which is not at the moment. We are going to recapture that. We are going to go back and get more goods onto rail in Ireland. That will make a big difference in decarbonisation from mobility more generally.

The Deputy referred to free travel in Luxembourg. Prior to the pandemic, the biggest challenge for Iarnród Éireann was its capacity constraint. We needed more capacity and if more people came along, we genuinely did not have the space for them. Now, as we move out of the pandemic, I believe the challenge ahead lies in attracting people back onto public transport. Some pricing intervention might be useful to get back to a situation where people are back travelling on all modes of public transport. Now that we hope to invest in a much larger fleet, we also hope to attract more people out of their cars and onto public transport.

Chairman: I invite Mr. Courtney next. I am conscious of time.

Mr. Ultan Courtney: I thank the Chairman. I will speed it up. I echo the comments made by my colleagues. I am aware that Deputy Dooley has been involved with the transport sector for a long time and is probably aware of the efforts being made by Dublin Bus. This year we are looking at some 290 plug-in hybrid buses coming on stream and, in conjunction with the NTA, getting more than fully electric 800 buses over the next five years. These are substantial investments in transport. The biggest issue has always been that while we can do all of these things, there was a question as to where the money would come from. The commitment and the money are there now. The NTA wants to do it and we want to help the NTA implement it. We will see that happen very quickly.

On the pricing initiative relating to buses, the revenue risk has moved from the company back the NTA. It is for the NTA primarily to decide the pricing policy and we implement it. Mr. Allen is quite correct that when we go back to full transport, as I call it, and when people

are moving around again, we may have to look at initiatives that encourage people to use public transport again or at how public transport it actually used. It may well be used differently in the future.

Mr. Aidan Murphy: Bus Éireann is fully committed to achieving the targets on sustainability. For example, we are involved in a pilot for the complete electrification of Athlone town through the use of electric vehicles. This will give rise to a large number of learnings. We are also introducing hydrogen bus trials and so on. Bus Éireann is in a bit of a difficult situation because we run a lot of long-range services for which current technology, for example, in the context of battery life, would not be suitable. While battery technology overall is undergoing significant developments and there are lots of suggestions that in the next number of years this will increase significantly, at the moment we must move to Euro 6 engines, which are a very clean form of a diesel engine. All of our future vehicles are along those lines. For distance travel, hydrogen is the only possibility at present.

On the broader question on public transport, as Mr. Allen and Mr. Courtney said, it will be a challenge to attract people back onto public transport. Levels of mobility have increased significantly and it is very clear that people are using their cars more and using them singly because they will not buddy up due to the difficulties with the pandemic. That is going to be a factor. Will we see people cramming onto vehicles of the future? Mr. Allen mentioned the problems involved. It is difficult to see whether people will actually immediately adapt to that. There will need to be some measures to attract people back onto public transport as a safe form in the future. Certainly, opportunities arise to consider how much that can be done through a pricing mechanism.

From our perspective, there is another element. We operate the school transport system. It has been shown in other countries that if children are educated at a very early age to use public transport, they continue that pattern throughout their lives. This is a very important aspect that could actually change significantly the behaviours of society in the future.

Deputy Timmy Dooley: My thanks to Mr. Murphy for the direct answer. For a long time, I have believed that we should have moved towards a model of free public transport as an incentive to get people out of their cars. Now, more than ever, it is obvious that we will have to look at something like that to address the fall-out from the pandemic and, more important, to address the modal shift required if we are to be successful in decarbonising transport to the extent that we must to meet our commitments. My thanks to Mr. Murphy for sharing to some extent the view on that. I look forward to working with him on this committee in the coming years.

Chairman: Ms Ross's statement makes specific reference to the pension scheme, which was spoken about earlier. She said the CIE group pension deficit is a key component of the weakness in the group financial position and that the accrued liabilities of the scheme had increased and exceeded the scheme's assets by €975 million at the end of 2020. I had a quick look back at the accounts for 2019. The scheme had a deficit of €547 million at the end of 2018. That increased by €230 million to €777 million in 2019 and reached €975 million in 2020 when it increased by approximately €200 million. There was a virtual doubling between 2018 and 2020. Why was there such a large increase over the relatively short period from 2018 to 2020?

The CIE proposal makes reference to the Labour Court recommendation proposed for the 1951 scheme. There are two schemes. One is a regular wages scheme and the other is the 1951 superannuation scheme. There are 7,500 staff in the regular wages scheme and 2,200 in the 1951 scheme. That is the sole basis for the development of a revised funding proposal for this

scheme. The ballot on that is under way.

Why have we seen such a dramatic increase in the deficit in the two years from 2018 to 2020? Of the €428 million increase, €200 million arose in the past year alone. The deficit in the two schemes was made up of €240 million in the regular wages scheme and €237 million in the 1951 superannuation scheme. That was back in 2019. What are the figures for the end of 2020? I saw reports in RTÉ earlier in April that the trustees of the 1951 superannuation scheme were seeking a ruling in the High Court on funding the deficit in the scheme. Will Ms Ross comment on those reports?

I looked at the company balance sheet. Ms Ross referred to the weakness in it. At the end of 2019, net liabilities were €690 million. The provision for employee benefits was €777 million. If the benefits under the pension scheme were positive, there would be net assets in the company's overall consolidated balance sheet. Will Ms Ross deal with those particular matters, which appear to be significant? I am conscious of the employees involved as well as their pension security. Will Ms Ross give us an overall response in the round?

Ms Fiona Ross: There was a good deal in there so if I do not get to every point, I ask the Chairman to remind me of particular points he made.

I will first address the recent news report in respect of the High Court. That matter was indeed reported by RTÉ. As the employer, we have not received any formal notification of any plans to go to the High Court. As I said, we are at a sensitive stage as the ballot progresses for members of the 1951 scheme. We await formal communication from the trustees in respect of that RTÉ story and whether there will be any subsequent developments.

Chairman: There have been no communications on that as yet. Is that the case?

Ms Fiona Ross: There have been no formal communications in respect of any High Court action. That is my understanding as I speak.

Chairman: Are their informal communications on the matter?

Ms Fiona Ross: The informal communication would have been the RTÉ story. A letter was then issued by the relevant committee that gave rise to the story. That letter was not to the employer. It is important to note that. We await formal communication in that regard. We will take it from there if that is indeed the case. In any event, the ballot is under way. We are conscious as an organisation and a board of the need to allow that ballot to take place in the best way possible and allow members to make the best decisions they can.

Chairman: From what I can see, they are speaking about a 1994 agreement that consolidated many older schemes into a superannuation scheme. What view does the board take in the round? Where do matters stand in the context of the CIE Group's consolidated balance sheet? When does CIE envisage certainty for all employees with regard to future certainties around their pension entitlements?

Ms Fiona Ross: There is great certainty for 6,500 members of the regular wages scheme because they voted in favour of the proposal midway through last year. They have good certainty and we will put a funding proposal to the Pensions Authority that would regularise the regular wages scheme. That scheme covers 6,500 members, the majority of our front-line workers.

Overall, the big swings are related to discount rates and market movements. While equity

markets are up significantly this year, as they were in recent years, our assets are allocated across a range of different categories. There is debt and equities and other investments across the substantive assets on the pension balance sheet or on the balance sheet as it related to the assets and pensions. There are vast swings in that deficit number. As the Chairman pointed out, the deficit has deteriorated significantly in recent years. That is why it has become a major factor for the board to address. We have seen the issues associated with-----

Chairman: Is there any specific reason for the deficit increasing from €547 million in 2018 to €777 million in 2019 and €975 million at the end of 2020? That is a significant increase over a two-year period. It was 78% or €428 million, which is a virtual doubling of the deficit. Why has it been so dramatic? Is that down solely to the markets?

Ms Fiona Ross: Yes, unfortunately that is the case. The assets are invested on behalf of the pension. They are invested over the long-term. There are also actuarial assessments, which are a factor. There is no executive or judgment call in respect of that. It is not an optional number. It is a factor of the discount rate associated with those investments over the period.

Chairman: Does Ms Ross have anything to say to the trustees regarding their talks about pursuing a ruling at the High Court on the 1951 superannuation scheme? Does she have anything in particular to say to them with regard to the situation?

Ms Fiona Ross: We were hopeful that the members of the 1951 scheme would see the value of the Labour Court recommendation and vote in favour of it. CIE made a contribution of €32 million to the pension scheme in 2019. We committed to providing €320 million over the next ten years for that scheme. The changes proposed by the Labour Court are modest and are well within the scope of changes implemented under reforms to other State pension schemes in the past.

At the moment, employees of 1951 scheme pay in approximately 8% and the employer pays in 27%. It is a generous scheme. The changes recommended under the Labour Court are modest. If they were accepted, it would allow us to put a funding proposal to the Pensions Authority for the first time since 2017 and begin to regularise the situation. Then, to address the point made by a Deputy, we can look at how we can do a better job on the deficit in respect of how we allocate the assets on the asset side of the balance sheet.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I echo the view that the pensions issue is one that needs to be addressed. There needs to be clarity and the problem needs to be rectified. It is far too serious to leave it as is. In fairness, the issue was dealt with by Deputy O'Rourke and the Chairman.

I add my voice to the comments made by several previous speakers on the incredible work done by our front-line workers in transport. At the risk of being parochial in regard to an all-Ireland sort of venture-----

Chairman: That is what gets one elected.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Chairman will be far more skilled than I in that.

Chairman: I do not know about that. Never apologise for representing your constituency.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I want to talk about the Enterprise train and Mr. Allen might come back to me on this. We heard previously from Jim Meade that there are conversations going on, there is a project in play, there is communication between Irish Rail and Translink and

there is talk about new stock being bought. What was said by both Jim Meade and the Department of Transport was there is a possibility this project would take until 2026 or 2027. We had a statement from Chris Conway of Translink that suggests that an hourly Enterprise train service, with earlier departure times between Belfast and Dublin, could be in place by 2024. I want to know what information Mr. Allen has in that regard.

We are talking about money coming from the special EU programmes body. Is all the due diligence in place from the point of view of bringing this about? It would be great news to have this happen in 2024 as opposed to two or three years later. I would like an update on that.

Mr. Allen spoke previously on the whole decarbonisation programme. What sort of stock are we talking about? In regard to future rail infrastructure and cross-Border infrastructure, where are we at in terms of developing fast rail or electric rail? I would like an answer to that question.

Chairman: Who would the Deputy like to answer first?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Mr. Allen. It is specific to Iarnród Éireann.

Mr. Frank Allen: I thank the Deputy. We and Translink have done all of the due diligence that is necessary in terms of requesting EU funding. We do not have any formal approval, far from it, but there are positive signals that this does appear to fit within the priorities of the various programmes. The work has been done on our side and we work very closely with colleagues in Belfast to make sure any additional information that is required is available, and that is in hand.

In terms of when it would be available, it all turns on the availability of rolling stock. That is not just the EU funded scheme, it is also what I just mentioned, in that we are at the moment reaching towards the end of a procurement process to purchase a new fleet of trains. That additional fleet of trains would allow us to have additional services. I agree we need to have a service that allows people whose journey originates, for example, in Belfast to arrive in Connolly Station for meetings at 9 a.m. That should be a priority and it is a priority for us, and we need more trains to do that. We have a substantially completed procurement exercise and that is now going through the approval process to get the funding to do that.

In terms of the decarbonisation associated with that, part of the DART process I mentioned involves extending the electrification of the line further north than it is at the moment. The trains we have proposed to buy, what I have described as battery electric multiple units, would allow us to operate using the battery from Malahide northwards, for example, to Drogheda, even before the overhead lines are put up. The design work has been done, the procurement work is substantially completed and we are looking for the funding to be able to support that.

On the timing, we will not have new trains delivered by 2024 to allow that to happen. I acknowledge that people want this to happen as soon as possible but, given the time needed to order a train and have it manufactured, delivered, commissioned and put into service, I do not see that as being achievable by 2024. The only way it would be achievable, in my view, would be to take trains off other services and put them on that service, and there is a bit of reorganisation that goes on all the time. However, we are committed to increasing the capacity and, in particular, to having earlier services come into Dublin from Belfast.

In terms of higher speed and shortening the journey time between Belfast and Dublin, that would require changes in infrastructure, and many of those changes would be north of the Bor-

der. In fact, much of the removal of level crossings, bridges and so forth has already taken place in County Louth and County Dublin. However, to really eat into and shorten that journey time further will require further investment in fixed infrastructure by Translink in Northern Ireland.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I appreciate that very comprehensive answer. It is a pity that 2024 is not in play but we need it to happen as soon as possible. It would be a lot better if we were able to have those North South Ministerial Council transport meetings so that is something I would like to see resolved very quickly.

People had mentioned looking at new versions of ticketing. Post-pandemic, we are looking at remote working or partial remote working, so we have to look at the entire methodology in regard to how we ticket. People might not be going up five days a week and it might only be two or three days, and we need this to be reflected. While I accept the NTA has responsibility, my understanding was that Irish Rail, Bus Éireann and others had been in contact with the NTA. Is there any progress in regard to a ticketing service that will suit our new way of working, where, as I say, it would not necessarily be five days a week?

Mr. Frank Allen: I do not have anything to announce in terms of a revised ticketing scheme. This is something that is certainly being discussed, particularly by the NTA, which has responsibility for setting the policies, setting the fares and so forth. As I mentioned earlier, in terms of attracting people back to public transport, pricing will have to be part of that discussion. That price includes the ticketing, and people with a revised work schedule know that. I support that myself, but I cannot report on any decision that has been made because it is probably premature. However, I have no doubt the NTA is looking at all that in terms of revised working patterns and making sure it remains attractive for people to use bus or rail when they get back to the office, even if that is part-time.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Thank you. I assume it is the same answer from Bus Éireann.

Mr. Aidan Murphy: Absolutely. The reality is the NTA is looking at all of these issues and I am sure it will form part of its consideration. As of now, however, we do not have any details on what might be proposed.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We probably should engage with the NTA to get an update. I appreciate those responses.

Chairman: We will write to the NTA in that regard. I call Deputy Cathal Crowe.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: It is great to be back in the Dáil Chamber and great to see the chairs-designate before us today. Like others who have already spoken, I wholeheartedly thank them but, more important, we thank the workforce of CIÉ, Bus Éireann, Irish Rail and Dublin Bus for everything they have been doing in the past 14 months in terms of getting people from A to B safely. I wish the witnesses well as they begin their renewed terms as chairs of their various entities.

I wish to launch straight into some questions. I had a very interesting chat a few weeks ago with Deputy Stephen Matthews of the Green Party, who is on the committee and is joining us here today. We were chatting about rail transportation in general. When I did economics in college, there was a curve that suggested that the higher a price went, the more usage dropped off, and that is certainly the case with rail travel. I did some pricing this morning. If I had travelled from Ennis to Dublin Heuston on the train today, it would have cost me €58 return. Bear in mind that if I had taken a booking for two adults and two children, which is a right of passage

for so many Irish families taking the train to Dublin Zoo and back on the same day, we would be talking extortionate money. That is probably one of the huge barriers that still exists in terms of attracting people to take the train and to travel to different parts of Ireland. Is the funding model relating to the ticketing system sustainable in the long term? Has Iarnród Éireann looked at what its counterparts elsewhere in Europe have done in driving down cost and making it more attractive for people to use the train and leave the car at home?

Mr. Frank Allen: Families who are planning a trip to the zoo might plan it days or maybe a week ahead. When purchasing tickets in advance, there is excellent value. On average, rail fares in Ireland are very reasonable relative to continental Europe. The walk-up fare is more expensive, as it is with other modes of transport, but the fares people pay when they plan a trip to the zoo a day or two ahead do not reflect the prices that the Deputy outlined. Taken in the round, the competitiveness of the fares is very attractive. Ultimately, it is a question of funding. Bringing down the walk-up fare requires more money. I am not sure that the Deputy gave a fair representation of the cost of a trip to Dublin from Ennis to visit the zoo if people plan it a day or two in advance.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I do not live too far from a railway and would love to board a train daily when I come up to the Dáil, but every time I look at doing so there is a problem with the schedule or something. That is my fault because Dáil sitting days can be a bit haphazard in the context of times. However, there is a lot of variance in the fares at different times. As long as the fares remain so high, they will be seen as prohibitive and will discourage people from taking the train. Unfortunately, until the pricing model comes down, the car will remain king, which is not what we need.

The Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport study is under way. This is extremely interesting. It is a very detailed, dynamic study about how transport will change in the decades ahead in the mid-west. Something that Irish Rail is really embracing, a suggestion I made about three years ago, is a park-and-rail facility. Two possibilities are being examined in this regard, one in the vicinity of Cratloe and the other just over the border in Limerick near Thomond Park. Without getting into all the detail, is it realistic to envisage that small villages and suburban centres, including Cratloe and Thomond Park, will have short platforms and large car parks so that someone can arrive in the morning by car, board a train, get from point A to B and return in the evening? I am referring here to a park-and-rail system. We already have park and ride and we have the Luas car park at the Red Cow roundabout in that regard. Would a short-platform-large-car-park model be realistic for Cratloe, Thomond Park and many other locations around Ireland?

Mr. Frank Allen: We have very exciting plans for Limerick. We are working closely with CIÉ Property and the Land Development Agency, and also working with the local authorities to ensure that the land owned by the various parties is consolidated. Iarnród Éireann made a submission to the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport study which proposes a very major upgrade in capacity and the quality of rail and public transport, making provision for bus services. It includes reopening the line at Foynes to ensure that we are competitive in freight and so forth. We have very exciting plans but it comes down to funding. We have made the proposals and indicated how disused or semi-used lines can be reopened or where there is a single line, for example, between Limerick and Limerick Junction, that could become a double track, which would be of tremendous benefit in the context of both passengers and freight. We are very committed to making sure that we provide a commuter rail service in the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area, of that there is no doubt.

On the short platforms and large car parks, the question is more the other side of coin. Acquiring large amounts of land adjacent to railway stations for car parks is extraordinarily expensive. The Deputy mentioned the example of the Red Cow. I was chief executive of the Railway Procurement Agency when we were building the Luas. For the Luas lines we spent €100 million just on the property for places like car parks at Red Cow, Sandyford and so on. We will do our best to make sure there is some car parking provision but for there to be a large amount of space available near stations for large numbers of rail passengers to park may not be affordable. We have far greater support to have integrated transport with bus services serving villages and other modes.

We want to use the land we have as much as possible but buying substantial amounts of land for large car parks at a number of locations would be exceptionally expensive. I am not persuaded that it would be the best value for money. I am hugely supportive of things like reopening a line to Foynes and double-tracking to Limerick Junction-----

Deputy Cathal Crowe: And a rail spur to Shannon Airport perhaps as well.

Mr. Frank Allen: -----but I am not so sure about buying land for car parks.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I appreciate Mr. Allen's very detailed response. In the context of seeking to revitalise Shannon Airport, the rail spur is a key component that this committee has championed. The plans are very exciting and we hope that proposal will remain a feature of them.

Mr. Frank Allen: Yes, we are supporting that.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I welcome the chairs designate and wish them well in their terms. At one level, today's meeting is a *fait accompli*. That underscores the need for reform of the appointments of chairs of State boards. It is no disrespect to the witnesses but this meeting is rather moot because we cannot - not that we would do so - block the appointments. I should say I am fully in support of the reappointments of all.

We have had an interesting and sobering discussion. If the Oireachtas is supposed to do its business differently after the pandemic, we should look at having hearings on the appointments of chairs of boards. We should also consider brining in chief executives, which we could have done in the case of the four companies before us today.

Among other issues, the witnesses referred to pensions. That is a massive issue. Like Deputy Ó Murchú, I have many issues from a Cork perspective that required to be addressed. These include the electrification of rail in Cork and the need to review the public service obligation levy funding which was made available by the Government in November.

I thank the front-line transport staff and the workers in the companies for the work they have done during the pandemic. In some cases, they have been treated very poorly by the travelling public, for example, in the context of people refusing to wear masks. I welcome the provision of hand sanitiser on buses in particular.

Life changes. There is less traffic on the roads. Remote working and working from home mean that the issue of public transport changes, but then it does not change. There is a responsibility on public transport providers to provide more services. At the moment, there is 25% capacity. We have to address that.

In the context of the Port of Cork, how does the rail freight strategy proposed by Irish Rail fit in with the move of the port to Ringaskiddy?

On education, it is true that if we educate children to do so, they will use public transport? Has Bus Éireann ever discussed with Munster Technological University or the Cork Institute of Technology plans for a shuttle bus park-and-ride facility to take cars off the streets of Bishopstown, for example?

We have all heard great buzzwords such as “mobility”, “passenger experience”, “choice”, “sustainable transport” and “integrated ticketing”, yet we cannot see integrated ticketing in parts of Cork, from the city to Mallow and Midleton. Why is that? If I live in rural Ireland, in Kilmichael or Omeath, how do I get a bus to Cork or Dundalk?

Deputy Cathal Crowe referred to train transport. Where is the plan regarding high-speed electrification of the route from Cork to Dublin? I have travelled on the Acela train service in America. I accept that it costs a few bob but as a one-off experience, it was worth the money because the train speeds on the track. Where are we in terms of that?

There are many issues into which I could go. We have the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy. I want to see more buses in Cork, and more people using them. We have issues around bus corridors. The difficulty we have in parts of the Cork is we are reducing services because there has been a decline in population. How do we incentivise people to use public transport? I drive to Dublin. It is brilliant that there is no traffic on the M7 into Dublin any more because of Covid-19 but that will not be the case forever. How do we tell the people who are on the commuter belt, in places such as Portlaoise, Naas, Sallins and the outskirts of Dublin, that we can provide them with a bus or train link into the city that does not require them to take their cars? The situation is similar in Cork. I am sure many of our guests are familiar with these issues. It can take an hour to go from the top of Grange to the Kinsale Road roundabout. Where are we on buses for schools and getting people off the road? I thank the chairpersons designate because their work is to be commended. I hope engagement on public transport will continue.

Chairman: Does the Senator wish a specific witness to reply?

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I did not individualise it, so whoever would like to reply can do so.

Chairman: We might start with Mr. Murphy from Bus Éireann in that case. The Senator referred to the whole-----

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I should pay tribute to AJ Cronin of Iarnród Éireann in Cork, who is doing a tremendous job. I also pay tribute to all the staff in Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann in Cork.

Chairman: I will let the Senator ask a direct question of Mr. Murphy.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: It is okay. I think our guests have the gist of what I want to say.

Mr. Aidan Murphy: I thank the Senator. Cork has experienced difficulties, including serious congestion before Covid-19. That has not allowed the provision of services and is a serious problem that needs to be addressed and is being addressed. There is a BusConnects proposal for Cork. I know from discussions with the Minister that he is anxious for BusConnects to proceed as soon and quickly as possible.

Interconnectivity is the key to what the Senator is talking about. Mr. Allen mentioned earlier, in the context of Limerick, that instead of building car parks, we should have interconnectivity of bus and train networks. That is a feature we need to explore further in the future because we have not developed that fully in a way that could assist. One needs to provide quality and certainty in public transport. If I want to be at a meeting in Dublin, I need to be sure that I can catch a train in Cahir, change at Limerick Junction and arrive on time in Dublin. If I catch an X8 bus in Cahir directly to Dublin, I need to be sure that the timings are right. In normal times, once the X8 hits the outer corridor of Dublin, it is stuck in traffic with all the cars. We have in the past requested that Transport Infrastructure Ireland allow us, for example, to use the hard shoulder at the end of the motorway so that the bus is faster than a car. Certainty will bring consumers back to public transport and connectivity will allow people to make journeys from one end of the country to the other.

Mr. Frank Allen: I have a few specific points to make. Our rail freight strategy envisages serving all the major ports of the country, including Cork, so we have taken that into account. The Senator mentioned high-speed rail comparable to the Acela service in the north-east corner of the United States. I should point out that the cost of a journey between, let us say, Washington and New York, even when a journey is planned in advance, is a substantial multiple of the cost of a journey between Cork and Dublin. That is a consideration. In terms of journey times, comfort and price, the Cork to Dublin route compares well with the Acela service in the north-eastern United States.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Another more practical example I should have given is the electric, high-speed rail between Barcelona and Sitges.

Mr. Frank Allen: The Spanish high-speed rail is of a different nature entirely. What has happened in continental Europe has meant building new lines entirely. Iarnród Éireann, with funds from the Department of Transport, is shortening journey times. When one passes through Limerick Junction, one will notice that changes have taken place there that will shorten journey times. It is an incremental change. To achieve the sort of high-speed rail such as can be seen in Spain and France, we would have to do what many continental European countries have done, that is, to build new lines. In terms of the resources available, I would rather put money into increasing the capacity and quality of service on our existing lines, closing more level crossings and so forth, rather than spending the billions that would be required for an entirely new line. Work can be done to improve the journey times without the cost of billions to have the sort of high-speed rail to be found in continental Europe. I would spend that money on improving the existing infrastructure rather than on totally new lines.

The Senator asked about better quality transport in the round, including integrated ticketing, real-time passenger information and all of that in Cork. Iarnród Éireann has put forward proposals to make the rail services in the greater Cork area more like a commuter rail service. Those proposals include double tracking out to Middleton and increasing the frequency of services to Cobh. Those proposals should bring in the whole package of high quality public transport, making sure that the information, ticketing and all the rest of it works best. I believe there is strong support to develop more commuter rail services in the Cork area and we have proposals to build a through platform at Kent Station. All of this turns on the availability of funding. We certainly support it and will ensure we get the best possible value for any money that is available to ensure a good quality of service in the greater Cork area.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: I will support Mr. Allen in that. To be fair, the Cork metropolitan area transport strategy is a fantastic document that must become a real living document we can

all see developing. I will support Mr. Allen in that. To give his staff credit, there has been profound change. I accept that the Acela was probably a bad example for me to use but the Spanish example could be a model. I take Mr. Allen's point about the billions that it would cost but, like Deputy Crowe, I think that if the customer can be given an enhanced experience, more people will use buses and trains instead of using cars. That was the point I was making.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank the witnesses for their attendance today and for submitting their statements in advance. In my short time in Dáil Éireann, I have never heard so many positive conversations take place about investment in public transport, electric buses, hydrogen buses, railways, electrification, new rail lines and investment in existing rail lines. It is very positive to hear that. As someone who has been a keen supporter of public transport for many years, I take great comfort in that. The Minister we have in place at the moment has a great understanding of that, which is helpful too.

It is also encouraging to read the four opening statements from the witnesses to see the issues addressed by the companies, including the ultimate need to decarbonise transport. This is not only about how to decarbonise buses and trains but to provide an alternative so we can decarbonise car transport and car dependency. The way we do that is by significantly investing in public transport.

The company representatives covered electrification. I will put a direct question on that shortly. They also covered the concept of transport-oriented development, which is key. The company representatives noted several of the urban centres for development where there are railways, including Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Galway. There is also great potential along the existing rail corridors we have. We could have higher density development along the rail lines in existing towns and settlements. Mr. Allen commented on how his preferred option would be to invest more in the existing lines, get them up, sweat the assets and get a good service out of them.

I want to ask about the electrification plan. DART+ is an ambitious plan. It is well overdue and really needed. We have low penetration of electrification in Ireland compared with many of our European counterparts. It is good to see this ambition. In the greater Dublin area the National Transport Authority has always favoured the northern line and the two western lines. In the past it has neglected the southern line, especially beyond Greystones to Wicklow. There are growing settlements there designated in the regional spatial strategy as growth towns. Does Irish Rail see scope for this once we start to build up the delivery of electrification? What is the plan once we have a specialist contractor in and start to get the supply chain up and moving, and perfect the electrification systems? We have not done significant electrification since the Malahide and Greystones extensions in the early 2000s. Does Mr. Allen see scope to go further in the electrification proposed at the moment? What about extending as far as Wicklow town? I have always taken the view that the NTA has ignored corridor F in the greater Dublin area transport plan. It would serve a population density and support investment in an existing line that has good infrastructure in place at the moment.

Mr. Frank Allen: My thanks to Deputy Matthews. He is right. The last electrification that took place in Ireland was the Malahide line, which was more than 20 years ago. It is important that we mobilise and develop those skills again. Once it starts and we get momentum behind it, there is scope to extend it even further.

I mentioned the procurement exercise for battery-electric. There are electric vehicles and battery-electric vehicles. The exercise is significant in that it allows us through the rolling stock

we are purchasing to provide what is effectively electrified transport beyond the reach of the electrification system. There are limits because of charging and so forth. There can be a bottleneck in a remote area. Anyway, the technology has moved rapidly in terms of densification of batteries. I believe moving in that direction or moving ahead with the purchase of up to 650 vehicles that we have talked about as part of this procurement exercise will be transformative for the full network. Public consultation and plans are furthest advanced on the Maynooth line. The reason is that providing additional capacity and electrification there would have the most impact in terms of influencing the pattern of development and so forth. I believe that is the right thing to do.

I will turn to the local area of interest of Deputy Matthews. I would say we are far from neglecting that line down to Wicklow. The most important concern I have about that line at the moment is to deal with an urgent problem of coastal erosion. We need to develop the resilience of our transport network. There is a significant issue in terms of coastal erosion along the east coast in particular. Unless it is attended to soon, it could put that whole line in some jeopardy. I am pleased to say that Government and the National Transport Authority have allocated funds in 2021 to begin the design work to deal with infrastructure resilience to address the coastal erosion issue. If it is not done soon it gets more and more difficult to do it over time. That is the first priority. We can then subsequently increase the capacity or frequency of service beyond that. I believe there is an urgent need to do that. People are talking about further expansion of the road network in the Glen of the Downs. There is an alternative to widening the Glen of the Downs. It is providing more rail transport along the coastal route.

Recently, we have appointed our consultants to do the design work. That work is being mobilised soon - in the coming weeks - to begin the design work to focus on the line Deputy Matthews has referred to.

Deputy Steven Matthews: It is good to hear that ambition in terms of expansion of electrification. I know the potential that battery-electric trains can provide as they travel from an electrified section charged. They can do an 80 km return journey. There is also the potential for discontinuous overhead electrification, whereby trains pick up charge. In reality we could look at electrifying Dublin to Cork without having to electrify the entire line from Dublin to Cork. There could be discontinuous sections where trains pick up charge. There have been great advancements on this in Germany. It is a reality, one we should be embracing.

I take the point made on the Dublin to Rosslare line. It is a line of significant importance in that it has direct connectivity to Europe as well. The coastal defence works are absolutely necessary. I believe there is scope for expanding the DART coastal proposal. We could look at that. We are extending an existing electrified line rather than trying to provide a new electrified line. It would be cost efficient to extend something that is already in existence and that already has good infrastructure in place. Moreover, from an engineering perspective, it is doable. For the purpose of public transport it not only gives people an option to get to work but it gives people in towns like Kilcoole, Newcastle, Wicklow and, with battery electrification, Arklow the scope to travel to work and benefit from recreation, education and all the things that a good, high-frequency, comfortable and reliable public transport system should offer growing populations.

Chairman: Can I go back in time? It is an unusual situation to have four chairperson designates, with the chairperson of the group and the operating companies, namely, Bus Éireann, Irish Rail and Dublin Bus. What is the structure? How does the company structure work? What is the interaction between the CIÉ board and the others? There are a relatively small

number of employees in CIÉ, with a little over 100. Then Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann and Irish Rail have large-scale employment. Between them they employ over 10,000 people. How does the structure work? How does Ms Ross find it works? It would be interesting to know in that context. I have a few operational questions for the other three chair designates.

Ms Fiona Ross: I am happy to address those. As I said at the outset, it is a holding company. We have an unusual and complex governance structure within the CIÉ group. It has certainly been subject to challenges in terms of how to make it work most effectively. Under the 1986 Act the operating companies are subsidiaries. They operate under company law whereas CIÉ is a statutory body. We certainly have encountered some challenges along the way. The arrival of the NTA and other key stakeholders has meant a change. There is a direct relationship between the operating companies and the NTA. The holding company has been in a different position as time has moved on. We have four worker directors sitting on the main board. My three chair colleagues on the call today sit on the main board with me and we have four independent directors as well. Our goal, as I said at the outset, is the fine line between fostering the autonomy of the operating companies and making it clear - I think it has been clear from the session today - that they are completely in control of the operations of their respective organisations.

The fiduciary duty and statutory responsibility that lie on my shoulders are to ensure the financial sustainability of the group. We consolidated the numbers into the main group. We are focused on financial sustainability. We talk about overall sustainability but, as can be seen from the operating companies, the way in which climate change and sustainability is operationalised will be through an operating company. We keep a watching brief on it at the main board.

On property and transport-oriented development, the parent company owns the property, while it is used by the operating companies. That is how it is currently structured and-----

Chairman: In terms of the strategies around transportation, is that done by the individual companies? CIÉ, as a holding company, has a role in financial probity and stewardship of the entire group. By whom are the assets in the group actually owned?

Ms Fiona Ross: The assets and liabilities are on a group balance sheet. They sit with me at the group. The Chairman is right that each individual company in front of the committee has its own strategy. The CIÉ Group strategy or holding company strategy is focused on a two-year financial sustainability strategy. The two bus companies and the rail company have much more operationally focused strategies, which they have outlined in detail today.

Chairman: That is one of the factors to get certainty around, in terms of the pension scheme, which is fast approaching a deficit of €1 billion. Is that a key concern for Ms Ross, as chair of the holding company?

Ms Fiona Ross: My absolute priority is to do as much as I can on that in my second term. We have made great progress in the past three years. We have been off track, legally, since 2017. We have made good progress. We may be lucky and make additional progress in the next couple of weeks but I cannot speak to that. The ballot is under way.

Given the scale of the investment outlined by the operating companies and what the State is giving to the public transport network, I owe it to taxpayers to make sure the organisation is as financially stable as possible. We are looking to reform the pension on that basis.

Chairman: I move to Mr. Murphy of Bus Éireann. I will raise two issues. We have the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area strategy, which Mr. Murphy will be familiar with, and

Bus Éireann has made adjustments in the city, which are to be welcomed, in recent routes. Where stands BusConnects in terms of Limerick? When will that come in? Where does Mr. Murphy see the future in terms of intercity routes for Bus Éireann? We had an issue where the intercity route between Limerick and Dublin has been discontinued. What is the future role of Bus Éireann in the provision of bus services? As an addendum, how do intercity routes fit into that?

Mr. Aidan Murphy: Coming from Limerick, the Chair will know that we have done a lot of work in terms of the city. Both the NTA and the Minister are committed to the concept of moving a BusConnects into Limerick in due course. Right now, there projects are on track for Dublin and Cork. Regarding Limerick, discussions are taking place. In the interim, we are working with the NTA to improve, as far as possible, the infrastructure of the bus network in Limerick city. Bus Éireann has always provided connectivity between the intercity connections. That is why we have our Expressway services, which are completely commercial. While the X12 route was removed, there are other commercial intercity services operating directly from Limerick. We have now 14 main routes. We are still the largest commercial operator providing intercity connections in the State. Part of the strategy around Expressway is to ensure that interconnectivity remains, strengthens and grows. We believe we have for the future a strong potential to maintain that network, provide connectivity into the city connections and ensure, as far as possible, that interconnectivity is alive. In the pandemic, we have demonstrated that connectivity was critical. That illustrates the importance of what we are doing and our strategy in regard to Expressway and development of city services in Limerick and beyond.

Chairman: I am a frequent user of rail. I have used the rail line to come to Dublin for many years. This is coming from a user as much as a politician. The service is highly punctual, staff are very good and broadband coverage has improved significantly but mobile coverage is still dire. If Mr. Allen is looking to encourage people to travel on public transport, the amenities must be there. Things have improved quite a lot but mobile coverage on the Dublin to Limerick rail line is very patchy. If Mr. Allen is looking to encourage people to travel on it for business and other reasons, the mobile coverage has to improve. One member of Mr. Allen's staff, Barry Kenny, would be familiar with this as it is something I have raised over many years.

On the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area strategy, where does Mr. Allen see the Limerick to Shannon rail link? We would like to interlink that with existing railway lines to create a Limerick metropolitan urban area which would use all the existing rail network in the city, out by Moyross, take the Galway line and do a spur from Cratloe or somewhere else to Shannon Airport. Where does Mr. Allen see that? His chief executive, Jim Meade, has been very proactive around these areas.

On the Limerick Junction to Limerick connection, a double line was laid but it is currently a single operation. It is one of the frustrating aspects that there was a double line there years ago and it was taken up. It is on lands owned by Irish Rail. Where does Mr. Allen see that progressing? My understanding is it would cut journey times by 15 minutes from Limerick to Cork.

I am looking at the integrated model around the city. The Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area transport strategy is unique in that for the first time ever it links Limerick to Shannon very directly. I have always felt that is a key element that needs to be driven. I ask for Mr Allen's thinking around the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area network with the existing rail line, Limerick Junction to Limerick with the double rail line and the new spur off the line which will allow someone getting off the plane at Shannon get onto the existing Galway to Limerick line and be able to come to Limerick comfortably and to Galway. Obviously, I would like them to

come to Limerick first. Will Mr. Allen give us a quick outline there?

Mr. Frank Allen: Iarnród Éireann made its submission to the consultation process relating to the Limerick-Shannon metropolitan area studies. The submission is supportive of the various initiatives the Chair mentioned. My view of rail transport in Limerick, at the moment, is that a fair description would be that we try to provide a very good service between Limerick and other cities.

Chairman: Which it is.

Mr. Frank Allen: In the future, we should be trying to provide much better rail services or commuter links within the Limerick metropolitan area. The various initiatives the Chairman described are ones we are keen on and supportive of-----

Chairman: There should be an enhanced commuter service between Limerick, Castleconnell and Birdhill. Castleconnell is a suburb and times of trains serving it are not great. There would be huge take up if the train timetable in respect of Castleconnell were more in keeping with what is necessary for people travelling to work.

Mr. Frank Allen: I agree. That is entirely consistent with what I am saying, which is that we need in our regional cities a commuter rail service serving those areas that are now so dependent on cars. In some senses, we are lucky to have in the ownership of CIÉ property that can be used for that.

Regarding areas, including Limerick to Limerick Junction, where there was a double track in the past which was pared back and became single line, similar to Galway-Athenry and so forth, we are giving high priority to see what we can do to double-track it. The initiative would be of real benefit to Limerick and Limerick Junction, not just in improving the journey time but also in terms of pursuing a freight strategy. If we had an inland port somewhere in the area of Limerick Junction and a double track between Limerick and Limerick Junction, passenger or freight journeys on their own might not be sufficient but the two modes taken together would justify the sort of investment we are talking about.

Chairman: When will Iarnród Éireann make a submission to the Department to upgrade the rail line between Limerick Junction and Limerick city to a double line?

Mr. Frank Allen: We have already put a proposal to the Department of Transport to do that.

Chairman: How was the proposal received?

Mr. Frank Allen: There is what I would describe as a commitment to providing commuter rail services in the regional cities. We got a very positive response to that. It is all framed by the availability of funding. That is the issue. The Department of Transport has responded positively to our suggestion that to have balanced regional development, regional cities will need commuter rail services. That includes the double-track initiative the Chairman mentioned.

Chairman: That is for the route between Limerick city and Limerick Junction?

Mr. Frank Allen: Yes, exactly.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I apologise to Mr. Allen if it seems I am picking on him in directing my questions to him. Will he update us on the status of the all-island rail review? Are there projects that are closer to being realised following the process?

Mr. Allen spoke about erosion on the east coast. How significant is the work that needs to be done? What are the areas affected and what is the timeline? It sounds like we are running out of time to deal with the matter.

Recently, proposals were made to make apprenticeships more attractive to employers. What plans do the transport companies have for apprenticeships?

Mr. Frank Allen: The all-island rail review was announced recently by the Department of Transport in Dublin and the Department for Infrastructure in Belfast. A steering group is being established and it is going to procurement to retain people to provide the review. I hope the review will take a wide view of what the benefits of public transport are and will include issues such as freight rather than just congestion relief around the cities. We have a very exciting opportunity and doing this in an integrated way with Northern Ireland is very welcome. The review is under way and the Department of Transport is leading. My colleagues in Iarnród Éireann, including the chief executive, are very much involved in the process.

On the resilience of rail infrastructure, the place that is most vulnerable to coastal erosion at the moment is south of Dublin, which I am sure the Deputy is pleased to hear. How urgent is it? The longer it takes for us to do the work, the more urgent it becomes. The unpredictability of major weather events, with once in 100 year events becoming more frequent, means that if nothing is done about the railway line south of Dublin, it will not be safe to operate within 20 or 30 years. I am very pleased this work has the support of the Department of Transport and that the design work is under way. When the work goes ahead, as I am confident it will, the coastal erosion will be dealt with for another generation and beyond. I am happy that people recognise the urgency of this work and that it will proceed in the coming years, with the most urgent places done first. Left unattended, the situation would be very serious.

On apprenticeships, we have continued to be very proactive in recruiting new apprentices. I recently met a class that had joined during the pandemic. We are very keen to recruit more women into our apprenticeship roles. Apprenticeship is a critical part of our people strategy and we are giving it a high priority. Much of the senior management of the company came through apprenticeships. We will continue to be absolutely committed to apprenticeship.

Mr. Ultan Courtney: Dublin Bus has long been associated with apprenticeships. Our training manager started off as an apprentice and is one of the few female apprentices in the business. She is very much an example to all women who wish to take up apprenticeships. We want to grow our apprenticeship scheme into the future. Like Iarnród Éireann, Dublin Bus wants people from different backgrounds to come forward. We should remember that 31% of employees in Dublin Bus come from 73 different countries. Dublin Bus is a public transport company that also wants to increase opportunities for anybody who wishes to take on work. The important point is that any organisation that has an apprentice scheme has a long-term future. Dublin Bus recruited a number of employees over the last year and will recruit nearly 100 more in the next year. The business is growing so apprenticeships are needed. We have new buses coming in so there will be new challenges.

Mr. Aidan Murphy: Bus Éireann is also in the business of expanding its apprenticeship scheme. There will be new technologies with hybrid buses, hydrogen buses and so on, which will require new expertise. I am sure everyone will have read the article published in *The Irish Times* yesterday, which highlighted the case of one of our female apprentices, Samantha Kao. We, like Dublin Bus, as Mr. Courtney stated, are anxious to attract as diverse a range of employees as possible into our apprenticeship scheme. The Minister for Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, visited our Broadstone office recently to highlight the work being done by Bus Éireann to expand its apprenticeship scheme.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Mr. Allen’s statement notes that “public transport is about people – those who use it, those who are connected by it, and those who deliver it.” Mr. Courtney’s paper refers to the ambition of Dublin Bus “to become the mobility partner of choice”. Will the transport companies describe their relationship with the National Transport Authority, NTA? How can it be improved? What are the differences and synergies?

I believe one of the best assets of any company is its staff. How would the witnesses describe industrial relations in their companies?

Mr. Aidan Murphy: We have always engaged very much with our employees. Over recent years, we have had difficulties with costs and efficiencies. We have had very open and transparent dialogue with our employees and we received tremendous co-operation from them. As a diverse company with employees spread throughout the Republic, we have invested in an online platform called Workvivo. Staff members can access the platform on their mobile phones and more than 80% of our employees are engaging with it. Our CEO constantly provides updates to our employees to ensure all of them are fully in tune with what the company is doing and how we are moving forward. It is important that employees are fully engaged with the company in terms of the strategies we employ. That is our approach.

Mr. Frank Allen: At its most recent meeting, the board of Iarnród Éireann had a lengthy discussion on a new people strategy. As the Senator mentioned, people are our most important asset. We have various training initiatives and are putting in place a joint industrial council. Iarnród Éireann is an organisation of 4,000 people. We try to solve issues that emerge as soon as possible and as far as possible within the organisation and without going to third parties. The idea is to try to resolve them as soon as possible as much as possible without the organisation going to third parties.

We cannot deliver all the other aspects of our strategy unless we have the people strategy in place in a robust way. We are absolutely committed to that and I share the conclusion of the committee on that.

There was a question about the relationship with the National Transport Authority. There is an excellent relationship. It is a robust one. Sometimes we complain that the authority does not give us more or wants us to do more in one way or the other. That is exactly as we would expect it to be with a regulatory or funding authority. Anyway, there is a professional relationship and rigour in the analysis that the authority carries out in the proposals we put forward. I know the people there at management level well and we are pleased with that relationship.

Mr. Ultan Courtney: The staff in our workplace are the most important people that we have along with our passengers. One of the simple tests we have is how long people stay with us. They tend to stay with us for a full career. When the competition came in with Go-Ahead Ireland, we found ourselves in a situation where not one person left Dublin Bus to go to Go-Ahead. That speaks volumes. It does not mean there is no tension. There is a tension between ourselves and the trade unions. It does not mean we do not have the same objectives but that sometimes we differ about how we achieve them. That tension is good for everyone at the end of the day provided we can continue to provide a service to the public. Continuity of service is most important.

Like Mr. Allen has said, there is a good tension between our company and the NTA. The NTA and ourselves are not the organisations we were five or ten years ago. At the end of the day, the authority has come a long way and so have we. We have learned a great deal. We have learned about public consultation, customer service and efficiency and effectiveness in the operations we provide. Most important, we recognise there is a future for everyone and a place at the table for everyone provided we provide value for money for the Government and a good service to customers. The future is bright.

Senator Jerry Buttimer: Mr. Courtney's curriculum vitae and rise to where he is today is testimony not only to him but to the aspiration that many of us would have in the sense that we can achieve what we want to achieve. His career achievement is something we should use more often and I congratulate Mr. Courtney for that. I have been watching him for a while and what he has achieved is significant. I am a major believer in worker directors on boards. What Mr. Courtney has done as chairperson of Dublin Bus is something on which we should commend him. My thanks to all our witnesses.

Ms Fiona Ross: I wanted to come back in on that point. The industrial relations apparatus and activities are related to the operating companies because they are where the bulk of the staff are based. The relationship with the trade union group has been excellent throughout the pension issue. We negotiated an agreement with the TUG at the end of 2019. We continue to work closely with TUG on the pension issue. I wanted to make that point to Deputies and to yourself, Chairman.

Chairman: Are you satisfied that you will come to a satisfactory conclusion on the pension issue in the short term?

Ms Fiona Ross: That is outside my control and the control of the board in the short term. The fact that the ballot is under way is certainly a staging post. The Pensions Authority has a significant role to play in this area. Absent those activities, this will come back to the board. We have a board meeting in June and we will be reflecting on the outcome of the ballot at that point.

Chairman: My thanks to all the witnesses, namely, Ms Ross, Mr. Allen, Mr. Murphy and Mr. Courtney, for attending today's engagement with the committee. I wish them all well. It has been a constructive meeting. Clearly, they are on top of their briefs. I wish them all the best on their reappointments.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.35 p.m. *sine die*.