

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR, TURASÓIREACHT AGUS SPÓRT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT, TOURISM AND SPORT

Dé Céadaoin, 17 Eanáir 2018

Wednesday, 17 January 2018

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Mick Barry,	John O'Mahony,
Imelda Munster,	Pádraig Ó Céidigh.
Catherine Murphy,	
Kevin O'Keeffe.	

Teachta/Deputy Fergus O'Dowd sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Robert Troy and Senators Frank Feighan and Ned O'Sullivan.

I propose that the committee go into private session to deal with some housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 1.39 p.m. and resumed in public session at 1.41 p.m.

Accessibility of Public Transport for People with Disabilities: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: We will resume in public session. A member of the committee has asked that if we have not finished our business by 2.45 p.m. we go into private session to discuss a couple of issues he wants to raise. Is that agreed? Agreed.

We will resume our discussion of the accessibility of public transport for people with disabilities. This is the second of our meetings. We met on 13 December 2017 with Senator John Dolan, Ms Joan Carthy, Mr. Chris White, Mr. Eddie Redmond, Ms Sarah Lennon and Dr. Margaret Kennedy, who represented a number of organisations, including the Disability Federation of Ireland, the Irish Wheelchair Association, the National Council for the Blind, the Irish Deaf Society and Inclusion Ireland. Dr. Kennedy is a disability activist. The purpose of today's meeting is to continue the discussion with a range of transport operators which have been invited to appear to discuss the accessibility of public transport for people with disabilities, the current status and future provision and to respond to the matters raised during the committee's previous hearing on this topic on 13 December 2017.

I will welcome the witnesses in the order in which we propose to hear their submissions. That order has been prepared by the committee's wonderful staff and there is no particular reason for it. The order is Ray Coyne, CEO, and Ms Clíodhna Ní Fhátharta, media and communications manager, Dublin Bus. From Iarnród Éireann, Mr. Jim Meade, operations director; from Bus Éireann, Mr. Ray Hernan, acting CEO, and Mr. John Sheridan, service manager, east region; from Transdev, Mr. Seamus Egan, performance director; and from the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland, Mr. Kevin Traynor and Mr. John Halpenny. That is the order in which I propose to call the witnesses.

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

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an of-

ficial either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I now invite Mr. Coyne, chief executive officer of Dublin Bus, to make his opening statement.

Mr. Ray Coyne: I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for the invitation to attend here today. It is a very important issue and I am grateful for the opportunity to address it.

As Ireland's largest public transport provider, with over 139 million customers a year, we play a key role in the provision of accessible public transport in the communities we serve. The primary barrier for customers with disabilities to our services in the 1990s related to step-entry vehicles and the challenges they posed for customers with mobility difficulties. In the late 1990s, Dublin Bus introduced its first low-floor vehicle and in the 2000s the company adopted a progressive policy that all new vehicles purchased would only be accessible low-floor vehicles. In 2013 Dublin Bus achieved a long-held goal of having a fleet that is 100% low-floor accessible. This required the replacement of over 1,000 vehicles from step-access to low-floor accessible access. This was good news not only for wheelchair users but for customers with mobility impairments, older customers and customers with buggies. The enhancement of the accessibility of our services requires a continuous programme of improvement. Our buses are now equipped with a low-floor chassis, kneeling suspension to further reduce step-entry height, a retractable ramp at entrance and a priority space for wheelchair users as standard. In addition to this, almost 50% of our fleet now has space for both a wheelchair user and a buggy. All buses provide a range of on-board facilities to assist visually, hearing and mobility impaired customers. These include multiple accessible seats in the lower saloon, colour contrasting handrails, and on-bus audio and visual location announcements on all buses. Having a fleet that is 100% accessible has proven to be vitally important in giving people with disabilities the confidence to use Dublin Bus services on a daily basis. This achievement was made possible by the acquisition of new state-of-the-art double-decker buses as part of our fleet replacement programme. The purchase of these buses was initially funded by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and subsequently by the National Transport Authority. I acknowledge their continued support in helping us achieve this goal for our 139 million customers. There have also been enhancements to the streetscape including accessible kerbing introduced at bus stops in the city. This stop infrastructure reduces the angle of boarding and provides near level boarding access for customers. It also includes tactile and colour contrasting paving. The roll-out of this infrastructure at bus stops continues today.

Dublin Bus has a dedicated accessibility officer whose role actively promotes the development of our accessibility policy. The accessibility officer works collaboratively with the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, Irish Wheelchair Association, Deaf Hear, St. Michael's House, Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind and the Irish Senior Citizens' Parliament. The group meets on a quarterly basis and considers a wide range of accessibility matters from the creation of our accessibility policy to the introduction of new features on buses. We have developed a close relationship with these agencies over the past 20 years. In 2008, Dublin Bus launched its travel assistance programme. The scheme encourages inclusivity across public transport by providing a personalised travel service to customers aged 18 and over free of charge. Provided by Dublin Bus, the scheme assists customers in the independent use of Dublin Bus, DART and Luas, in particular those with mobility and learning disabilities. It is funded by the NTA. Through this scheme, customers can avail of personal assistance and practical advice on how to travel independently on public transport. Our travel assistant will meet a customer at his or her home before he or she makes the next step of using public transport. With the help of our

travel assistant, a tailor-made travel plan is drawn up to meet each individual customer's needs. The personal relationship is hugely important, as is developing trust between the customer and the travel assistant. Since its launch, the scheme has gone from strength to strength with over 1,200 travel assist programmes provided in 2017.

It is our policy to ensure all our buses, information points and services are accessible and user friendly for all our customers. We review our training programmes on an ongoing basis, aiming to provide employees with the latest and most progressive training resources. We seek to further enhance the accessibility of our service through many initiatives and work processes. These include consulting with people with access problems to meet their requirements and expectations where possible, work with other external agencies such as local authorities to assist with infrastructure which improves access to our services, continuously review our service to see how best it can be improved, and upgrade our communication system and provide accessible information. While it is not possible to anticipate every challenge a customer may have on his or her journey with us, we work diligently with customers and stakeholders to anticipate problems and solve them as they arise. Dublin Bus has a strong working relationship with stakeholders in the accessibility area. Engaging with stakeholders allows us to react quickly when issues arise. One such issue was the availability of the wheelchair zone on board buses.

Dublin Bus joined the Irish Wheelchair Association and Transport for Ireland to develop and launch an awareness campaign highlighting the importance of the dedicated wheelchair zone on all our PSO buses. The multi-agency campaign initiative demonstrates the negative consequences which can impact a wheelchair user if they are unable to access the wheelchair zone on a Dublin Bus service. A series of awareness videos, featuring wheelchair users captures the effects and illustrates the challenges that arise if the wheelchair zone is occupied by another customer, including those travelling with a buggy. The series of videos launched as part of the campaign illustrate the simple process which IWA, Dublin Bus and TFI are encouraging all customers travelling with buggies to support and follow. Member can find these videos online in the buggy section of the IWA website. We are currently in discussions to run this campaign again in the coming months.

Over the past number of months, we have been working closely with local organisations at events for older people. It is our responsibility to ensure that our older customers feel safe while using our services so our presence at events such as the age friendly strategy road show and the over-55s showcase of talents is essential. Events like these allow us to promote safety and accessibility on our services while also giving our customers the opportunity to share their concerns or ask questions.

We have been proactive in raising awareness among employees about the health and safety risks for older customers with a poster campaign active throughout all our depots. We have been proactive in raising awareness among employees about the health and safety risks for older customers, with a poster campaign active throughout all our depots.

While we have made significant progress in the area of accessibility, challenges remain. I read with interest the submissions from the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, the Irish Wheelchair Association, the Disability Federation of Ireland and other stakeholders who appeared before this committee last December. We are always looking for ways to improve the service we provide to our customers and I want to assure these groups and members of this committee that any issues raised in their submissions will be dealt with fully by Dublin Bus. It is important to continue to build on the progress made on the accessibility of urban bus transport. Dublin Bus has a progressive accessibility policy, a key element of which is providing

employees with disability awareness training. All our customer facing employees receive disability awareness and customer care training. We have over 2,500 drivers, inspectors and customer service employees who deal with the public on a daily basis. Dublin Bus is in the process of addressing the area of hidden disabilities in employee training. Dublin Bus works closely with disability user groups in the design of our disability awareness training programme. As part of this programme we now include a video which focuses on how to assist customers with Alzheimer's disease and other hidden disabilities. This improvement is a direct result of the close co-operation between Dublin Bus and these groups. We have engaged with Headway with regard to people with hidden disabilities. Headway is a voluntary organisation that specialises in brain injury rehabilitation and assists people who have been ill or injured to rebuild their skills to achieve the best quality of life that they can. A key element of this training is to create awareness on disabilities which are hidden and highlight that these customers may have difficulties that are not visible but they may require some extra assistance. We are also examining the possibility of redesigning our public offices to make them more accessible to customers who have hidden disabilities.

As chief executive officer of Dublin Bus, I am very proud to lead an organisation that is an industry leader in accessibility. Public transport enables all people in our society to fully participate in the work, social and leisure activities that Dublin offers. We are not complacent and I acknowledge that more work is needed to address issues experienced by people with disabilities. Dublin Bus will continue its commitment to playing a leading role in helping to create an accessible and inclusive public transport system in Ireland. That concludes my opening statement and I would be happy to any questions that may arise.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Coyne for his excellent and comprehensive statement. We will hear from all our witnesses first and then members can address questions to them. I now invite Mr. Jim Meade from Iarnród Éireann to make his opening presentation. I would point out that we invited the chief executive to this meeting but I understand that he is out of the country. I am not being rude but just stating a fact.

Mr. Jim Meade: He is not available today and as I will point in my opening statement, I am responsible for all our services as director of train operations.

Chairman: I do not want to appear rude and I respect Mr. Meade's position and welcome him here today. However, the group that presented to this committee previously wanted the chief executives of the various organisations to be invited here. We welcome those who are in attendance but understand that some cannot be here. It is important that our engagements are with those who are at the highest level in the companies. I accept that Mr. Meade is at the highest level in terms of operations at Iarnród Éireann.

Mr. Jim Meade: The Chairman's comments are noted. My colleagues and I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for the invitation to attend today to discuss the topic of accessibility of public transport for people with disabilities as it relates to Iarnród Éireann. As director of railway undertaking, I am responsible for our train operations and the maintenance of our fleet and our stations, all of which directly relate to the accessibility of our services. I want to give the committee an overview of where we have come from, our current service provision and planned improvements as well as future measures needed to give the best and most independently usable service possible in the future.

Virtually the entire Iarnród Éireann rail network was originally developed in the 19th century and when significant renewal investment returned to the railway in the 1990s, it is fair to

say that the legacy of that Victorian era still remained with us. Apart from the DART network, our trains had significant accessibility issues and stations had not been upgraded to modern accessibility standards. However, in 1995 we appointed an accessibility liaison officer, adopted the latest accessibility standards for fleet and buildings and established a disability users group in 1997 which operates to this day and includes the major representative bodies for the mobility and sensory impaired. This ensured that the benefits of Exchequer funded investment in trains, stations and customer systems throughout the intervening decades were enjoyed by all customers, with direct input to design via our disability users group.

This has ensured that all our Intercity trains have dedicated wheelchair spaces, and wheelchair accessible toilets, and all are accessible via a mobile ramp. All DART and commuter trains are accessible via a mobile ramp and have an open area which can accommodate wheelchairs as well as designated areas. All new stations and all major station refurbishment programmes ensured accessibility was incorporated into the design, including ramps and lifts for access to all platforms. Design features for the visually impaired such as tactile markings on platforms and colour contrasts on board services have enhanced the safety and usability of the travelling environment. An ambitious programme was well under way to complete necessary accessibility works at all stations. However, it was regrettable that this proved to be one of the many casualties when the country's economic crisis caused major rail investment grind to a halt. While significant progress was made, we are acutely aware that there is much more to be done.

While our train fleet is now accessible, there is in all instances a gap between train and platform to ensure the safe operation of services. For this reason, a mobile ramp is used by staff to assist in boarding and alighting of wheelchair users. As members of the committee will be aware, we are seeking to commence a major order of new trains to cater for growth in demand across our network and planned electrification of the greater Dublin area rail lines as part of the DART expansion programme, including DART underground. In any tender process, we will request companies bidding to build fleet to include solutions such as automated ramps from the train to facilitate independent use of our services by the mobility impaired. I would advise members of the committee that the Victorian legacy to which I referred at the outset results in platform heights and gaps which have the potential to impact on the effectiveness of some automated ramp solutions, particularly at curved platforms, including those at major stations such as Connolly Station in Dublin and Kent Station in Cork.

Today, 118 of our 144 stations have all platforms accessible, with the remaining 26 stations having at least one platform accessible. We have two prioritised programmes to address the remaining stations and to improve accessibility standards within other stations, as funding becomes available. A prioritised programme to remove impediments or restrictions on access both entering and within station areas is progressing, covering 54 stations. The funding envelope from the National Transport Authority, NTA, has increased steadily in recent years for accessibility projects, from €250,000 in 2015, to €510,000 in 2016 and €2.4 million in 2017, which included a new access to platforms Nos. 6 and 7 in Connolly Station, and which saw 26 of those 54 stations addressed. The 2018 allocation will be confirmed shortly and we are ready to proceed with a range of projects.

A separate programme which would provide lift and footbridge access at stations without all platforms accessible has commenced, with planning permission secured for Carlow and Mullingar and planning applications well under way for Castleknock and Ennis. The timescales for these works will be dependent on funding availability.

On a daily basis we assist hundreds of customers, be they wheelchair users, of reduced mobility, or visually impaired, as they use our stations and our services. The committee will be aware that we advise mobility impaired customers to give notice where possible to ensure we can provide any assistance needed. I would stress, however, that this is advised and not essential, and we make every endeavour to provide assistance at all times, whether notice is less than the advised 24 hours or whether no notice is possible. This is the case today in many instances, particularly where our staff have well established relationships with regular users who require assistance. In addition, as I mentioned above, 26 of our stations remain partially accessible and notice ensures we can plan that trains are directed to serve accessible platforms at these stations when assistance is required. However, we want to work towards a future where any notice is ultimately eliminated and have worked with the representative bodies on our disability users group to develop plans to achieve this. Later this month we will commence a pilot programme on DART stations to improve assistance for customers. This will move away from a situation where we have many stations partially staffed to a “hub station” concept where nominated hub stations are permanently staffed. Staff will be mobile between the hub stations and no more than two other stations served by that hub, meaning assistance and response times will be much improved. We will reduce the advised notice to four hours, but continue to respond to requests for assistance in all situations. We will liaise with the disability users group and individual users to ensure improvements are being delivered and issues addressed and after six months will review the pilot programme, both for its expansion to commuter services and for further reductions in the advised notice period.

We are also in the process of introducing Intercity customer service officers on trains across the Intercity network. Ultimately, as we complete this during 2018, this will ensure a turn up and go service for the vast majority as there will always be assistance available when boarding and alighting each train. This will provide customer service improvements on board for all customers also, including connection information, seat reservations, delay assistance and addressing anti-social behaviour issues.

Building on and further to the initiatives I have just outlined, we are also working with regular mobility and sensory impaired users of our services to develop a dedicated assistance app which will provide another channel by which we can engage with users, provide assistance and improve service. We hope to develop this in 2018, and begin a trial of this facility by the end of the year. We are a national railway and have a responsibility to provide the best possible service to all our customers. We are confident that initiatives being introduced this year will result in significant improvements for customers with disabilities in using our services to live their lives, and to be full participants in our society and our economy. They will be the latest in what has been a continuous programme of development, which will also form the foundation for future improvements.

We welcome support for the investment needed as we build further on this, both for our fleet and our stations. I am happy to take questions.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Meade for his comprehensive address. I call Mr. Hernan from Bus Éireann to make his opening presentation.

Mr. Ray Hernan: I thank the Chairman for the invitation to speak today. Bus Éireann, in partnership with our stakeholders, including the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Transport Authority, NTA, is committed to providing fully accessible services under the Disability Act 2005. Bus Éireann has 100% accessible city services in Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, and fully accessible town services in Sligo, Athlone, Navan,

Dundalk, Balbriggan, and Drogheda. Our intercity commuter and rural services are not fully accessible but their enhancement is a key priority for us in 2018. Currently, Bus Éireann operates five regional coach routes that are wheelchair accessible, which include Navan to Dublin City University, DCU, with three accessible stops, Waterford to Cork with four accessible stops, Galway to Athlone with end-to-end accessibility, Galway to Ballina with end-to-end accessibility, and Letterkenny and Lifford to Dublin with end-to-end accessibility.

It is Bus Éireann policy to procure accessible vehicles as part of the continuing programme of fleet replacement and upgrading. The company follows best practice when assessing and improving the accessibility of our services. Since 2008, it has been a legal requirement to ensure all new fleet acquired is accessible. The NTA is responsible for funding the public service obligations, PSO, fleet and we work closely with it in that regard. In recent years, all our major bus stations have been made fully accessible. In addition, audio onboard announcements for main stops are made on the majority of our services, which assists the visually impaired. In 2018, it is our intention to roll out this key initiative for all 6,000 bus stops across the network.

In addition to the above, we are in the process of converting our online timetables into html format to allow for ease of use for those with visual impairments. This process is at an advanced stage and will be completed by mid-February 2018. Our website, *buseireann.ie* meets the web content accessibility guidelines, WCAG, standard and is 95% compliant in this regard. Converting files to html will help to convert the remaining gap and facilitate those users who wish to access web timetables using a screen reader.

While there has been a significant amount of investment surrounding accessibility, we accept that there are still shortcomings. We will continue to work with all stakeholders to improve further the service offering. A multi-stakeholder approach is key to achieving this. Over the past number of years, we have invested in our bus stations in order to ensure that they follow best practice and are fully accessible. While this investment is ongoing, common features in our bus stations now include, but are not limited to, automatic doors, accessible toilets, ticket offices with audio hearing loop, accessible ticket vending machines, and wheelchair accessible bus bays in the majority of bus stations.

Bus Éireann employs a full-time accessibility and information officer to ensure high quality accessible and safe services are, where possible, available to our customers. This officer also co-ordinates our accessibility user group, which includes the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA, DeafHear and the disability focus group, which is a part of the Dublin Community Forum. In addition, the requirements of our special needs passengers are covered as part of the driver certificate in professional competence, CPC, training courses that are conducted each year. All Bus Éireann training inspector located in all main depots nationwide are qualified to provide training in all aspects of accessibility. In addition, last year a cohort of drivers was also trained in recognising and dealing with customers who may have dementia. This was facilitated by the representative group dementia understand together.

In terms of our fleet, all new vehicles purchased in the last number of years for PSO services are accessible through low floor access. This includes kneeling access, which involved the vehicle being lowered to bring the entrance stop area in line with or close to the curb, or a wheelchair lift. In addition, all our vehicles also feature handrails that assist with ascending or descending the entrance steps and contrasting strips that define each step. We continue to work with the NTA regarding bus stop infrastructure and to identify vehicle types best suited to the varying needs of all our customers, while also suitable for roads and associated infrastructure. This recently resulted in route 32 becoming accessible between Letterkenny, Lifford and Dub-

lin.

Currently, 86% of Bus Éireann's road passenger fleet of 680 vehicles is wheelchair accessible. With the investment plan for 2018 this figure will increase to 92% by the end of this year. Bus Éireann operates a mixture of vehicle types, from low floor city buses to high sided coaches. All low floor buses operating on city services, along with a small number of commuter routes, are 100% accessible and advance booking is not required for these services. The majority of intercity commuter and rural services are operated with high sided coaches featuring a wheelchair lift. This necessitates a minimum of 3.5 m of space in order to accommodate the wheelchair user and operate the lift in a safe manner. Local authorities are responsible for pathways and kerbing. We work with their staff on the requirements for wheelchair accessible stops. It is my understanding that the NTA is providing funding toward the construction of more of these stops.

There is one wheelchair space on all our vehicles. A reservation system is in place for passengers who wish to book a space on a Bus Éireann coach. In order to accommodate a wheelchair, all coach types used on an accessible service require the removal of up to four seats, prior to the journey, along with an operational check on the wheelchair lift and the accompanying restraint mechanisms to ensure the wheelchair can be securely clamped into place.

What I have outlined is a key aspect of why advanced booking is required. The booking system necessitates any intending customer to book 24 hours in advance of his or her journey on weekdays by contacting the Bus Éireann information line. Due to operational constraints, bookings for weekends and Monday travel require 48 hours' notice and must be made no later than 3 p.m. on the Friday beforehand. In this way, customers can be guaranteed the wheelchair space and Bus Éireann can make the necessary internal arrangements for it. This type of reservation system is in line with the prevailing practices across other EU countries. Bus Éireann is one of the only coach operators in the State offering wheelchair accessibility on its services. While there are considerations, both in terms of logistics and financial constraints, Bus Éireann remains fully committed to an ongoing roll-out with several more routes to be added in 2018. In this current year these additional services will be available from accessible bus stations only, while some key bus stops *en route* are being redesigned to accommodate wheelchair accessible coaches.

Routes to be rolled out include the Waterford to Dublin airport, Galway to Dublin city, Limerick to Dublin airport and Belfast to Dublin city. As I noted earlier, wheelchair accessibility was recently introduced on route 32 and our first wheelchair passenger used this service last week. In conclusion, Bus Éireann remains fully committed to the roll out of wheelchair accessibility and enhanced facilities for passengers with disabilities on all our services. We will continue to work with all stakeholders, including local authorities and the NTA in order to address some of these particular challenges. We have committed to improvements in 2018, which I have already outlined. These include online timetables converted to html, accessibility rolled out on additional routes, more driver training to coincide with new accessible routes, with all city and greater Dublin area, GDA, bus stops to be audited within quarter one of 2018 to assess their ability to be used by wheelchair accessible passengers. In addition, we are going to roll out audio announcements for all stops across the network in 2018.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to address it. We are conscious of our special role as a State transport provider and the operator of the largest nationwide public transport network, to comply with the higher standards expected of us as a public body. While much work remains to be done I am very much committed to ensuring we meet those standards as best we can as we

continue to recover from the financial and operational challenges of the past year.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Hernan very much indeed for his comprehensive statement. I now invite Mr. Seamus Egan from Transdev to make his opening statement.

Mr. Seamus Egan: I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for their invitation to attend today to discuss the accessibility of public transport for people with disabilities, the current status and future provision as it relates to Luas and Transdev Dublin Light Rail.

Firstly, I will give the committee a brief overview of Luas and Transdev's involvement in Luas since its launch in 2004. Luas is a state-of-the-art light rail transit system that provides an accessible, attractive and unique mode of public transport in Dublin. Compliant with current accessibility and environmental standards for transport systems, it offers accessibility for all. This philosophy has been a cornerstone of the design and development of the system from the initial phases of the project. Luas operates two main lines serving the north, south and west of Dublin city, the red line and the green line. The red line is 20 km in length, has 32 stops and runs from Tallaght-Saggart to the Point-Connolly. The green line is 24.5 km in length, has 35 stops and runs from Bride's Glen to Broombridge through the city centre. All Luas stops and trams are wheelchair accessible.

Transdev operates Luas under contract to the National Transport Authority and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. It is a privilege for Transdev to operate a safe, reliable form of public transport carrying some 103,000 passengers on average per day. Transdev are experts worldwide in operating transport systems, including light rail, buses, shuttles and taxis. It is our view that developing accessibility in public transport would include a number of key objectives including consultation with the relevant advocacy groups at design stage. TII and Transdev, through the Luas disability users' group - members of which attended this committee on 13 December - engage with relevant stakeholders to ensure that Luas and future Luas extensions are designed to meet the needs of all the public. Design for accessibility on Luas has focused on people with mobility and sensory impairments. Well thought out surfacing, furniture, stop facilities, clear signage, audio announcements and destination displays all serve to make the system easier to navigate.

I will now turn to the review with the relevant advocacy groups during construction. The Luas disability user group is consulted throughout construction and on-site visits take place to inspect and review solutions. Amendments to design are agreed and implemented as required. This approach greatly reduces the requirement for retrofitting solutions post construction. There are agreed formal processes for developing accessibility further during operation. Luas with disability user group meetings take place on a quarterly basis. TII, Transdev and the relevant advocacy groups meet and review Luas operations and develop accessibility solutions. TII and Transdev have been proactive in establishing procedures and implementing staff training and awareness initiatives, which further enhance the accessibility of the system.

With regard to working in collaboration, Transdev strongly believes that in order for Dublin and Ireland to be seen as a world class transport provider, it requires all stakeholders to work together and to share best practise and key learnings. We are delighted to be members of the transport integration group set up and run by the National Transport Authority. Already we are seeing the benefits of having key transport providers sitting at the same table exploring ideas and sharing potential solutions to common challenges.

We thank the committee for its invitation and we welcome the opportunity to discuss the

issues raised on the 13 December 2017 by the transport users. We understand that Luas is not perfect. There are improvements to be made in areas such as audio announcements at key times and locations. Through regular and formal consultation we aim to meet the needs of all transport users, to deliver a transport system that is as equally convenient for a person with a disability or a carer, as it is for the rest of society so that anyone can use public transport to get on with his or her life, without additional challenges or having to rely on the kindness of strangers.

I note the Chairman's comment on the chief executive attending, and I will take this back to the chief executive. This concludes my statement and I am happy to take any questions.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Egan for the comprehensive statement. I appreciate that accessibility for all is obviously much better than in Victorian times, since the Luas has been set up more recently, but it clearly is a fundamental principle that the Luas fulfils.

I invite Mr. Kevin Traynor from the Coach Tourism Transport Council of Ireland to make his statement.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: I thank the committee for affording us this opportunity to make a submission on the very important issue of the accessibility of public transport for people who have a disability. The Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland, CTTC, is the representative body for Ireland's coach touring companies and Ireland's private bus operators. CTTC members are experts in coach hire and transport solutions, including: airport transfers, day tours, extended touring, incentive travel, golf tours, school transport and provision of scheduled services. In addition to specialising in long distance scheduled services, many of our members also operate licensed bus services in towns and cities throughout Ireland.

All CTTC members are family owned companies, with a combined fleet of 1,500 coaches, employing more than 3,500 people directly. The CTTC comments and makes representations regularly on matters of concern to its members such as public transport, school transport, the coach tourism sector and the tourism industry generally.

CTTC believes the availability of and access to public transport is essential for many people with disabilities to play a full and active part in society, engage with their communities and to access services and work. Accessibility to public transport is of critical importance to those who have no other form of transport and is a key challenge with a rapidly ageing population. It ensures a quality of life which is taken as given norm for public transport passengers without a disability. Private operators currently operate quality scheduled route services throughout the country under licence from the National Transport Authority and are uniquely placed to improve transport services in a cost effective manner. There are, however, significant barriers currently, which are restricting the continued positive growth in the provision of fully accessible services that I will set out for the committee.

One of these challenges is the cost of fully accessible transport. In private sector transport, accessibility is restricted due to limited financial resources and the substantial cost of providing accessibility features. Private operators face additional costs in excess of €30,000 to purchase a fully accessible vehicle. There is a requirement for positive national and EU incentives to create a sound business case for owning and operating accessible vehicles. In addition, funding should be provided from State resources to private operators for increased staff training, pre-journey information and access point of contact in order to put systems in place to deal with requests for accessible vehicles.

A further challenge faced by private transport operators is the shared use of existing infrastructure. Section 62 of the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008 was included to facilitate access by non-public funded transport operators to bus stations and railway stations but this has failed to materialise. Investment in infrastructure is also a challenge. There is no point in providing accessible vehicles if the infrastructure is not available to support these services. All local authority transport plans must provide accessibility infrastructure and ensure sufficient funding is available to complete the necessary work. Other infrastructural barriers include managing the accessibility of infrastructure in small towns and villages to curb illegal parking in bus stops and provide accessible toilets and associated facilities at private resting areas and stations.

There is clear evidence that in the past there has been a communication failure between statutory bodies. There is, therefore, an urgent requirement to ensure there is a joined up thinking process put in place between planners, transport providers and statutory agencies to facilitate fully accessible transport infrastructure in any new development, and to maximise resources to ensure a planned cohesive approach to optimise delivery.

CTTC welcomes the opportunity to make this submission and looks forward to liaising with the committee and contributing to the provision of an enhanced public transport system that is value for money and provides a public transport system that is accessible to all users.

Chairman: Go raibh maith agat Mr. Traynor. We will now go to the committee members. The tradition has been that it goes in the order of Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and the Independent parties. In view of the very comprehensive statements we have had, I ask that members' contributions contain more questions than statements to get to the nub of the matter. After this session with the current witnesses the regulators will appear before us and then the committee intends to produce a comprehensive report to bring about change. This is what we really want.

Senator John O'Mahony: I will be brief. As the Chairman said, the statements are very comprehensive. At our previous meeting, disability groups outlined many major problems. The witnesses today have told us that they obviously have a lot done but have more to do and funding also seems to be an issue. I will address my first question on private coach hire to Mr. Traynor. He referred to shared use of infrastructure. Perhaps this can be answered later on. Mr. Traynor said that section 62 of the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008 was included to facilitate use of bus stations, but that has never happened.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: Not really.

Senator John O'Mahony: Why?

Mr. Kevin Traynor: There are a number of reasons for it. There are problems with much of the current infrastructure. For instance, Busáras is over capacity and is no longer fit for purpose as a central capital hub.

Senator John O'Mahony: Therefore, it is not going to happen.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: No.

Senator John O'Mahony: Okay.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: However, the point is that effectively it needs to be incorporated in any future development. That is why my submission proposes joined-up thinking from everybody,

including local authorities and planners, not just to look at what we have but to look at future planning for provision and accessibility. For instance, local authorities claim they do not have the funding to provide the necessary infrastructure.

Senator John O'Mahony: The legacy of Victorian infrastructure has presented Iarnród Éireann with particular problems. Mr. Meade mentioned the links from platforms to the carriages. With staff reductions, there are now many more unmanned stations, particularly the smaller ones. That creates further difficulties for people with disability. Mr. Meade referred to the 24-hour notice to be given. Surely that contradicts an improved service.

Mr. Jim Meade: The improved service will come from putting people on-board the service so that when a passenger arrives at an unmanned station, the person is there on the train to assist any user who requires it. That is not currently the case on our intercity services. The unmanning of stations is about bringing people from behind the booking office window because many of our interactions are now web-based or machine-based. The number of transactions through the booking office is quite small - barely above 10%. We now want to bring them to the front of house to interact directly with the customer and have more touch-time with the customer.

Senator John O'Mahony: I can see the reason, but I am saying it creates further complications, but Mr. Meade has answered it.

On the last occasion I raised this issue with some of the visually impaired people. I am glad to hear Mr. Hernan say that Bus Éireann will have audio announcements and others stated it also. In terms of implementing some of the changes needed to help people with disability, it is not all about funding; it is about the logistics of doing it. That is the impression I have. I am glad that is a target for 2018.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I welcome the representatives of the transport service providers and thank them for their very informative presentations. My first question is general. Do they comply with some directive on the percentage of their funding to be set aside to provide an upgrade in disability services? Of every €10 they spend, how much is geared towards improving disability access and safe travel?

My next question may be parochial and relates to joined-up thinking between Iarnród Éireann and Bus Éireann with regard to Kent Station in Cork. The entrance to the Kent Station has been changed. What protocols were put in place for passenger access to the station in the event of one of the lifts going out of service? Why did Irish Rail not put a ramp in place in the new station? At the moment if the lift breaks, there is no ramp access for wheelchair users from the new entrance. Was there a breakdown in communication there?

Twenty-four hours seems like a long time for people to have to give notification. Could that be reduced to four hours? Mr. Hernan spoke about Bus Éireann, but for rail users, could the 24-hour notice be reduced to four hours?

What efforts has Irish Rail made to incorporate or retrofit automated wheelchair ramps into their carriages? In its recent purchases Irish Rail has failed to the required standard by not having the wheelchair space and wheelchair-accessible toilets in each carriage.

Chairman: Deputy O'Keeffe can come back again. We just want to get the initial questions.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I have one other question. Why does Bus Éireann not have audio

announcements on its service as Dublin Bus has? What percentage of the Bus Éireann fleet has a screen display for its passengers? Dublin Bus seems to be more advanced. I accept that Bus Éireann is playing catch-up in funding, but is it making progress on the screen display for passengers?

Mr. Jim Meade: I will respond first as several of the questions were for me. I referred to the NTA in my presentation. There is ring-fenced accessibility funding, which we agree with the NTA. We have an accessibility pot that is agreed every year. We are awaiting finalisation of the current year's pot. The presentation stated that €2.7 million was ring-fenced for accessibility last year. We do not need any extra money for any future developments; they are automatically accessibility compliant.

We intend extending the four-hour notice across the network. We expect the pilot to run well because we are already running it informally. I would say that in excess of 100 times daily people just turn up and go and we assist them. Reducing from 24 hours to four hours is a guideline and we regularly do far better than that. As we move on to our on-board service where we help put people on board, people will again turn up and go because a member of staff will be on board to assist people.

The Deputy asked about the entrance to Cork station. In the unlikely event of a failure - we have specified the lifts realising the amount of work they will get - we have the option of using the Glanmire Road. The Deputy is very familiar with the station and will know that the old lifts or ramps can be used from the Glanmire Road. There are alternative means to access the station in the unlikely event of lift failure because we have learned from our experience and the quality and design of lift gone in there now - I might regret saying this - should give us a very high level of reliability.

On level of capacity, we are required to work to an EU standard on new train design. All our trains have capacity in excess of the guidelines, which is 10% of capacity to have either priority seating or wheelchair access. Regarding wheelchair access, the passenger capacity guidelines refer to the length of a train. Train carriages vary in length from 12 m to 25 m. We are ahead of the guidelines and technical specifications and the EU directive. We have priority seating in every carriage so that people in wheelchairs can, after being accompanied to a train, transition into seats. We are well in excess of the guidelines in that regard. For example, the Mark 4 Cork train has 400 seats, nearly 50 of which are priority seating and - I am doing the maths in my head - with ten wheelchair spaces.

Mr. Ray Hernan: The Deputy raised a number of points about Bus Éireann. Key funding relates to fleet replacement. Since 2015, all of our buses have audio systems, the most recent visual technology and access via low flooring. The issues that we face this year do not concern funding as much as they do the logistics and practicalities of trying to set up audio and visual responses for 6,000 bus stops. Approximately 550 of the main stops have been recorded so far. A degree of co-ordination is required between us and, for example, the NTA in order to ensure consistency in the naming of bus stops. We may not be the only people stopping at a certain bus stop, particularly on intercity routes, so we need to ensure that whatever name we are using is also being used by other parties. We were sidetracked from our commitment to certain aspects last year, given the other issues that we were dealing with, but they are back on the agenda this year in terms of dealing with the audio and visual aspects to which I referred.

The Deputy also mentioned the issue of notice. I would be hesitant to commit to less than 24 hours notice, given the practicalities of having to take seats off a bus. A bus must be brought

to a garage so that they can be removed, as seats are not taken off just in advance of a journey. It takes time. We also need to ensure that the lift is working. I would prefer to be 100% sure that, when we commit to something, we can deliver on it. Unfortunately, that has not occurred in some instances for various reasons, including a breakdown in the chain of responsibility. We need to get that right before we can reduce the timelines.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: On that issue, is it because the bus is full at other times? Can the space not be kept? Is that not viable?

Mr. Ray Hernan: It is not, particularly on our commuter routes where capacity in terms of bus size is becoming a greater issue. When a 63-seat bus already does not have excess capacity, removing four seats for a requirement that may not arise is not practical. However, there are two dedicated buses that provide wheelchair access everyday on a number of routes into Dublin. We try to meet the requirement in that way as opposed to by meeting random or rare applications on other routes. The number of people who use our service is minimal. We need to be cognisant of that. We like to believe that we can encourage more use, but it would not be practical to take four seats off each bus all day everyday.

Chairman: Mr. Hernan is saying that, the busier the bus route, the less likely it is that Bus Éireann can dedicate a seat to people with disabilities, for example, wheelchairs.

Mr. Ray Hernan: We cannot dedicate seating permanently, but if there is a request-----

Chairman: Deputy O’Keeffe’s point is that such a seat is more likely to be sought on a busy route because more people are travelling on it. This goes to the core of the Deputy’s point. Are they being treated as second class citizens? I do not want to take over the Deputy’s question.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: No, it is fine. Like a car park, there may be no disabled drivers using it 90% of the time, but spaces for them are always kept.

Mr. Ray Hernan: We are trying to achieve a balance between - I hate to say it, but I will be upfront - the commerciality of the situation with our absolute obligations. We need to get that right in terms of the 24-hour notice. None of our city services requires notification, and they comprise the vast majority of our services. We are trying to improve the fleet and ensure that, even if the seats have already been removed, buses are accessible. That has been a problem. We will be at 92% accessibility by the end of this year. Where it is realistic and we believe there is a necessity to provide a permanent reduction in capacity to facilitate a wheelchair user, we will consider that.

Chairman: Deputy Munster will contribute next, but I will put this to Mr. Hernan in a different way. While I accept that his comments are genuine, the fact is that the loser will be the disabled person who cannot give Bus Éireann notice but who must travel and needs that space. Demand for it is likely. Could Mr. Hernan give us the statistics on this matter? It is a critical issue for the disabled people and their spokespersons who are present, notwithstanding the good news in many respects that Mr. Hernan has provided.

Mr. Ray Hernan: We would be more than happy to facilitate that. We will pull the statistics together.

Chairman: We can examine them. Mr. Hernan mentioned commerciality. I do not want to pick him up negatively, but this is a public service and it should be available to people with disabilities in particular. Mr. Hernan is not saying that it is not a public service, of course. I

will not put words in his mouth.

Mr. Ray Hernan: To clarify, we are a public service body, so commerciality is not the priority, but capacity is a challenge. There are numerous routes on which we do not have sufficient capacity and we leave passengers behind. I do not want to augment that unnecessarily, but if there is a demand, we will recognise and respect it.

Chairman: I appreciate Mr. Hernan's commitment on that. Deputy Munster is next, but Deputy Barry must leave at-----

Deputy Mick Barry: At 2.50 p.m.

Chairman: That is not a problem.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I wish to ask the witnesses from Iarnród Éireann about the free travel pass. At our December meeting, disability groups raised the issue of the requirement, as per Iarnród Éireann's protocol, of booking in advance. Along with that booking comes a charge of €5 for a single journey or €10 for a return journey. The witnesses can correct me if I am wrong, but my understanding is that this charge is against EU regulations. If so, why is Iarnród Éireann charging people? Aside from those who need assistance gaining access, does that charge also apply to pensioners in receipt of a free travel pass who, for whatever reason, decide to book in advance? If they had someone with them to assist them on and off a train, would that charge still apply?

Mr. Hernan stated that Bus Éireann had an accessibility and information officer. That is the first I heard of it, and I have been in contact with Bus Éireann numerous times about a lack of accessibility for wheelchair users locally and across the State. Is the contact number advertised at stations and so on to members of the public - travelling customers - who have a grievance? Is it visibly displayed at every bus station or bus stop so that members of the public can contact the officer with concerns?

Another important question I want to ask is how many times were wheelchair users who followed the company's protocol let down in 2017. I am sure the company keeps a record of the number. One keeps a record to ensure services can be improved and maintained. Based on the records for 2017 alone, how many customers who required wheelchair access were let down? I could refer to numerous incidents. A constituent of mine who travelled to Dundalk Institute of Technology was let down no fewer than 20 times in 2017. I could also refer to the case of a gentleman from Laytown who is regularly left sitting at the side of the road. If a low-floor bus does not come for him, the driver tells him that he is not qualified to operate the lift. That is scandalous. The affected gentleman, with many others across the State, has been left at the side of the road on numerous occasions.

I have a question on booking 24 hours in advance. Is it not the case that many stations across the State seek 48 hours notice? It was said this type of reservation system was in line with the prevailing practice in other EU countries. For weekend reservations, one has to make a reservation by 3 p.m. on Friday. Therefore, if someone decides to visit a family on a Sunday, he or she will get the two fingers. If a passenger wants to use public transport, he or she does not have a chance because Bus Éireann must be let know by 3 p.m. on the Friday what his or her plans are for the Sunday. One could not make it up.

The delegation referred to the fact that seats needed to be removed, as well as the more commercial aspect. Does that not speak volumes? I acknowledge that there is an issue with the

free travel pass subsidy, a matter I raised with the Minister last year. The subsidy is way below what it should be and operators outside the public transport system receive a higher subsidy for passengers with the free travel pass. When the delegates refer to commercial considerations, are they saying the amount of money received for passengers with the free travel pass makes a person who needs wheelchair access to a bus less important than a paying customer who does not need wheelchair access? The delegates need to explain the position, considering that people with a disability and access issues are equally as entitled to access daily public transport services as the next person and should not be left standing at the side of the road.

Chairman: Deputy Mick Barry told me at the beginning that he was pressed for time. May he ask his questions now?

Deputy Imelda Munster: May I come back in afterwards?

Chairman: Yes. All of the answers may be given together, if that is acceptable.

Deputy Imelda Munster: If that is not a problem for Deputy Mick Barry.

Deputy Mick Barry: That is appreciated.

My first questions are for Mr. Hernan. I will ask a couple of questions about the position in Cork city and county which may be somewhat typical of the position elsewhere.

Let us consider the matter of access at the central bus station in Cork city, at Parnell Place, and how disability-friendly it is. Mr. Hernan will be familiar with the circumstances there and the layout of the bays. How many of them are good to go and allow wheelchair access? Mr. Hernan will be aware that some of them are exposed to the elements, while some are under cover. What is the position on the bays that are used to provide wheelchair access in terms of their exposure to the elements?

I was interested in the points raised on audio announcements. I was not quite clear what was said on the current position. What is the position on the Cork routes, for example? Is Mr. Hernan saying there are audio announcements on all of the city routes? Is he saying there are audio announcements on all of the routes that are not city based? Will he clarify the position on the matter?

My last question is for Mr. Egan and on the position on Transdev Ireland and Luas services. He mentioned that all services were wheelchair accessible. Although that is technically the case, how does it work out in practice?

With reference to the new Luas services from Bride's Glen to Broombridge, what is the position on the number of carriages used? It is now very common for the tram from Bride's Glen, for example, to fill up very quickly. The passengers waiting at stops down the line closer to the city have a right to gain access to the Luas, but effectively they cannot do so because the tram is full. Does Mr. Egan accept that this is a particular inconvenience for wheelchair users? What is the company's plan to address the issue and what is the timescale involved? I do not see how it can be addressed unless extra carriages are provided. When will that happen? What is the plan in that regard?

Chairman: I will go back to Deputy Imelda Munster first and then we can hear the answers to the questions asked.

Deputy Imelda Munster: If Deputy Mick Barry would like to have his questions answered

first, that is acceptable.

Deputy Mick Barry: I thank the Deputy.

Chairman: He has to go in two minutes; that is all I am concerned about. I do not mind. I am happy to hear the answers to the questions asked.

Mr. Ray Hernan: From my recollection, we have ten bays in Parnell Place station, not all of which are under the roof and not all of which are wheelchair accessible. What I have said is that all of our stations are accessible. Therefore, if there is any passenger who needs to board a bus, we always ensure it pulls into a bay that is accessible. I cannot confirm definitively whether the bays are exposed to the element, but I will clarify the matter. I do not know personally.

It is my understanding there are audio announcements on all city routes.

Deputy Mick Barry: And all county routes.

Mr. Ray Hernan: No.

Deputy Mick Barry: On how many are there audio announcements?

Mr. Ray Hernan: I can only put the matter in context. There are audio announcements at 550 bus stops out of approximately 6,000, or approximately 10% of our full network. I understand there are audio announcements on all city services. That is the challenge we face in the current year.

Deputy Mick Barry: I will come back in briefly on Parnell Place station. The information I have from disability campaigners in the city is that, of the ten bays, one is wheelchair accessible and that it is one of the bays that is exposed to the elements. That is something Dublin Bus might have a look at.

Mr. Seamus Egan: The Deputy raised the challenges of the service running northbound from Bride's Glen. Since Luas cross city opened, one of the unforeseen consequences has been the uptake in patronage on the Bride's Glen to Sandyford spur. Nineteen northbound services leave from Sandyford during peak times, which are between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m. Many of those services started service at Sandyford so they start empty from Sandyford to take passengers between Sandyford and the city centre. We have seen an uptake in patronage of services leaving from Bride's Glen. The Deputy is right. On many occasions, passengers have been left behind, which we did not see prior to the opening of the Luas cross city. Commencing Monday, 15 January, we have put in an additional service departing from Bride's Glen during the peak period so it is departs from Bride's Glen just before 8 a.m. This will pick up passengers. In two to three weeks, we are looking to put in a second additional service to pick up northbound passengers from Bride's Glen.

Deputy Mick Barry: Carriages?

Mr. Seamus Egan: In terms of absolute carriages during the peak service?

Deputy Mick Barry: No, is it not the case that the trams that run have fewer carriages?

Mr. Seamus Egan: Fewer than what?

Deputy Mick Barry: Okay, are there not plans to extend the number of carriages on those trams?

Mr. Seamus Egan: Yes.

Deputy Mick Barry: And that is Transdev's solution as opposed to putting another on here and another on there. That is even the agreed position of the company that it would be necessary to do this. When will this happen?

Mr. Seamus Egan: There are two aspects to that. Seven additional trams have initially been purchased. These trams will be 10 m longer than the existing fleet. They will be coming into service over the next few months and all should be in service by mid-May. Separate from that, there is a plan to extend the current rolling stock on the green line by 10 m. That has been put through. I am not sure about the exact dates but it will probably start next year. I can come back to the Deputy with the exact dates for that.

Deputy Mick Barry: That is the answer to my question.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I will get answers to my initial questions and-----

Chairman: Then Deputy Murphy after her-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: Then I will come in-----

Mr. Ray Hernan: I have noted all the Deputy's points. With regard to a public information line or access, the number for the accessibility officer is not online. However, we have a dedicated public information line that consolidates all queries or inquiries relating to Bus Éireann so once they go into that dedicated line, any specific ones relating to accessibility or issues around that are then passed on to our accessibility officer. That information line is advertised in all locations and on our website.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Would Bus Éireann consider advertising an accessibility and information officer because it is for a very specific customer? I am sure that when a customer is left at the side of the road or has a valid complaint or query, he or she would appreciate having that number on hand and made available to him or her rather than waiting until it goes into the whole mishmash of emails and contacts Bus Éireann has had before it is filtered out back to the officer? Would Mr. Hernan admit that there is huge room for improvement in Bus Éireann services for people with disabilities? It would be one way of being proactive for Bus Éireann to say a customer can contact its officer directly and of providing a better service. Would Bus Éireann consider doing that?

Mr. Ray Hernan: We must take on board the practicalities of it - that we run a seven-day operation. If I am giving out a specific number for somebody who is likely to be working just five days a week and probably 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., outside of hours as well as outside the normal working week must also be dealt with. What I can categorically say is that if somebody telephones our main information line with issues relating to accessibility, he or she will be dealt with as a matter of urgency. I can categorically say that and I believe that is the situation.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Could Mr. Hernan guarantee a specific timeframe for somebody getting back to a customer who telephones about a specific issue?

Mr. Ray Hernan: I cannot honestly say.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Mr. Hernan does not know how long the person would be waiting?

Mr. Ray Hernan: I do not know exactly what it is that we have in our customer charter in that respect but what I can say, because I know of specific instances in Meath and Louth where there has been a fall down in the provision of the service, is that we have responded in every way possible to make sure that this customer is looked after.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Bus Éireann is not interested in making that number available. It has the officer in place but it is not interested.

Mr. Ray Hernan: In respect of practicality, I am not against providing the number but we need to be realistic. If that person is not there, what happens then? What is the fall back? Then we are actually putting it back to the information line that is already in place.

Deputy Imelda Munster: If that is the case, and it is only a suggestion, if someone reverts back to the information line that is already in place, that might only be for weekends. The information officer would be there from Monday to Friday.

Mr. Ray Hernan: I am happy to consider that.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Perhaps Mr. Hernan might get back to us on that.

Mr. Ray Hernan: The Deputy asked how many people might have been let down by the service. I do not have the statistics to hand but I will certainly find out. I cannot deny that there have been breakdowns and I was upfront in saying that in my opening statement. It is something on which we are focused. When there is a fall down, we try to learn from that and we have certainly learned from a number of experiences with passengers pre-Christmas or early in the autumn. I would like to think that our service and our ability to provide an accessible service to passengers has improved in the intervening period.

Deputy Imelda Munster: With all due respect, I find that incredible. Is Mr. Hernan saying that Bus Éireann does not keep a record or that he did not see fit to look at those figures before coming before us to discuss this issue today? Which of those is the case? Does Bus Éireann not keep a record of wheelchair users who have been let down year-by-year or did Mr. Hernan not think to look at those figures given that he was bound to be asked about them today and given that Bus Éireann wants to improve on its services so it would compare the figures year-on-year. Which of those is the case?

Mr. Ray Hernan: I do not have the numbers to hand.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Does Bus Éireann keep a record?

Mr. Ray Hernan: We keep a record of every request that comes in.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Is it of wheelchair users who were let down? It was a specific question.

Chairman: If the witness does not have the facts-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: I am trying to find out whether Bus Éireann keeps a record

Chairman: Let me make my point. As Chairman, I just-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: My question was very specific.

Chairman: I want to be fair to everybody.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Does Bus Éireann keep a record of wheelchair users who were let down? The answer is “Yes” or “No”. Does it keep a specific record of wheelchair users who were let down by the service?

Chairman: I want to be helpful to Deputy Munster and get her the answers she wants. I also want to offer the witness the opportunity to get the facts and come back directly to Deputy Munster immediately after this meeting. I think it is fair to Mr. Hernan. He does not have the facts but he will come back with them immediately-----

Mr. Ray Hernan: I will clarify that.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is fair enough. I accept that but I would like to find out whether Bus Éireann keeps a record of wheelchair users who were let down for 2017.

Mr. Ray Hernan: I am sure we would have that information in the context of complaints that would have come in as a result of not providing the service.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We will have that and can make comparisons. Mr. Hernan will have a detailed list of complaints.

Mr. Ray Hernan: I do not know exactly what the details are but I will look into it.

Deputy Imelda Munster: We will know when he furnishes us with it. In respect of the 48-hour notice at weekends and the notification, Mr. Hernan spoke about it being in line with the prevailing practice across other EU countries but he is not talking about the weekend service. He is talking about the 24-hour service. I am talking about a situation where if somebody decides to visit a relative on a Sunday, he or she must let Bus Éireann know by 3 p.m. on Friday. That is not EU legislation or in line with EU practice.

Mr. Ray Hernan: It is my understanding that EU practice requests that anyone wishing to use public transport services who needs access or has special requirements in terms of access should give a minimum of 36 hours’ notice. According to my understanding, that is what EU regulations outline.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Does the requirement under EU legislation not involve 24 hours’ notice?

Mr. Ray Hernan: My understanding is that it is 36 hours.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Is that day-to-day or a weekend period?

Mr. Ray Hernan: I do not think the regulation differentiates between weekends and weekdays.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Bus Éireann asks to be informed by 3 p.m. on the Friday before the journey. If someone wants to travel on the 3 o’clock bus on the Sunday to see a relative, that is 48 hours, which is 12 hours over the EU regulation.

Mr. Ray Hernan: No. The regulation stipulates a minimum of 36 hours. It does not stipulate a maximum. My understanding of the regulation is that 36 hours is the minimum notice one is required to give. It is not that we are obliged to provide a service within 36 hours.

Chairman: I think the Deputy’s point is that, whatever the regulation is, people wish to reduce that waiting time. I think what we want as a committee is for the service to be provided

within the shortest possible time. I appreciate Mr. Hernan is quoting the regulations. I think it is a question of the company wishing to bring about the changes the Deputy is talking about, regardless of what the European regulation is.

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is it. It seems grossly unfair. I would have thought it was not in line with EU regulations but if I am wrong about that I stand to be corrected. Bus Éireann is a long way off providing the proper, rights-based wheelchair access for people with disabilities that would be expected. Mr. Hernan has to admit that.

Mr. Ray Hernan: We have been challenged as an organisation on many fronts and we know that we have been deficient in certain respects but we have made huge progress over quite a number of years on the accessibility of our fleet, etc. There are many things to be done with a number of stakeholders to continue to improve that service. We will try to do everything within our power to improve the service on board our buses and modernise our fleet, but that is only part of the provision of accessibility. The accessibility of bus stops is at this point the key impediment to providing a broad service for people with disabilities.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Mr. Hernan will get back to me with that record for 2017.

I have a question for Iarnród Éireann about the free travel pass and the charge.

Mr. Jim Meade: The reservation charge is in place for all ticket holders. Any person who holds a free travel pass for any reason is entitled to free travel. They can attend any of our services. There are no restrictions on travel. If they want a particular seat and want to ensure they can reserve it - this is true of family ticket, return ticket and season ticket holders - there is a reservation charge, and that applies to everyone.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Great, but is that not in breach of EU legislation? The reason, in the first instance, people are awarded free travel passes are specific to those individuals and, more often than not, it is because they either are pensioners or have disabilities. Therefore, if those people are awarded free travel passes, surely there should be an exemption for them. They are not paying customers. They need access, and the reason they have to book places and are charged a fee in the first instance is that Iarnród Éireann's service is not wheelchair-accessible. The only reason, in 100% of cases, wheelchair users book is that they must do so to ensure they get places. The reason they have to book is the same reason Iarnród Éireann is putting that charge on them. It is Iarnród Éireann's responsibility if its service is not wheelchair-accessible, so why should those people who have been awarded free travel passes have to pay for the fact that its service is not accessible to them whenever they decide to travel? Why should they have to give Iarnród Éireann a day's notice plus be penalised by a fee? Will Mr. Meade examine that and will he-----

Mr. Jim Meade: We will certainly look at that because it applies-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: Will he look at the legislation around it too? That is-----

Mr. Jim Meade: I do not think we are non-compliant with any regulation but we will absolutely look at the matter. It is a means of ensuring that, when they turn up, the facilities are there for them. If they want to pre-book and ensure they get the travel, particularly on intercity services, where they are travelling long distances, that is how they do it, but we will certainly look at the legislation. I think we are compliant with the legislation.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The reality is that they have to pay because they cannot access

Iarnród Éireann's trains.

Mr. Jim Meade: I take the Deputy's point.

Deputy Imelda Munster: The Coach Tourism and Transport Council's opening statement calls for, among other things, investment in infrastructure and State funding for staff training and private operators to deal with requests for accessibility. That is all fine and commendable, but when the CTTC calls for State funding for private operators, how does it propose that be funded?

Mr. Kevin Traynor: As I pointed out, private operators operate scheduled routes under licence from the NTA. Many of the other public transport providers get State funding to upgrade their fleet. There is no State funding or incentive available to the private sector at all in this area.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes, but the reason for that is quite clear, that is, that public transport service providers provide a public service. For example, they would operate-----

Mr. Kevin Traynor: So do private operators.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes, but for profit, not as a service. There is a massive difference between the two. For example, public service providers serve the least profitable routes because they provide a public service. Mr. Traynor said the private operators need to be funded by the State. How does he propose that be done? Does he propose tax increases to pay for it? Does he propose to borrow or to cut existing public services? How could this be done?

Mr. Kevin Traynor: Again, I accept what the Deputy is saying about the proposals. I would suggest there are a number of options. One would be to consider a preferential rate in terms of borrowings, perhaps. Another would be some form of tax incentivisation to encourage and to defray the actual costs of purchasing these vehicles.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Okay, but going by the CTTC's business model, its business plan, as it stands, it does not provide a service for all the people; it provides a service for the able-bodied.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: No.

Deputy Imelda Munster: What percentage of the CTTC's vehicles are wheelchair-accessible?

Mr. Kevin Traynor: It depends on each individual company relative to the delivery of services.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Does Mr. Traynor have statistics on this?

Mr. Kevin Traynor: I do not have the statistics in front of me because it depends on each individual company and on the age of the fleet. There are not even facilities to retrofit existing vehicles at present in Ireland, even if private operators wish to do that.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes, but the CTTC is operating its private service - and fair play to it - and making its profit from it. However, Mr. Traynor wants to make the State responsible and is asking that some of the CTTC's costs be offloaded on the State. The CTTC applies for contracts. One way of looking at the matter is that if it is a problem for the CTTC to provide

wheelchair-accessible services, perhaps we should look at the qualifying criteria when applying for a tender through the NTA. If it is the case that the CTTC cannot provide for all the people, perhaps-----

Mr. Kevin Traynor: In due course, under legislation, that will happen.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes, but I am saying to Mr. Traynor-----

Mr. Kevin Traynor: However, there is a cost factor associated with that.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Of course, but it is like any business. If one goes into a business wanting to provide a thorough service, one is aware there is a cost factor, particularly when it is-----

Chairman: Deputy Munster, I am happy that everyone gets an opportunity to ask questions. It is just that Deputy Murphy has indicated she would like to ask some questions shortly and I am anxious that everyone gets a full opportunity.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I will finish up. It seemed from Mr. Traynor's statement that he pretty much admits there is no private sector solution to this issue. If there were, I suppose we would have it.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: The NTA, for instance, provided grants for accessible taxis, which are not a form of public transport, so there is a precedence set there.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Mr. Traynor has seen from earlier discussions the struggle it is to provide public transport. I had asked him the question to see what his suggestion was-----

Mr. Kevin Traynor: I have given the Deputy answers.

Deputy Imelda Munster: -----and how we would secure the funding, whether by raising taxes or otherwise. Mr. Traynor wants the State to subsidise the CTTC.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: If we want full accessibility in the delivery and freedom of choice, we must consider that option.

Deputy Imelda Munster: However, the CTTC would then cherry-pick the routes. That is the problem.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: No, one cannot cherry-pick the routes because effectively-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: The CTTC would apply for certain routes.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: I beg the Deputy's pardon. One applies for the routes, but it is the NTA that has the clear directive as to whether or not one will get that licence.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes, but I am saying the difference between the CTTC and the public transport system - again, I am just pointing it out-----

Mr. Kevin Traynor: Go ahead.

Deputy Imelda Munster: -----is that the latter provides a service.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: In the context of PSOs, yes.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes, not in the context of whether or not it is the most profitable route or the most used route. It is a service. That is the difference.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: Yes. The point-----

Deputy Imelda Munster: That is all I am-----

Chairman: There are no restrictions on questions or answers, which is healthy. Deputy Catherine Murphy is next and then I have a few questions. I am conscious of trying to keep everybody on board.

Mr. Ray Hernan: With regard to the cost of vehicles, Expressway is an arm of Bus Éireann, which is a 100% commercial operation that does not get any State funding. However, because it is part of a semi-State company, we have to ensure that all of its buses are fully compliant with disability regulations and, therefore, we incur the additional cost of acquiring a bus that is wheelchair accessible without any funding. I would welcome a level playing field in respect of commercial arrangements.

Chairman: So the taxpayer provides the company with the cost of the bus and the additional bit is-----

Mr. Ray Hernan: No, we do not get any funding. Expressway is the commercial arm-----

Chairman: What about all the other buses?

Mr. Ray Hernan: All the other buses are provided through funding by the NTA.

Chairman: By the taxpayer. That is fair enough but the problem for Mr. Traynor is that he must buy the bus, full stop.

Mr. Ray Hernan: So does Expressway at the higher specification-----

Chairman: I accept that Bus Éireann does.

Mr. Ray Hernan: -----to allow us to provide disability access, which private operators do not have to provide at the moment.

Chairman: The system could not operate without both public and private operators. One of its hallmarks is the co-operation between Bus Éireann and private operators where Bus Éireann's services are contracted to private operators. That is hugely important. Private enterprise is healthy for our society. If it increases competition and services and reduces costs, that is fine. In fairness to Mr. Traynor, I accept that the key for all operators, public or private, is that they should be able to use the same facilities that are owned by TII. Every operator should have access to full services. That does not happen in some places not too far from where I live and that does not make sense.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I thank the witnesses for their opening statements. The information they provided us with is useful. There is no doubt that there has been a substantial improvement over the decades in public transport services. I recall being a member of the consultative panel of the Dublin Transport Initiative that discussed some of the proposals that we now see in operation. The committee is examining the measures that still need to be implemented. The hardware is in place in many ways and the issue is how it is used. Reference was made to old trains and the old Craven carriages which could not have been adapted in a million

years. Even the Dublin Bus fleet was much different prior to the 1990s when significant investment was made. However, there is much more to be done.

There was an expectation, for example, that when accessible services were available, people would be able to access them. A significant bone of contention on Dublin Bus vehicles is the issue of dedicated disabled spaces being occupied by somebody who has folded up a buggy, for example, and the bus driver being unable to pick up a wheelchair user as a result. The driver does not have the authority to instruct a passenger to make room for somebody in a wheelchair. How do we overcome that other than through public information campaigns? Should the drivers be given authority? Disability groups have asked for this.

There is a pilot project in respect of giving 24-hour notice. Will Mr. Meade elaborate on the intended roll-out? How will that work in practice? What areas will the pilot be run in? He stressed that 24-notice is advised but it is not essential and every endeavour is made to assist people at all times. That is grand if somebody is able bodied but if people in wheelchairs turn up for a service having given 24 hours' notice, they are more likely to be stranded and that is why they will not take the risk. That curtails their ability to travel. The company can say it is only advised to give notice but, in most cases, wheelchair users see the notice as essential. They will continue to raise this issue along with disability groups. The notice period is a major bone of contention.

Do local authorities have to be proactive in seeking the available money from the NTA to ensure the surfaces are correct? This primarily affects Bus Éireann as the Dublin Bus routes have largely been upgraded in recent years. Is it the case that some local authorities are better than others? We want to be prescriptive in the report that we will produce regarding what we think needs to be done. It would be useful for us to hear from the witnesses on what their engagement is like on this and whether it is uniform throughout the country.

Reference was made to customer surveys. These have always driven me nuts. Such surveys are great for people who use buses and trains but people who cannot access services or who have limited access but who want services cannot be surveyed and, therefore, transport companies are not capturing everybody. How can everybody be captured in a survey?

I understand the capacity issue faced by Bus Éireann. I have engaged with the company frequently in recent months about this. Are there design issues? It is suggested that four seats must be taken out. It must be possible to overcome design issues in the new fleet to provide flexibility in using the disabled space on a bus. What is the experience in other countries? This information would enable us to make recommendations on these design issues to make buses more flexible. We do not want a scenario where spaces are empty and people are not using them. However, we cannot have a discriminatory service either.

I refer to the contracts and commercial tendering through the NTA for some routes. In terms of disability, is there a like-with-like approach in terms of the fleet when tenders are being examined or is a different standard required depending on who is seeking it? I would welcome clarification on that because issues have taken us by surprise in terms of remuneration and historical pension requirements and I would like to hear about the experience in terms of disability access on commercial routes.

Deputy Munster made the point about staff not being trained on the use of electronic lifts. Is additional training required? One does not want a scenario where one has the facility but it cannot be used because training has not been provided. I will leave it at that.

Mr. Ray Coyne: The first question was for me. I thank Deputy Murphy for her question about buggies and wheelchair space. The facility has been there since 1999 when we bought our first low-floor vehicle. Our most recently purchased 450 vehicles since 2013 now have both a buggy space and a wheelchair space. There have been considerations at Government level and we fed into that in terms of what we could do to address the problem. It is very complex. We also feed into the EU, into DG MOVE, in terms of what the considerations are in Ireland from an operator's point of view. The key issues include legislation, which is a matter for the Government in terms of what it chooses to do. We offer our view of the current scenarios and if something was not legislated for we would outline the complications that arise. If that was legislated for today what one would find is that all of our buses are full in the morning peak and generally in the evening peak so one would have to move six people off a full vehicle to allow for wheelchair access. All the buses have the space but six people would have to be moved off the bus which is difficult to do. Those who would have to move would have to leave the bus and that would involve complexities around refunds and which six people would come off the bus. I do not say the issues are insurmountable but we would have to face very difficult challenges if legislation were to specify that a disabled person is fully entitled to the access space.

We also have a number of users whose parents carry a special card that we give them for children with a disability who are in a buggy. It is not a case of the buggy being full of shopping, as the child requires it for transport. Moving such a child from an access space would give rise to concern. A number of people who have mobility permits also use the space. Not every seat on a vehicle is accessible on the lower saloon as step entry is required for seats at the back. Asking such a person to move would require them to go to a space that is not accessible to them, for example, upstairs. Those are some of the complicating issues. An alternative is to make sure the space is constantly available, because that removes those factors. One would have to block that space off from general users. One will still be faced with the situation of there only being one space. What that would do is create a 6.5% capacity requirement and in order to counterbalance that one would need to invest 6.5% in the fleet. Our current fleet is 1,000 so it would mean 65 vehicles to replace that capacity with capital expenditure of between €20 million and €30 million but there would also be current expenditure which would be around €20 million a year.

Chairman: Dublin Bus is really a city service so therefore if people do not have wheelchairs they could stand in that space.

Mr. Ray Coyne: Yes.

Chairman: When one travels on the Continent one can stand in the wheelchair space.

Mr. Ray Coyne: That is what happens today.

Chairman: So what is the problem with taking those seats out and if there is nobody in a wheelchair then people can stand in the space?

Mr. Ray Coyne: The point is that if legislation is introduced then the driver has the power to remove people from the space.

Chairman: Would it get over the problem if there is X sq. m for standing passengers or a wheelchair and priority is given to wheelchair users?

Mr. Ray Coyne: Yes, and the Dublin Bus point of view, which we have fed into Government, is that we have long been advocates of accessible travel. We have been on this road for

20 years. I was an accessibility officer and I went to Peamount Hospital, the Central Remedial Clinic, CRC, and the Irish Wheelchair Association, IWA. Our view is that, all things considered, the system we operate today is based on the goodwill of passengers and, by and large, that works. It does not work on some occasions and when that happens it is a 100% bad experience for the person. Our drivers are very well aware of the situation and generally customers make a situation known to us. Incidents occur but it is very rare. I do not think the answer is for the Government to legislate in favour of having a total dedicated space at all times.

Chairman: When we go on holidays we use public transport. Years ago the buses in this city were all seated accommodation but mostly, everybody stands elsewhere. That is what is happening in Nice in France. Is that the way we should be going here?

Mr. Ray Coyne: What we have done in our recent fleet purchases is that we have centre-door access, a wheelchair space and a buggy space. We have taken out approximately 25% of the capacity on the lower saloon. There are seats on the lower saloon that are not accessible so one is just into double digits in terms of the number of seats.

Customers travel long distances on the urban bus network.

Chairman: I will put the question in a different way. Could the service providers come back with what is the best practice elsewhere because this is not just an issue in this country, it is the same in many countries? From what I could see in France the trend is to make more space for standing, buggies and wheelchairs.

Mr. Ray Coyne: I can come back to the committee on that but as I said, since 2015 we have removed close to 30% of the seating capacity on buses.

Chairman: I accept that.

Mr. Ray Coyne: I will come back to the committee on the issue.

Chairman: I think it is a problem everywhere.

Mr. Ray Coyne: We are long time advocates of accessible transport but the system that works best is the one we have today. We did a partnership with the IWA and TII earlier this year and we knew what would come out of that in that we have all our customers to accommodate and it is something we are not shying away from. I accept issues arise from time to time but, thankfully, they are minimal and, by and large, everybody gets accommodated. It is a system we have worked towards for the past 15 years and it is working well now. All things considered, it is probably the best solution we have at this point in time for the system we operate today.

On infrastructure, from a Dublin Bus point of view, we primarily deal with the local authorities in the greater Dublin area. They are all very good in terms of providing assistance such as infrastructure requirements at bus stops. What one will find in terms of quality bus corridors, QBCs, and many of the infrastructural projects is that accessibility is built into them at this point. That is the remit of the NTA now and we have influence in that regard but it takes a strong line on infrastructural planning. We had a tender with the NTA this year to operate services. The specification is the same for whoever is tendering. It has to be the same vehicle.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Is disability factored in?

Mr. Ray Coyne: Yes, it is.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What about customer service surveys?

Mr. Ray Coyne: We do surveys for bus users.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I am talking about people who cannot use the service.

Mr. Ray Coyne: Yes, we have done surveys with customers who do not use the bus service. We have a disability user group. I could not quote off-hand what surveys we do but we do engage with customers and our user group helped us design our accessibility policy. We use it all the time. We bring our buses out to people and test them on those who do not ordinarily use bus services just to see how we can best design them.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What about the question on Irish Rail?

Mr. Jim Meade: The four-hour notice period is operating now informally as we speak.

We intend to launch it formally before the end of the month.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Where is that being piloted?

Mr. Jim Meade: We are piloting that across the entire DART network. We have been very involved with the user groups in designing how it will work so we have a good database of all our users and as further users come on board, they are added to this. Each location will have mobile numbers, so that it will not be a central number, users will know their home station and have a contact number for it. That number will be manned throughout the hours of service. As the customer requires assistance, it will come from that station. We will run this for about six months with a view to extending it further, having learned any lessons from the pilot.

We also use surveys and focus groups for non-users, particularly when looking at new time-tabling. When we agree a new timetable with the NTA, we then go to a public consultation process and get comments from both users and non-users. If we are examining a new service, there is a company that we use that specifically targets markets that are not using it to see how and why they are non-users and what we could offer them to entice them onto public transport.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What about design, in relation to Bus Éireann?

Mr. Ray Hernan: We always try to see what is best practice across Europe and further afield to see what is the best model we can bring to bear. The NTA is very much partnering with us on that and will take responsibility for the purchase of all buses relating to PSO services. My understanding is that the NTA is focused on ensuring that all buses acquired for the fleet will be low floor access buses to make it much easier to get access rather than using the lifts. That will evolve.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: That means that there is a requirement to have a suitable surface or platform in place.

Mr. Ray Hernan: It may reduce but we are challenged. There is a question of whether low floor access buses would be practical in the context of the road network we have, particularly when we are talking about longer commuter routes or longer inter-city routes in the case of commercial operators. Are low floor buses capable of working on the route network we have?

Deputy Catherine Murphy: That comes back to local authorities. I take the point about the joined-up nature of the issue which has been a bone of contention for me for some time.

Outside the Dublin Bus network, we are talking about Bus Éireann and private operators. Is it the case that some local authorities are more proactive about seeking funding or is there a very definite agenda coming from the NTA which is saying that it wants this in particular areas? Which way does it work?

Mr. Kevin Traynor: Local authorities have their own transport infrastructural plans. We in the Coach Tourism and Transport Council of Ireland have piloted what we refer to as coach-friendly locations where certain local authorities have come on board, where we have strategic criteria in giving an award to a coach-friendly location. To a degree, the individual local authority's commitments and the proportion of its budget it will give to the provision of accessibility depends on the budget constraints under which it operates, along with the infrastructure that is there already.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Is there a national audit of what is required or do we need to speak to the NTA on that?

Mr. Ray Hernan: The committee needs to speak to the NTA and Government, in terms of policy, on that.

Mr. Ray Coyne: We are doing an audit, in conjunction with the NTA, on the greater Dublin area bus stops to assess their requirements. The NTA is focused on ensuring that there are accessible bus stops at all key towns in all of the routes. That is probably its priority and presumably it will cascade down from there.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I want to raise coach tours. The Transport Council of Ireland touched on the question earlier in relation to obligations. For instance, is there a legal obligation to provide certificate of professional competence, CPC, training?

Mr. Kevin Traynor: Yes, disability awareness is part of the CPC training. Naturally, every licensed operator, that is anyone who holds a coach licence, has to have the certificate of professional competence, for which they must undertake the five modules and the training is part of that process. It is not in the remit of this committee, but we advocate that the direction of the modules be changed in order to be more proactive practically.

Chairman: We have had a very important discussion today and I thank our witnesses for their knowledge and giving us their time. I have questions, mainly in relation to unmanned DART stations and so on. I appreciate the point about the new dedicated hub, where one can telephone a number when one is within two stops of a station and seek assistance. The Irish Rail submission says the number of partially accessible stations is 26; I do not know if that means manned or otherwise. How many unmanned stations are there and does Irish Rail plan to increase that number?

Mr. Jim Meade: That is a good question. I do not know the exact number off-hand. The 26 stations referred to are where the platforms are partially accessible, irrespective of whether the station is manned.

Chairman: So if I go to a particular point in my wheelchair I cannot get on.

Mr. Jim Meade: One could not physically get on because there might be only step access across to the other platform. There are 26 of those that we have to deal with. It might be the case that some of the platforms in the location are accessible but others are not because of step access. We are working through that with the programme. We have planning permissions for

some stations and are close to having it for others. Our aim is that all stations will be accessible by lift or by ramp.

Chairman: If I am in an accessible station, but it is unmanned, will Irish Rail increase the number of unmanned stations?

Mr. Jim Meade: There is not a plan to unman every station, which some people are concerned about, rather the plan is to make it more efficient and better able to serve the customer. The DART network does have unmanned stations, these are some of the more lightly used stations, but we want to have the facility that if a person requires use of that station and they need any assistance that we have a very quick response. We are working to a four hour period now and we intend to work to much less than that, so that it will be considerably less than an hour in due course. That is what is happening in more than 100 cases daily on the DART network alone, and we are building it up. The manning to which I referred earlier relates to taking staff from behind the glass to front of house with the customer and onto trains with customers.

Chairman: This guy is two stations away. He comes on the train.

Mr. Jim Meade: Yes.

Chairman: And the person will be waiting at a particular point?

Mr. Jim Meade: The person will be waiting and in most cases will travel to wherever they want to go or make the contact for another person.

Chairman: In the case where multiple users come along at the one time, what happens there?

Mr. Jim Meade: Then we draw in from other stations. There is obviously a limit to what we can do. We had an experience on the DART a year and a half ago where a user group organised an outing and did not inform anyone and we had some 12 or 14 wheelchairs arrive at once. That will cause a problem, but even the wheelchair-user group said that was somewhat unfair. They were making a point and it is a valid point that we cannot have that many users turn up, but we have a cascade effect where we can bring more people to a station if required.

Chairman: That is one of the key points that was made earlier.

Before we finish, the committee wants to produce a report that makes sense. Getting the service providers' buy-in and their ideas and issues in that is very important. The groups have expressed their views today. The matter of audits was raised earlier by Deputy Murphy but what about an audit of services? Do the providers have an annual report on service and change or do they intend to do so? What are the service providers doing to make themselves more accountable? What is their audit process to evaluate what needs to change? The witnesses have told us what is changing, I would not describe it as what is being imposed on them from TII or otherwise, but if they had the funds, what is their best case scenario or plan? How could they shorten the waiting time for people with disabilities? I know that significant investment will be brought in, but what if that was front-loaded? What is the best that the service providers could offer people?

Mr. Jim Meade: In Irish Rail we have carried out an audit in conjunction with the NTA. In 2014 we conducted a survey across the network to identify all of the accessibility issues, including CCTV systems, communications, lifts and access, etc. The figure ranges from a low

tide of about €48 million if we only do some of the work to about €80 million if we were to do everything.

Chairman: Is that a public document?

Mr. Jim Meade: I do not think it is, but it certainly is a document we have in-house.

Chairman: Will Mr. Meade send it to us because we want to build on Irish Rail's experience and how it perceives the needs identified and obviously how public funds should be used to meet them.

That is about as far as we can go. We have recommendations which came to us through the users' groups. The delegates probably have a copy of them. I hope that before we finalise our report, they will have sight of them. They can then make an input in order that when the document is published, it will make sense, have been costed and be irrefutable in meeting the needs of the organisations represented, people with disabilities and the general public. What is best practice in other countries? How do we benchmark against them? I do not expect the delegates to answer that question now, but perhaps they might come back to us on it.

Mr. Kevin Traynor: The Chairman raised the issue of standing. In that respect, one of the problems is in the area of health and safety. As things stand, this is probably one of the dearest nations when it comes to insurance costs. Premia have increased by about 40% in the last year. We need to look at the risk assessment in that regard. I know from where the Chairman is coming; it is a viable option to maximise the use of the spatial capacity within a vehicle. Deputy Catherine Murphy spoke about the manufacturers. It might be within the remit of the committee to liaise with the designated manufacturers to see if they would be prepared to have a representative appear before it to discuss the issue of accessibility.

Chairman: I have experience of seeing 30 people on a bus with only ten seats. It was in a city environment in which the maximum journey time was about an hour. If the delegates have ideas, they should send them to us and we will be happy to take them on board.

The joint committee went into private session at 3.45 p.m. and adjourned at 4 p.m. until 9 a.m. on Wednesday, 24 January 2018.