

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR, TURASÓIREACHT AGUS SPÓRT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT, TOURISM AND SPORT

Dé Céadaoin, 31 Eanáir 2018

Wednesday, 31 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,	Pádraig Ó Céidigh.
Imelda Munster,	
Catherine Murphy,	
Kevin O’Keeffe,	
Robert Troy.	

I láthair / In attendance: Senators John Dolan and Marie-Louise O’Donnell.

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

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senators Frank Feighan and John O' Mahony as there is a debate in the Seanad on transport.

I propose that the joint committee go into private session to deal with a number of house-keeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 1.35 p.m. and resumed in public session at 2 p.m.

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

Chairman: I remind members, delegates and those in the Visitors Gallery to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the recording and broadcasting equipment.

The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the accessibility of public transport for people with disabilities. This is the third of a series of meetings we have had on the issue. We have previously heard from transport users and, more recently, transport operators. Next week we will again hear from transport users and the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport will also attend.

I welcome from the National Disability Authority Ms Siobhan Barron, director; Dr. Gerald Craddock and Ms Niamh Fawl; and from the National Transport Authority Ms Anne Graham, CEO, and Mr. Hugh Creegan.

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

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I invite Ms Barron to make her opening statement. She will be followed by Ms Graham.

Ms Siobhan Barron: The National Disability Authority, NDA, thanks the Chairman and members of the Joint Committee on Transport, Tourism and Sport for the opportunity to present on the accessibility of public transport for persons with disabilities. The NDA was established to provide independent and evidence-informed advice for the Minister on matters of policy and practice relevant to the lives of people with disabilities. We were given additional functions

to operate the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design from 2007. Our role means that we cover a very wide range of policy areas, Departments and public sector remits. The statutory Centre for Excellence in Universal Design promotes the universal design of the built environment, products, services and information and communications technology in order that they can be accessed, understood and used independently to the greatest extent possible by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability. The NDA's view is that a universal design approach to transport would benefit everyone, particularly those with disabilities and older people, especially as it could maximise their participation in society and control over their own lives.

Since the NDA was established, transport has been one of the key priority areas identified for attention and focus in our work, with other areas such as employment, for example. In particular, we have consistently advised that an integrated, planned approach would be required to successfully implement universal access to transport for all. This would entail joined-up working, involving the different Departments, related agencies and stakeholders working together to provide a co-ordinated policy approach that worked nationally and at local level. The focus is on the customer's end to end journey. It requires mainstream policies and services that have been designed to include the needs of persons with disabilities and that have been disability-proofed in line with the Government's commitment to disability mainstreaming. Our advice is informed by research, learning from good practice and the experiences and views of people with disabilities which we capture in surveys, studies and our consultation exercises.

The NDA has also advised on the broader policy areas of which transport is part which include the built environment, education, employment, health and disability supports. We advise that there be a focus on accessible transport actions in the strategic plans of Departments and agencies, as well as national strategies and programmes, for example, the current national disability inclusion strategy and the comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities.

The NDA produced a code of practice on the accessibility of public services and information. It has also produced a range of free guidance materials on how to achieve integrated universally designed services. It has held various seminars and workshops on transport issues that have facilitated discussion and shared learning on how transport services can be more integrated and universally designed for all.

We recognise the developments advanced by the Department, the NTA and various agencies and the commitment to continued progress in their strategic plans and national strategies. The positive developments include increased investment and established plans to address inaccessible transport; an expanded fleet of accessible buses, with a figure of 100% reached in some areas; work being advanced by the NTA to source accessible buses and coaches to address existing challenges for passengers with disabilities; increased investment and an increase in the number of wheelchair accessible vans, WAVs, in the taxi fleet and efforts to continue to expand; rural transport programme developments to support connection with transport solutions; work on a community car scheme to bring customers to transport service locations; continuing work to address the issue of advance notice requirements for services, including rail, even though we appreciate further work is required to address issues in that regard; the roll-out of audiovisual announcements; the development of information solutions for customers; the operation of user groups by transport service providers which should assist in identifying practical solutions to accessibility issues on the ground; and the roll-out of disability awareness training for staff.

Unfortunately, despite positive developments, there are still many people with disabilities who are experiencing barriers in accessing transport. This needs to be seen as a quality cus-

tomers service issue rather than as an add-on solution to the problem of disability access. That entails applying the principles of universal design. The issues that still need to be addressed include but are not limited to the fact that accessible taxis are not readily available, even in cities where numbers have increased. Even where accessibility has been advanced, it can break down, unless it is maintained and resourced by trained staff. Challenges remain in accessing information, as not everyone has a smartphone. Data systems for each service need to be consistent and inter-operable.

Health and safety need to be key considerations. There is little or no support at stations or on trains, particularly where emergency evacuation is required. The requirement for advance notice limits people with disabilities in their right to get around. There are issues with any notice period exceeding 36 hours with reference to EU regulations for coaches. The reasons there is a need to give notice in advance in some cases we understand arise from technical challenges. We are pleased that the NTA is working to identify some solutions in that regard.

It is crucial that all staff across all public transport services are trained to build awareness and competence. It should be easier for persons with disabilities to communicate with service providers and easily access complaints procedures. We note the work to be advanced at bus stops throughout the country. Some private bus and taxi operators are not providing the same level of accessible transport as their public transport service counterparts. While audiovisual announcements have improved, they need to be available in all areas. There is a need for a more robust system to measure and track how accessible public transport services are operating on the ground. There are safety issues for transport that are also relevant for pedestrians and cyclists, such as challenges navigating Luas tracks. There is a need for an integrated and accessible ticketing system across services and systems and there are issues concerning the availability of transport for those in disability services. We welcome the work by the Health Service Executive, HSE, to look at that along with engaging with the National Transport Authority, NTA.

A key issue is the fact that transport supports are operated by and come within the policies of various Departments and agencies. There is a need for a more joined-up policy approach to achieve integrated transport services.

The National Disability Authority, NDA, will continue to provide advice to the Department, the NTA and other Departments on the various issues that need to be addressed to ensure the development and operation of an integrated, universally designed public transport service that is responsive to the needs of its customers, including people with disabilities.

We advise cross-departmental working in order to develop a national transport strategy that details how the different Departments and related agencies will work together to deliver an effective, universally designed, integrated public transport service. We advise the continued and full implementation of actions already committed to in national strategies and that further actions be committed and set out in those strategies which are, in effect, living documents whose implementation is regularly monitored. It is important that there is buy-in and accountability for those actions throughout the Departments, agencies and service providing bodies within mainstream policy and services and that a universal design approach is adopted, as well as ensuring adherence to new and existing European directives and legislation on accessibility.

The NDA is advancing work to monitor the accessibility of transport services further to research we conducted and a pilot we engaged in recently with the Department, the NTA, service providers and disability stakeholders. The intention of that project was to identify mechanisms for robust data and a rounded picture on what is happening in services. We will commence the

next stage in monitoring specific transport services this year. Transport needs to be viewed as a service from the widest perspective, recognising the newer transport solutions emerging, for example, GoCar, and considering how these will be factored into an integrated, universally designed transport service that serves everybody in society and does not reduce mobility for some. The NDA welcomes the possibility of continued exploration in that regard, being led by the NTA, to identify practical solutions to some of the challenging access issues regarding the overall transport system. We will continue to play our part in supporting progress through research, advice and guidance.

The NDA considers that accessible transport is key to ensuring equal participation for people with disabilities. The NDA acknowledges many positive developments but the reality is that many people with disabilities still face barriers on a daily basis. The NDA recommends that the committed actions detailed in this presentation need to be implemented and, in particular, the action on all key agencies working together to deliver an integrated, universally designed transport system.

Chairman: I thank Ms Barron for a comprehensive and constructive analysis. I call Ms Graham to give her address, following which members will ask questions of the witnesses.

Ms Anne Graham: I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for the invitation to attend. I understand the committee wishes to focus upon accessibility of our public transport services. To assist me in dealing with their subsequent questions I am joined by Hugh Creegan, deputy chief executive officer with the authority.

Before dealing with the specific areas of focus, I would like to set the context by providing a brief overview of the remit of the authority in this provision and regulation of public transport services. The remit of the NTA is to regulate and develop the provision of integrated public transport services - bus, rail, light rail and taxi - by public and private operators in the State to encourage the development and implementation of an integrated accessible transport system within the greater Dublin area and to contribute to the effective integration of transport and land use planning across the State. In addition to its statutory responsibilities, the authority has various arrangements with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to discharge functions on its behalf. This includes the assignment to the authority of the management of the public transport accessibility investment programme.

In terms of accessibility of public transport services, they are largely determined by when particular services or infrastructure came into existence. Accordingly, older public transport infrastructure is largely not accessible or has limited accessibility features. However, more recent infrastructure is designed and built with the needs of disabled users in mind. The NTA is actively committed to ensuring that new public transport services and infrastructure are fully accessible. We are committed to securing the retrofitting of all older public transport infrastructure as quickly as resources will allow.

As for the current public transport infrastructure, the city bus fleet is now 100% low floor wheelchair accessible and will be maintained so by means of the infrastructure investment programme, with boarding arrangements, seating and internal layout addressing the needs of all passengers. The fleet purchased in recent years in Dublin has a wheelchair space, as well as a buggy space. The difficulty on some city services is the availability of the wheelchair space. The NTA is supporting a multi-agency initiative, launched in October 2017, of a new awareness campaign which highlights the importance of the dedicated wheelchair zone on every Dublin Bus. The initiative aims to demonstrate the negative consequences that can affect a wheelchair

user if they are unable to access the wheelchair zone on Dublin Bus services and encourages commuters to leave the wheelchair zone vacant for those who need it most.

In terms of the regional bus fleet, regional bus services are primarily delivered by single-deck or double-deck coaches. The double-deck coaches are accessible by ramp but require the removal of seats to provide the wheelchair space and the required restraint. The remaining coach fleet that is accessible uses an external wheelchair lift to lift the passenger onto the high floor of the coach. Approximately 86% of Bus Éireann's coach fleet is wheelchair accessible. That percentage will increase as the coach fleet is replaced. As this fleet requires the removal of seats, 24-hour notice of travel is required. With regard to bus stops, all city bus stops are fully accessible as they can be served by wheelchair ramp and kneeling suspension on buses. In regional cities they are wheelchair accessible where there is a hard standing at the stop. A bus stop that can facilitate the operation of a wheelchair lift from a high-floor coach requires a minimum of 3 m space to the back of the footpath. Currently, very few bus stops that receive coach services have this space.

A number of bus stations are currently accessible but more work is required on some of the key bus stations. Real-time arrival information is available for each stop on bus and rail services on the web, the smart phone app and SMS messaging service. Currently, visual and audible next stop announcements are not available on all bus services other than Dublin Bus services.

Approximately 10% of public transport services are delivered by commercial operators licensed by the NTA. In the annual returns we have received from those operators for 2016 services, 16% of the services had low-floor wheelchair accessible vehicles while a further 28% had vehicles with lifts suitable for wheelchair access.

In terms of the rural transport programme, those services are operated and managed by the NTA and the 17 LocalLink offices and are largely wheelchair accessible. LocalLink now provides demand-responsive services under the rural transport programme, which provides a high level of support to the public. These are door-to-door services that are suitable for those who have a disability and may also have passenger assistance on board. The NTA has invested in improving the wheelchair lifts on the fleet owned by the rural transport companies. The current services are being retendered in 2017 and 2018 with a provision that all services must be fully wheelchair-accessible within two years of contract award.

All the Luas services have been designed to be fully accessible.

As for heavy rail services, all of the fleet operated by Iarnród Éireann is fully accessible internally. The main issue with accessibility for wheelchairs is that a ramp is required between the platform and the carriage and not all rail stations are accessible. Accordingly, 24 hours' notice of travel must be given currently to ensure access for wheelchair users on all rail services. Iarnród Éireann has recently introduced a pilot scheme, which results in the notice being reduced to four hours, and a review will be undertaken following the pilot to see how it was received by customers.

Of the 144 stations on the Iarnród Éireann network, 118 have received accessibility upgrades or were constructed new to full accessibility standards such that all platforms are accessible, with the remaining 26 stations having one platform accessible.

An accessibility audit carried out in 2014 identified 54 stations across the network that require accessibility enhancements. Since 2015, a number of stations had accessibility enhance-

ment works completed, including Kilcock, Enfield and Maynooth. Improvements include signage, new footpaths and elimination of steps. Further works commenced in 2017 on a number of other stations.

Installation of a fully accessible lift and associated works at platform 6-7 in Connolly Station, which was identified as one of the major accessibility issues on the rail network, were completed in 2016 and the lift has been fully operational since then.

Next stop announcements, both visual and audible, are available on all intercity and commuter rail services. However, the next stop announcements on the DART service is not up to the required standard and needs replacement.

The National Transport Authority continues to support the travel assistance scheme, which is managed by Dublin Bus. The scheme aims to give people with disabilities confidence to use public transport. Under the scheme, an assistant can accompany people who need help using public transport and to plan a journey on Dublin Bus, Luas and DART. Over 1,000 individuals availed of the scheme in 2016 and a total of €200,000 was allocated to the scheme in 2017.

The availability of a wheelchair-accessible taxi fleet has been falling in line with the decline in numbers of licensed vehicles and licensed drivers in the industry. A number of measures have been introduced to increase the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles in the fleet. Since 2010, the only new vehicle licences issued are for wheelchair-accessible vehicles; new regulations were introduced in 2014 to allow smaller and less-expensive wheelchair-accessible vehicles to operate as taxis and hackneys; and a grant system for wheelchair-accessible vehicles was put in place offering grants of up to €10,000 for the purchase of or conversion to a wheelchair-accessible vehicle, WAV. The WAV grant scheme has operated from 2014 and the success of the grant scheme is demonstrated by an increase in the number of WAVs in the small public service vehicle fleet from 860 in June 2014 to 1,555 in December 2017, which now represents 7.6% of the total fleet. One of the conditions attaching to the scheme is that all recipients of the grant must successfully complete a disability awareness training programme, which is provided free of charge by the Irish Wheelchair Association on behalf of the NTA. There are strict terms and conditions attaching to the WAV grant scheme to ensure that accessible vehicles are used for the intended purpose. Disability awareness training is provided by all transport operators and disability user groups have been established by all public transport providers. An accessibility officer has also been appointed across all operators.

As that is the current status, what needs to be done? The funding available in recent years has been considerably constrained, which resulted in difficult choices and prioritisation of projects. However, the four-year capital envelope for public transport announced in budget 2018 includes a multi-annual allocation of almost €28 million for the accessibility retrofit programme for the period 2018 to 2021. This funding is a trebling of the previous allocation for accessibility under the capital plan. This will facilitate the continued roll-out of the programmes to install accessible bus stops, the upgrading of train stations to make them accessible to wheelchair users and the grant scheme to support the introduction of more wheelchair-accessible vehicles into the taxi fleet and many of the projects I intend to outline.

As for the bus fleet, the high-floor coaches currently available do not offer a good customer experience to wheelchair users. There does not seem to be many alternatives to this type of fleet for long distance inter-urban services. Together with Bus Éireann, we propose a change in our fleet strategy for shorter regional commuter services of less than 50 km. In future, these services could be operated by low-floor single-deck vehicles, rather than high-floor coaches.

We are in the process of procuring the first of these vehicles with a low-floor ramp entry suitable for the mobility impaired with a dedicated wheelchair space and we expect them to be in service from 2019. With regard to commercial public transport services, now that the NTA has more knowledge of the fleet available to the Irish market, the authority will move to regulate the accessibility of the public transport services operated by commercial operators. The authority will publish its proposals in this area later this year, which will set out minimum accessibility standards for fleets operating public transport services for new licences and on renewal of existing licences.

The authority is looking at ways to improve the journey information available to disabled users. The national journey planner features a wheelchair symbol for transport services that are known to be accessible. The authority is also looking into providing information on options for a step-free journey on the journey planner. This requires an audit of bus stops and other public transport infrastructure to determine their level of accessibility and this work is under way. The authority is in the process of standardising names of stops, which will be disseminated across all bus services. This will allow next-stop announcements to be made where the facility is available on the bus. Retrofitting of visual screens will be undertaken as required for the visual next-stop announcements.

In 2013, a comprehensive estimate of the cost of addressing accessibility issues at the various Bus Éireann bus stations was prepared. Excluding three particular stations - Busáras, Ceannt Station, Galway and Colbert Station, Limerick - the cost of addressing accessibility issues at the other bus stations was estimated at €11.5 million. Separate larger redevelopment plans have been prepared for Colbert Station, Limerick and Ceannt Station, Galway, both of which are shared bus and rail stations and these will include compliance with all accessibility standards as part of those redevelopments. The authority will work with Bus Éireann and CIÉ to ensure that a comprehensive programme of upgrading bus stations continues. Access to railway station buildings and platforms remains challenging at some locations. The authority will continue to fund accessibility upgrades at stations as funding allows.

With respect to bus stops for high-floor coach services, as I indicated, the wheelchair arrangements for high-floor vehicles require a large area of adjacent footpath to operate, typically between 3 m and 3.5 m in width. In many towns and villages, it is extremely challenging to achieve the necessary footpath width for the vehicle lift to function. Solutions such as relocating the bus stop to an alternative location may be necessary but this can give rise to additional problems, in that the alternative stop location may not suit other users. In other cases land or property acquisition may be required to obtain the necessary space, potentially requiring the exercise of compulsory acquisition powers to acquire the relevant lands. As a result of the complexity of determining the solution in each case and the need for extensive consultation with various parties, we do not have a singular figure for making all coach stops capable of accommodating wheelchair lifts on coaches. However, we will continue to upgrade the bus stops, where possible, to ensure that all main towns have at least one wheelchair lift-accessible bus stop in each direction.

With regard to taxis and hackneys, the NTA will continue to offer a WAV grant as long as funding is available to achieve a minimum of 10% of WAVs in the fleet by 2020. The DART fleet requires an upgrade of its next-stop announcements. In general, the communications to passengers on board the trains and particularly in stations needs to be improved. An upgrade of the on-board and at-station communications systems is estimated to cost in the region of €30 million. Work will commence shortly on scoping this project.

The authority is looking at the legislative changes required to allow the operators' by-laws to be changed to allow enforcement of priority for wheelchair users. Whereas much has been done to raise the level of accessibility across our public transport services, I acknowledge there is still work to do. Some of that work is challenging but the NTA is committed to meeting that challenge in partnership with our operating companies.

Chairman: I thank Ms Graham for that comprehensive address to the committee.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: I thank both groups for their informative submissions. Is the National Disability Authority watching over the National Transport Authority in its implementation of the programme? Does it send inspectors on-site on a regular basis to ensure implementation? Is a fixed budget set aside on an annual basis in the NTA for the provision of disability access services and related matters? Is the budgeting done on an *ad hoc* basis? While there was mention of targets, is the NTA on schedule and will they be met? Outside of further upgrades or extensions, when will the NTA be in a position to say that services are fully accessible? This would include screens and audio facilities on buses. Is there a timeframe set out for it? Has the NDA provided the NTA with a timeframe to which to work?

Deputy Imelda Munster: Does the NTA intend to move towards having buses that do not require the removal of four seats, which will do away with the need for 24 hour notice? Is there a timeframe for that and what percentage will be achieved? Has the NTA carried out an audit of the percentage of bus stops that require to be made accessible?

Why was accessibility not included in tenders awarded by the NTA to private operators? The witness said that 16% of the services have low floor, wheelchair accessible vehicles, which is quite low, while a further 28% have vehicles with lifts suitable for wheelchairs. Does the NTA have a target to increase the 16% significantly, particularly when it is awarding contracts to private operators?

The witness mentioned Iarnród Éireann's pilot scheme for waiting times. Is that taking in intercity rail? Ms Graham said 118 of the 144 have had accessibility upgrades. If that has been done why do customers still have to give notice? If 54 stations required further enhancements in 2015 why do the customers still have to give that notice for the other stations?

Ms Siobhan Barron: The National Disability Authority, NDA, is not a regulatory body. It is a policy advisory body but we do have functions and roles in monitoring programmes. We do not have powers of enforcement or inspection. We monitor compliance with accessibility requirements by all public sector bodies and Departments. We are also monitored. We have a code of practice on accessible public services and information. We consider the transport service in that context. As part of that we are researching a monitoring mechanism to roll out the focus for a detailed analysis of what is happening in the transport area. We started that with research on the kind of tools and mechanisms that would be effective for measuring accessibility. Other jurisdictions struggle with how to ensure strong, clear, concrete standards to measure accessibility. There is very poor quality data, and differing data from service providers. We considered trialling a system and self-assessment questionnaires, we did mystery shopping and customer satisfaction surveys and we analysed performance measurement systems.

We worked very closely with the NTA, the Department and the public service providers and disability stakeholders to try to devise something that would be workable and would give the quality information required. We intend to roll that out later this year. There will be roles for us and for the NTA in monitoring that transport. The NTA has responsibility for receiving

quarterly performance reports from public service providers. There is potential to focus on accessibility within that and we would work to give guidance on how that might be measured and reported consistently. In addition, we would consider the areas of the roles of access officers in transport services, monitoring how that is working on the ground, the accessible information. We would produce an independent assessment and report for the Minister on that with recommendations on what needs to be addressed. We would also use the monitoring to advise further actions the various bodies could implement but we do not have the power to enforce the implementation of those actions.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: Has the NDA made any progress?

Ms Siobhan Barron: There has been a lot of progress but there are areas that need attention. The obligations in the disability legislation are based on practicalities such as the technical design of coaches etc. That is a factor as well.

Ms Anne Graham: Deputy O’Keeffe asked if there is a fixed budget set aside for services. There is no budget set aside specifically for disability services because the challenge is to make all the public transport services fully accessible. Our regional cities are very much there. Some aspects need to be improved such as next stop announcements and screens but overall the level of accessibility in the cities is quite high. The challenge is outside the cities and we have an issue with the fleet and bus stop infrastructure and information. There is a very low level of accessibility outside the city areas.

We receive a separate budget of €28 million for the next four years from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport for the disability programme to improve and retrofit the infrastructure. That will go into the type of works I indicated earlier. I could not give a timeframe for getting all our services 100% accessible. It depends on the level of funding available, on some changes we hope to see in the fleet, and working together with our agencies and operators to deliver the infrastructure on the ground. There are definitely challenges in all that and I would not be able to give a timeframe.

Deputy Munster asked about the bus fleet. Before now all the services outside Dublin were operated by a coach fleet, which is a high floor coach. We have moved and changed our strategy so that the shorter journeys outside our cities will be operated by low floor vehicles, with a dedicated wheelchair space. That is a change in approach to the fleet. There would be no requirement for notice in respect of the fleet but we have to make sure there are accessible bus stops to serve that type of fleet. The challenge is the inter-city, the longer journey fleet which usually operates with a higher floor because that level of comfort is needed for the long distance journeys. We want to move away from the 24-hour notice. We would like to have no notice period associated with public transport services. We are moving incrementally by considering the short journeys initially, removing the requirement for notice on the basis that we have a low floor fleet available with the right bus stop infrastructure.

We are undertaking the audit of bus stops. We had done a lower level audit. Using much of the framework from the NTA we are assessing those in much more detail to see what level of accessibility we can give to the infrastructure we have. That will identify the work that needs to be done to have them considered 100% accessible, which feeds into the information we give on the journeys that can be made, through our journey planner. That work is under way and we expect to complete it in the next few months, which will also help our work programme on bus stops in particular.

The information that I gave on the private operators - the licensed commercial operators - refers to the services that are operated privately. That is the public transport services that are licensed by us, not tendered by us. When we go to tender services, and we do use commercial operators to provide services for us, we have moved and are moving towards requiring that the fleet they operate is wheelchair accessible, and preferably low-floor wheelchair accessible, particularly for the shorter journeys.

In terms of rural transport services, we allowed a short lead-in term of two years for those services. That means if the service is not wheelchair accessible, now that we have awarded them the contract, they have two years to get their fleet in place to offer wheelchair access. If they do not comply then we re-tender the service and remove the service from them. We are moving slowly to improve and move as much as possible towards a low-floor accessible fleet that does not require notice, and that does not require the removal of seats.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I would like a clarification. It has been mentioned that new contracts will be awarded. In the future will it be compulsory for all buses to be wheelchair accessible? Is there a commencement date for this? Let us say a bus company is awarded a public contract but its buses are not wheelchair accessible. When will the situation change for the company? If the company applies for a new contract will it be turned down on the basis that its buses are not wheelchair accessible?

Ms Anne Graham: We have a number of contracts at different stages. For any new contracts that we put forward now we want a low-floor wheelchair vehicle to be available, as part of that service.

In terms of the rural transport services, of which there are more than 1,300 different services operating throughout the State, we felt it was appropriate, given that many of those operators own just one bus, that we give them some notice to transfer and change their fleet so they can offer a low-floor wheelchair accessible vehicle as part of their service. We have given them a two-year lead-in time for such work. Those buses should be fully wheelchair accessible in another 18 months to two years. If they do not comply then we will re-tender the service on the basis that we need a wheelchair accessible fleet in place.

The Deputy also asked about Iarnród Éireann.

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes.

Ms Anne Graham: Even if we have the stations fully accessible so that they are independently accessible there is still the issue about accessing the trains themselves. Assistance is required to board trains. If there is nobody available at the station or it is unmanned, there is an issue about accessing the train fleet itself. While we may move towards upgrading the stations and having them accessible there is still notice required currently to actually board, and to make sure that there is somebody available both to allow the wheelchair to board through the use of a ramp or return to the station. We know work needs to be done in that area.

Deputy Imelda Munster: If Iarnród Éireann goes ahead and introduces unmanned stations then customers requiring assistance will depend on a member of staff being on the train. Does Ms Graham perceive that situation being problematic?

Ms Anne Graham: In terms of the intercity service, Irish Rail has proposed that it will have a host available on every train service. If that is the case then one can offer the service on each train service. There should not be any issue with the service unless there is an issue with trying

to get out of the station.

The DART and commuter services are another area where the service has sought to put improvements in place and a pilot scheme is under way. We will examine the scheme with the organisation once the pilot scheme has been completed. We will analyse whether the level of service is acceptable or whether we need to do more.

Chairman: More people use public transport at peak times. Should operators be required to provide people to assist customers at peak times, particularly at unmanned stations? In other words, there is an expectation that somebody will be available. Has the NTA asked Irish Rail to carry out an analysis on the frequency and times the organisation has been asked to supply services? Such information would help reduce the times when people are not available.

Ms Anne Graham: That is the work that we will do with Irish Rail. Rail services have particular difficulties in terms of the cost of operating the services. Reducing costs is one of the challenges that Iarnród Éireann has faced. Alongside that there must be a standard level of service that is offered to customers. We want to ensure that the right level of service is applied, particularly at station level. We will review the pilot scheme with Irish Rail once it has been completed.

Chairman: Ms Graham has said that Irish Rail is analysing the frequency and times when assistance is in peak demand. I presume more assistance is required at peak travel times.

Ms Anne Graham: Not necessarily. Again, we have not seen that information but we can ask Irish Rail for it.

Chairman: Please share that information with us.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Chairman: During the week a news programme was broadcast that featured a person with a disability availing of the new system of ramps. The person was brought to place A but he or she was left at that location. In other words, there is a lack of follow through in terms of the arrangements made. The NTA is the accountable body, I think. Why can the NTA not insist that such gaps in service never happen again?

Cost has been mentioned. I am sure that the NTA could provide a specific and separate amount in its budget for additionality, if a lack of money is the problem.

Ms Anne Graham: That is what we want to consider with Irish Rail. Yes, if an additionality is required to avoid such issues arising. We imagine that Irish Rail could provide the service that it has proposed. However, the service relies on individuals responding in time.

Chairman: Yes.

Ms Anne Graham: If there is not an appropriate level of service and it is more that the users and our customers require a higher level of service, of course we will consider the matter. If there is a cost associated with that aspect then we will consider it with the operators.

Chairman: I thank Ms Graham for her replies.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I appreciate the point that was made about universal accessibility, which is definitely the way to go. I am concerned about the suggestion that there should

be buy-in by various Departments. I wish to make the point that they should automatically do so.

I want to refer to wheelchair accessible taxis. I received a reply from the National Transport Authority in the past few weeks. I accept that there is a grant scheme. The grant and the changes made in 2014 have been helpful. The number of such taxis per head of population varies very significantly. For example, Tipperary is the worst with just one wheelchair accessible taxi for every 28,000 people. By contrast, Dublin has one wheelchair accessible taxi for every 2,000 people.

In terms of growing the fleet by 10%, it matters where the 10% is located because disability is not something that is unique to one location. Has a more targeted approach been proposed for areas where significant deficiencies in the service have shown up? How can one ensure there is a universal spread in terms of a service if one does not implement a targeted approach, as well as grow the number? I presume the 10% is a target. It would be nice if that target was exceeded.

I would like to hear more about the measurement of outcomes. If one does not have a plan there will be no outcomes and one cannot see if progress has been made.

Ms Graham mentioned that providers are given two years to move towards providing an accessible service. Are there situations where there is an accessible service but when the NTA moved to a tender process the service disimproved only to improve again in two years' time? Would that be something the NTA would not permit? We do not want the service to go backwards and forwards. If there is a fully accessible fleet then there should be a comparable competitive tender. I mean the competitive tender should be like with like. Could the witness give an indication of the costs for retrofitting older public transport or if any work has been done on that? It would be useful for us to have that in our report. For example, is it possible to retrofit the rail services with automatic ramps? With regard to bus stops, does the National Transport Authority have a plan and then require the local authorities, if the local authorities are involved at all, to implement the plan? How is that carried out? What we do not want is a very enthusiastic local authority using all the money and it not being in the worst part of the country. It should have a reasonable spread. There is a €30 million scoping project relating to DART for the announcements and the visual upgrades. Is there a timeline for it being implemented? Does it all have to be implemented at the same time or does Ms Graham have information on that?

Ms Graham referred to compulsory acquisition powers with regard to bus stops. How advanced is the authority on being clear about what it is seeking, and is there buy-in from the Department to include that in legislation? Where is the engagement on that? In terms of the legislative changes regarding the use of the section on the bus, what is the position with that? When might we see that appearing in either primary or secondary legislation, if that is necessary?

Senator John Dolan: I thank Senator Ó Céidigh for giving me the opportunity to speak. He is under pressure too. I was a member of the board of the National Disability Authority for a number of years. We received welcome news from the Government yesterday on the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. I draw people's attention to Article 9 on accessibility to the physical environment, transportation, information and communications, including information and communication technologies, and so forth. It refers to both urban and rural. The rural conundrum has been mentioned already. We will ratify the convention in a month or two. I believe the work the committee has been doing already in the

space around accessibility puts one in a good place to drive and keep that theme. We have had meetings with people with disabilities as witnesses and participants. It gives an edge to the proceedings. It is a different environment from the one we are in today, but we are all committed to the same thing. Getting things moved forward means nothing to somebody with a disability who cannot depend on a service today.

With regard to Ms Barron's presentation, it is unfair but I will try to distil it down to where we are and what needs to happen. She made a few key statements. She referred to the various Departments and agencies involved. This theme is in the remit of the National Transport Authority as well. She said the NDA advises cross-departmental working and she referred to the importance of getting full implementation of all the actions already agreed. There is a gap between action and moving it to execution. How big a boost would it be to this project if the various Departments and entities, and this encompasses local authorities, transport, private operators and others, were to work together in a more coherent and determined way? With ratification of the convention approaching, getting folk together in a determined way across the different silos in which they normally work would be important. Transport accessibility is key to a range of other things. We do not need to labour that other than to mention training, employment and other services. Does she have a view on that?

Due to the time constraints I will move to Ms Graham's presentation. I thank her for it and for the work the authority is doing. She said when replying to a question that we have a low level of accessibility outside the cities. It is helpful to say that in simple language. That is the case not just for people with disabilities but also for older people and people who live outside the big cities. We should remember that. Giving 24 hours' notice does not mean that it works. Two of the five wheelchair users who turned up for the pilot presentation about the four hour scheme for the DART on Monday could not get there or could not get home.

There is another question. It is not a tricky question but it is not a two plus two equals four question. Deputy O'Keeffe asked how long more it will take and Ms Graham said that depends on how much comes out of the State's pocket. Ms Graham might not be able to answer this question but it would be useful if she could advise the committee on it. Given the trend that has been in place over the last number of years and the amount of money that has been available to deal with the accessibility project, how long would it take if that was the continuing trend? She might have footnotes to that because she might say there is an indication that it will be improved or whatever, but taking the baseline that we keep going at the current level, in what year and century will this be sorted? That would be useful for us.

I have a similar question for the NTA to the one I put to the NDA. The NTA has a remit to develop the provision of integrated public transport services and integrated accessible transport systems within the Dublin area. What are the different stakeholders that have to be involved, such as local authorities and so forth? Again, could we pump up the work by the different agencies? I have a range of other questions but I will not ask them.

Chairman: Senator Ó Céidigh will thank you for not asking them.

Senator John Dolan: We can return to them. I thank the witnesses.

Senator Pádraig Ó Céidigh: Ní bheidh mé ach cúpla nóiméad. Beidh sé an-ghéarr. Athróidh mé go Béarla má tá sin ceart go leor.

I thank Ms Barron and Ms Graham for their presentations and I thank Dr. Gerald Craddock,

Ms Niamh Fawl and Mr. Hugh Creegan for their time. For me and all members of the committee this is one of the most important, if not the most important, pieces of work to which we can contribute. Our guests' contribution is very important for us.

I wish to make some fundamental points. First, I tried to imagine myself in a wheelchair. Can people try to do that? I live in Connemara. It is not a matter of me simply sitting into the car, driving to Dublin, going to meetings, staying in a hotel and so forth. I am not able to imagine it. I do not think any of us can put ourselves in that situation. It is not anybody's intention but I believe we are treating part of our community as second class citizens. We should start from there.

I have a little involvement in this area. I am a patron of Ability West and the Irish Association of Supported Employment, IASE. The term "disability" does not sit right with me because I know several people to whom it is applied who have significantly more ability than I and many others do. They are incredibly talented individuals with many abilities. If we accept that as a framework and try to put ourselves into the shoes of such people, we might be able to begin to imagine some of the challenges they face.

What the committee is trying to do in this regard is probably the most important thing it might achieve and it needs a clear structure, strategy and key performance indicators, KPIs. What are the witnesses' organisations hoping to achieve? I am very respectful of them and appreciate that they are doing their best. What are they trying to achieve, by what time, how much will it cost and what are the challenges? I found the presentations very useful and perhaps they had to be somewhat general. Towards the end of her presentation, Ms Graham began to get more specific, which I appreciate. Perhaps it is because I come from a business background but I wish to know what is to be done, when, by whom and what the key deliverables and challenges are. If those facts are available for the committee to study, interrogate in a positive way and begin using in our deliberations it will give significant meat to what we are trying to achieve. We need the witnesses' help in that regard.

The issue regarding urban and rural as raised by other members is very important. We must do our best to have balance. Imagine if one were trying to go from A to B and had to give 24 hours' notice before travelling. It would not be easy. I appreciate that the witnesses are doing their best. This issue must be pushed as a very high priority. It is very important to have KPIs and a business plan and to know what is to be delivered, when, by whom, how much it will cost and what the challenges are. I would value the witnesses' comments in that regard.

Chairman: I was in Cuba a few years ago and everybody had to give 24 hours' notice to use public transport. It was ridiculous. One could not do anything.

Deputy Robert Troy: I thank all those who have appeared before the committee today. Senator Ó Céidigh fairly summed the issue up a moment ago. At our first meeting on this issue, witnesses with limited mobility appeared before the committee to share their experiences of using public transport. Those experiences were less than flattering in some cases, although some positive experiences were also shared. However, the positive experiences shared were the result of the goodwill of key people working on behalf of the transport companies. That should not be the case. It should not be about who one meets when one turns up at a DART, train or bus station.

We must set key targets for what we want to achieve, by when and how that will be done. Without knowing exactly where one wants to go and the timeframe for getting there, one is

unable to put a plan in place. The reduction to four hours of the notice required for usage of the DART by persons with limited mobility has recently been rolled out. Although a reduction from 24 to four hours' notice would normally be welcome, the service users were far from complimentary of the measure. We need to accelerate our efforts to ensure we make public transport accessible for all. The key to that is what our targets are, how they will be achieved and the timeframe for so doing.

Chairman: Is there a better way of monitoring accessibility? We hear reports but who is in charge? Who is proactive in getting transparency on what is happening and reporting on it? On an advocate for change, many people come to me with issues relating to disability and I often think there is an absence of an advocate to carry the flag for them. Do we need a better advocacy service? Do we need more transparency regarding people who are refused or cannot get to transport? The more information that can be put in the public domain in respect of that matter without compromising people's personal details, the better. It is hugely important to have such public accountability.

How will the relevant EU directives and regulations apply in the future? What additional work is needed in that regard?

Ms Siobhan Barron: I thank the Chairman and members for their questions. On outcomes and outcome indicators, a large part of our role in the National Disability Authority is to measure the outcomes and impacts of policies as well as their outputs. Strategies such as the national disability strategy and the comprehensive employment strategy factor in specific timeframes, targets and responsibilities. They are sometimes a little loose in terms of an exact timeframe and an activity may be described as ongoing but even in such a case we measure it against what is happening. The National Disability Authority produces an assessment report, usually on an annual basis, for the relevant monitoring committees for the national disability strategy and the comprehensive employment strategy. We recently submitted an analysis to the latter committee. That is one form of analysis but it can tend to measure outputs.

Overall outcomes involve measuring the difference an action has made in the lives of those with disabilities. One can provide more accessible buses on a route but if people do not use them to travel, it does not make much of a difference in their lives. Our role is also to consider how that can be monitored at the higher level of outcomes. We often have to rely on data reported overall from the Central Statistics Office because such data is robust and collected at frequent intervals, which means it can be measured over a period of time. However, that can also impact the frequency at which one can measure such outcomes.

Along with the HSE, we have devised a monitoring framework specific to disability services and the supports in that regard. It is built on an area of nine outcomes and the impact on people's lives in terms of living in the community, friendships, being able to get out and about and how one measures that at a personal level as well as overall. That is a work in progress in terms of how it will be implemented and transport will be a key aspect thereof.

There is a challenge in terms of the quality of data when measuring outcomes at the highest level because people measure and report different things. Different organisations are measuring apples and oranges. One is very reliant on a very good data source, which is dependent on the questions asked, what is recorded and how the information is categorised.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: It would be useful to know, in the context of the committee's report, whether there is a way to get a similarity in approach such that people are talking about

the same things.

Ms Siobhan Barron: There is such a way in regard to transport. One of the issues we considered as part of monitoring the transport service was looking at getting information from a range of sources but founded on very clear criteria. We will be working with the National Transport Authority on devising those criteria for measuring accessibility. That information will also come from how complaints are recorded. There was mention of transparency, which will help identify issues and the number of incidents. There is no reason for service providers not to undertake regular customer surveys because customer service is the issue for everybody, including those with disabilities. The findings on that could be published and could inform further improvements. There is further work to be done in the context of indicators. In looking internationally at what might constitute effective measurement tools, it is something that is quite challenging. We are working with DIT and engaging with Trinity College in respect of data analytics and good systems for improving that. We are continuing to bring that to bear in terms of monitoring transport and other policy areas. I hope that is okay.

I will now address the questions from Senator Dolan regarding what needed to happen overall in terms of getting bodies to work together. One of the challenges is that there are lots of good initiatives but they are happening in isolation. They are being funded by different Departments and agencies. They are not connected. There is an issue around someone's journey from A to B. People may have to use different transport means. They need lots of information about that, reliability of timetables and certainty that there will be a connection between that and that they can easily access it in a most convenient way. It is not just about getting out to a social life. It is obviously critical to employment, education and other things people want to do. While we welcome the fact that transport is a core element of strategies like the comprehensive employment strategy and the national disability strategy, there is a need to look at transport in the round in the context of all those different Departments and how that all joins up and works together, how funding can be more effectively used and how those services can be better linked.

Going back to the question about outcome indicators, there are lots of data. It is a matter of bringing all of that together and using it to better effect. Bringing all of that together and capturing it in some kind of overall strategy with timeframes and indicators would lend itself to measuring this more easily over time but, in particular, to measuring our report to the UN committee in terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and how we are advancing the issues relating to that. Many of those issues are captured in the national disability strategy and other frameworks to a degree but a lot more can be done to achieve a joined-up approach across agencies and in respect of sharing of data. There is the question of rural-urban issues, the taxi service and the standards that can apply. It also means that they would all be measured in the same way as well. We feel there is a need to bring Departments and agencies together to create some kind of transport for all plan and looking at it from a universal design approach so it is not, as I said earlier, about an add-on service. It is about a service for everybody, including people with disabilities, and a good customer service from which everybody benefits.

I think a lot of the points were made equally about clear structures and strategies and indicators, which would be part of that; a better way of monitoring accessibility, going back to the points made earlier about a similar way of reporting; the criteria people are measuring against; the different means of gathering data from sources, particularly from customers themselves; and who is charge of that. We have a key role in monitoring the success of policies, programmes and strategies so one could say we are guiding on the monitoring systems and devising that.

We are monitoring what is there in a sense but it is very much built on the information that is available to us and our awareness.

Chairman: In respect of driving that change, there could be a website or somewhere people could go to make complaints if they wanted to do so. It is just to have more pressure on the system and the accountable people in the context of doing their job. That would be hugely important.

Ms Siobhan Barron: I agree with the point about the source of information. I think it came up at the previous discussion in the context of the role of the access officer and being able to contact somebody in the system. There is also information on complaints, how that is promoted and made easy for people to use and obviously, the outcome relating to all of that being available and transparent.

Chairman: How we do measure up to best practice internationally in terms of the transparency of the problems?

Ms Siobhan Barron: We are different to many countries in how we manage a transport service. The system in Ireland is very centralised. Other countries would measure that very much at a local level. Every country seems to have some challenges and difficulties in terms of transport issues but, equally, they have problems in terms of data. We have been looking at Finland, Denmark and many other jurisdictions. We could be a shining light in trying to crack that at national level.

Chairman: Could I put a different way? I appreciate that Ms Barron might not be able to provide an answer today. Where is best practice? Where is the best accountability? Where is a real change happening most quickly and most effectively?

Ms Anne Graham: Mr. Creegan will answer the question about wheelchair-accessible taxis.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: The Deputy is right with regard to wheelchair-accessible taxis. There is a different percentage in different counties. We started this grant scheme a couple of years ago. Our target was to raise the number of wheelchair-accessible vehicles overall. It had reached a worryingly low level of 860 a couple of years ago. We have increased it to 1,550. That is still not enough. Providing targeted grants for specific counties is quite difficult. It can create tensions within the industry. It is something we can look at further but we are still keen on raising it not just in specific counties but across all the counties.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I appreciate that but how does the NTA bring up the level if it does not do that? There is a huge difference.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Yes, but it is very difficult to say that we will offer a higher grant in one county while the neighbouring county has a lower grant. The Deputy can imagine the kind of issues that would arise. We do not have an answer. I do not have a clear answer as to how we might do it. It is something we will look at to see whether there is a way of encouragement. That is about the most we could do. Tailoring the grant to different counties throws up many issues.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I appreciate that.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I might deal with two other questions. One was about accessible bus stops across the country and how we go about doing it. As indicated in our opening statement,

our plan is to put in a wheelchair-accessible bus stop for coaches in all major towns. It does not make sense to try to do this in every location. It is physically very difficult.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Who does the work?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: I was going to get to that. We have been going to the councils and telling them that we would like to put in accessible bus stops on main streets, that we have been preparing the designs for this and that we have looked at the best way of doing it. We need to go through the councils to actually get it done.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: Is there a difference in experience between local authorities?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It is fair to say there is but it is also a function of the bespoke nature of the stops. In some cases, if little intervention is required and we just have to do a small rejigging of a kerb line or something, the councils are more amenable. It is smaller-scale work. In other cases, we must remove parking and widen the footpath by 2 m. The Deputy can see how that is far more problematic for the obvious reasons. It is a different experience and it does require encouragement with regard to the council with regard to moving on.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: What I am trying to get at is whether some local authorities take this more seriously than others. Is there a more targeted approach? Can something be done? I just want to get the outcome here.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: It probably needs political push at a councillor level to actually support doing these things in a town. We will come along and produce a design but unless the council is behind it, it does not get delivered so it does need support at councillor level to make it happen in these towns.

Chairman: The NTA wants a person who advocates and pushes it every day.

Mr. Hugh Creegan: Correct.

Senator John Dolan: Who is responsible? Is it each council?

Mr. Hugh Creegan: The council is responsible for making changes on the street surface in the various towns. We can give it the designs, support it and do all that we can do but we cannot go in and rip up the street and do what is necessary.

Chairman: On that point, perhaps we could meet a representative from the County and City Management Association before we finalise the report.

Senator John Dolan: The NTA cannot ensure that there is an accessible bus service because it is not just the bus.

Ms Anne Graham: It is the stop.

Senator John Dolan: If each of the 31 local authorities in this country must do it, then it is a bit of a quagmire. In such circumstances, I think the Chairman is right.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: We need to include this in our report. We need to flag it as what needs to be done in the context of symmetry between the agencies and the local authorities and that there is an expectation that it would be carried out. We must look at where the blockages exist.

Chairman: What we are saying is that someone is needed to drive that agenda. If the local authorities have accountability, it would not be a bad idea to call them before this committee and ask them for their recommendations in this. I agree that must be in our report.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: In relation to the local authorities, is it not the case that if a new bus stop is being erected, planning must be sought and it is necessary to say what is planned to be done with it?

Ms Anne Graham: It depends on the level of expenditure on the stop. It may not need planning. In some cases they do require planning permission. It would not be the NTA that looks for that. It would be the local authority that would seek that through Part VIII.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: The local authority just ensures that these conform or are properly regulated. If planning permission is not required, there is a letter of compliance if there are remedial works. Is the NTA not in a position to give the local authorities money to undertake the works? For example, the local authorities maintain our national secondary roads and primary roads but they get the money from Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. The local authorities are agents. Is the onus not on the NTA to provide local authorities with the few bob to upgrade these bus stops-----

Ms Anne Graham: Absolutely.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: -----as opposed to the local authorities being expected to take money out of their own pockets, so to speak?

Ms Anne Graham: We are not expecting local authorities to fund it. What we want to do is to set out a programme of works that are required at bus stops. We started with an audit, we will set out a programme of required improvements and liaise with the local authorities. What we tend to do is go on a route-by-route basis. For example, we started on the route 32, which is Donegal to Dublin. We would try to build up accessibility across a particular route. We would approach local authorities, ask them to provide the infrastructure changes, which we will fund, but the local authorities have to do the planning and works. We are only at the early stages of this process. I do not want to indicate that the local authorities are not willing to do this. We want to improve and increase the programme of works and the local authorities need to be in a position that they can respond to that. There is an element of educating them to let them know that this programme is coming. We want to ensure that the local authorities can respond to it.

Deputy Catherine Murphy: I would like to get the answers to my questions as, unfortunately, I must leave.

Ms Anne Graham: I also have more answers that I would like to give.

Chairman: There is no problem with that. I want everyone to get their answers.

Ms Anne Graham: Deputy Catherine Murphy asked about the services, which are tendered for two years. Obviously, it would not be our intention for the service to disimprove. The tender process is not based on price alone, but we also look at quality, and one of the quality elements is the accessibility which is offered. I am not aware of any disimprovements in the service level and it would not be our intention that this would happen. Even if it occurred as a result of a pricing issue, because a tender process is being undertaken, we would try to recover that as quickly as possible, with the two years requirement to have a wheelchair accessible vehicle on the service. As I said, I am not aware of anything that has happened in that case.

On the next stop announcements on the DART, we had some indication and there has been some scoping work done with an initial costing of €30 million put on that. We need to re-examine it. We are only at the very early stages of that, working with Iarnród Éireann to develop that project. We would like to commence that project this year. We do not know at this point, but it could take a year or two years to implement because we are talking about the whole communications system, both visual and audible, across the DART system. It definitely needs a good investment.

On powers and legislation, while we have some compulsory acquisition powers, if compulsory acquisition is required to do bus stop works, we would ask the local authorities to use their powers in that area. If we need to step in, we have the facility to do that. When we did the work with the Irish Wheelchair Association on access to the wheelchair space on Dublin Bus, one issue that Dublin Bus raised with us is that its drivers cannot force people out of the space. They can only encourage them. Its by-laws and the primary legislation does not allow them to enforce a movement. It is another matter whether we wish to take that route but we want to examine, along with the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, whether there should be a change in legislation. No decision has been made on that but we are working through the Department on the matter.

Responding to Senator Dolan who raised the matter of the 24 hour notice, we are concerned that even when it is given, it is not working. We know there are issues on this as a service provider, but also the requirement to have the notice at all. We want to work with the operators, as I have indicated, to try to remove the notice. Our target is to have 100% universally accessible public transport without notice periods. As to how long that would take, at current funding levels it would be very many years. We will give the committee a note of what would be required for the areas that we would target and the type of infrastructure that we would prioritise to make significant steps towards that target. We supplied the committee with information which gives an indication of the cost relating to railway stations, where the improvements would cost around €80 million. Regarding bus stations, Bus Éireann wants to revisit the cost associated with it, but in that case improving the infrastructure would also be in the tens of millions. Our key target is to have 100% universally accessible public transport. Many elements must be targeted to deliver that, and funding is required to help us do so.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe took the Chair.

Vice Chairman: I apologise that our Chairman had to leave. I have another question for Ms Graham. I notice that more and more of our train stations are becoming more automated and we are losing the stationmaster. I picked up on something in the NTA’s opening statement where it refers to Cobh, which is a good example of what I am thinking of. Accessibility has been put in place but it has lost a stationmaster. People feel aggrieved that there is no person at the end of their journey. There might be only one person disembarking from a train and there is no one there for the purposes of safety and security. Is it the case that now all the disability issues are covered, we can just dismantle the manpower? Does the NTA support the lack of staff in these stations, which are becoming increasingly automated?

Ms Anne Graham: As I indicated earlier, we will look with Iarnród Éireann at the type of service that is being provided. There is no doubt that it has been de-manning stations on the basis of the infrastructure available, such as ticketing and other aspects of its services which did not necessarily require somebody to be available for a full length of service. We know that as a result of that, there are issues when someone who needs assistance wants to travel. That is why the 24 hour notice is required. There is a trade-off between notice required and the level

of service that is available and the cost associated with the level of service of having a manned station. It is something that we will work with Iarnród Éireann to establish the best level of service where passengers need assistance.

Vice Chairman: Are there any further questions or do the witnesses wish to make any further comments?

Ms Siobhan Barron: I apologise for having missed a question earlier regarding the implications of EU regulations and the various directives. I want to highlight the fact that further obligations are coming down the track in terms of a web directive and also an EU accessibility act. The implications of those are that we will have to have better systems for planning, achieving and measuring the impact of what we are doing to realise those requirements progressively. It is about how that is measured at national level but also how it is measured within the relevant sector. That comes in under a particular Department, for example, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, and it should be very much a strong feature of its strategic corporate plan and in how it measures and accounts for its performance as a Department and sector. How it feeds back in to reporting must also be considered, and how Ireland is performing and reporting back in to the EU systems.

We are always happy to support and guide on how this might happen. We will conduct our own independent assessment also. A lot more work, however, is needed to improve data, data sources, criteria that are used and the very specific timeframes and indicators that will apply. There are further obligations coming down the line that will impact the transport sector.

Vice Chairman: I am sure that Senator Dolan will be keeping an eye on the witnesses.

Senator John Dolan: Indeed.

Vice Chairman: That concludes this session. I thank our witnesses for appearing at the committee today and for their informative presentations. Their contributions will form an important part of the committee's deliberations on this important policy matter.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.35 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 7 February 2018.