

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR, TURASÓIREACHT AGUS SPÓRT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT, TOURISM AND SPORT

Dé Céadaoin, 30 Bealtaine 2018

Wednesday, 30 May 2018

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Mick Barry,	Frank Feighan,
Imelda Munster,	John O'Mahony.
Kevin O'Keeffe,	
Noel Rock,	
Robert Troy.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputies Michael Collins, Danny Healy-Rae, Mattie McGrath and Aengus Ó Snodaigh.

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

Business of Joint Committee

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe took the Chair.

Vice Chairman: I remind members to turn off their mobile phones completely because they interfere with the recording equipment.

Before we deal with the main business, I will deal with correspondence. No. 2018/281 is an email from Ms M. Daly of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport requesting a date for the chairperson designate of the Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, Mr. Basil Geoghegan, to appear before the joint committee. This meeting is scheduled for 13 June. Is that agreed? Agreed.

No. 2018/282 is a letter from the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Ross, forwarding further information on a number of items following a Revised Estimates meeting on 18 April. It is proposed to note this. Is that agreed? Agreed.

No. 2018/283 is an email from Mr. Kieran Delaney, dated 21 May, requesting that an invitation be issued to Mr. Dermot O’Leary, National Bus and Rail Union, for the final meeting regarding accessibility of public transport for people with disabilities. It is proposed to invite Mr. O’Leary to appear before the committee at its final wrap-up meeting. This meeting is on 13 June next. Is that agreed? Agreed.

No. 2018/284 is an email from Ms M. Bell of the Marine Casualty Investigation Board regarding queries raised by Deputy Troy at a meeting with Ms Cliona Cassidy, chairperson designate of the board, on 21 February. It is proposed to note this correspondence. Is that agreed? Agreed.

No. 2018/285A comprises a letter and attachment from the Minister, Deputy Ross, regarding the general scheme of a railway safety (amendment) Bill 2018. It is proposed to engage in pre-legislative scrutiny on this matter as soon as the committee’s schedule permits. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Robert Troy: On that point, would it be acceptable to ask the Minister, when he comes in, whether it is a priority for his Department given that we are waiting on legislation for an independent noise regulator and the variation in speed limits on the M50? I tabled a parliamentary question to the Minister and received an answer implying that, over the past five years, not one person has been found to be in breach of the railway safety order in the workplace. I wonder whether dealing with the Bill in question is a priority and efficient use of our time given that we have other legislation and a fairly comprehensive work programme. Various Members across the political divide have other issues they want to see on the agenda. I wonder, therefore, whether it is a priority at all.

Vice Chairman: What does the Deputy propose?

Deputy Imelda Munster: Is the Deputy proposing that he put that to the Minister?

Vice Chairman: I have no problem with that. The Deputy can include any question he wants.

Deputy Robert Troy: We will put it to the Minister.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I do not see in the minutes a reference to the junket or trip to

Germany last week. Could the committee be furnished with a report outlining its cost, the reasons for it and its benefits?

Vice Chairman: It related to a report on the International Transport Forum.

We will wait for the Minister before beginning our first session.

Rural Bus Services: Discussion

Vice Chairman: In the first session of today's meeting, we will consider proposals for late-night rural bus services. I welcome the Minister, Deputy Shane Ross, and his officials, Mr. Kevin Doyle, Ms Eilish O'Connor, Mr. Dermot Murphy, Ms Maev Nic Lochlainn, Ms Denise Keoghán and Mr. Declan Hayes.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. However, if they are directed by the committee 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, 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 official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I invite the Minister, Deputy Ross, to make his opening statement.

Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Shane Ross): I thank the committee for inviting me to speak to it today about the recently announced new evening and night-time rural transport services.

I will very briefly go into the background of the new services and begin by setting out how services in rural areas, funded by my Department under the rural transport programme, have developed and expanded.

The rural transport programme was launched in 2007, following an earlier pilot that ran from 2002 to 2006, specifically to address social exclusion in rural areas arising from unmet public transport needs. At that time, 35 community transport groups around the country were funded under the programme to deliver the services. While services are open to the general public, older people and people with disabilities have traditionally formed the core customer base of the programme.

In 2012 the National Transport Authority, NTA, was assigned responsibility for management of the rural transport programme as part of new arrangements for integrated local and rural transport approved by Government that year. A restructuring of the programme was announced in 2013. The aim of the restructuring, which followed a value-for-money and policy review of the programme, was to ensure a more efficient and effective delivery structure that maximises integration with other State-funded transport services and to make the programme a sustainable part of the public transport system. As part of the restructuring the rural transport programme, which now operates under the Local Link brand, 17 Local Link offices were established from

the 35 rural transport groups previously delivering the services under the programme. The NTA contracts the services and the 17 Local Link offices manage the services in their respective areas on behalf of the NTA. The NTA, with its national remit to secure the provision of public passenger transport services, is best placed to ensure that Local Link services are developed and integrated with other public transport services.

Since the organisational restructuring was completed in 2015, the focus has turned to optimising the services provided within the available funding. In 2016 the Local Link offices began a review of services in conjunction with the NTA. The review is looking to ensure that services are meeting the needs of communities in rural areas and identifying gaps in the provision of services across the country. Arising out of the review and with an increase in my Department's funding for Local Link services since 2016, 50 new services have been introduced to the network. These include regular five-, six- or seven-day per week bus services as well as demand responsive services. Key features of these services include greater integration with existing public transport services and better linkage of services between and within towns and villages. The review also identified the need for community transport services targeting the needs of specific service users from a social inclusion perspective. Accordingly, the NTA has provided funding to Local Link offices in 2016 and 2017 for once-off community transport services across a number of categories, including age-related, youth, integration and culture and education.

I am aware of how important the Local Link services are to people living in rural areas. The difficulties in accessing social activities in rural areas in the evening and night-time have been a particular concern for me and the Government. I therefore set about bringing together key stakeholders to explore the issues involved and to try to come up with practical proposals. I hosted meetings in September and November last year, attended by representatives from the Vintners Federation of Ireland, Insurance Ireland, the Irish Countywomen's Association, the Irish Farmers' Association, Irish Rural Link and the NTA, among others. Arising from that dialogue, I tasked the NTA with examining the potential to extend existing Local Link services and proposals I received in this regard from Deputy Martin Heydon. The NTA sought the views of the 17 Local Link offices in terms of the various ways that the rural transport programme is seeking to address unmet transport needs in rural areas during evening and night-time hours. Proposals were also sought in terms of addressing these unmet transport needs going forward. The NTA on 27 February 2018 issued a funding call for applications from all 17 Local Link offices to deliver a range of trial evening and night-time services. The deadline for receipt of applications was Friday, 16 March 2018. The NTA received proposals for 50 such services from 12 of the Local Link offices by the deadline. No applications were received from the five Local Link offices for Galway, Sligo-Leitrim-Roscommon, Mayo, Clare or Limerick.

Having appraised the applications received, the NTA approved funding for all 50 new services on a six-month trial basis. The services comprise 20 extensions to existing regular public transport services and 30 demand-responsive services across 19 counties. They will add 188 new trips per week to the network of rural transport services nationally, and will run on average from 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. typically on Friday and Saturday evenings.

While a public procurement process must be undertaken for the 30 new demand-responsive services, the NTA plans to have all 50 services operational by mid-July 2018 running until December 2018 on a trial basis. The total cost of funding these services for the six-month period in 2018 is €450,000. The NTA will monitor usage patterns and trends on the services over the trial period. The results of the trial will be assessed and the continuation of these services will

be considered in the light of those results and the availability of funding in 2019. That figure of €450,000 may rise because there were five that did not apply but may have applied since. In that case it will rise proportionately.

I should add that the NTA has engaged with the five Local Link offices which did not submit applications for funding and has invited them to submit applications with a revised closing date of Friday, 1 June 2018 on the same terms and conditions as applied previously. I acknowledge the help I received from Deputy Heydon and from the Minister of State, Deputy Griffin, in getting this initiative off the ground. I also thank the NTA and the Local Link offices for their work in developing the new services. I am grateful for the general welcome for this scheme from large numbers of people, particularly in rural Ireland, as well as in these Houses. As members know, this is a pilot scheme and it should be given a chance. Of course, it is not a final scheme but is something on which we must build. We will have to make judgments on it at the end of the six-month period. At the moment, the general welcome it has received in rural Ireland is very gratifying. This is just the beginning of a recognition of and a solution to the problems experienced in rural society. We want to address those problems in a very serious way, not just now but also into the future.

Vice Chairman: I thank the Minister for his presentation. Senator Feighan is first.

Senator Frank Feighan: I thank the Minister for his presentation. A lot has been done in recent years to improve rural transport. The development of Local Link, which grew from 35 different rural transport groups, has made a noticeable difference on the ground. While we could always do with more, that has made a significant difference. The important issue now is to market those routes to increase the numbers using them.

I was very disappointed to hear that no applications were received from the five Local Link offices for Galway, Sligo-Leitrim-Roscommon, Mayo, Clare and Limerick. I am sure there is a reason for that and was glad to hear that the Minister had invited them to submit applications, with a revised closing date of Friday, 1 June. Have any applications been received? I would be very concerned if applications had not been submitted from what are very rural areas. Have any applications been received so far? The deadline is only a few days away.

Deputy Shane Ross: To date the NTA has received applications from two of the five Local Link offices to which Senator Feighan refers, namely, Limerick and Sligo-Leitrim-Roscommon. We are hoping that the other three will submit applications. The lack of applications is not really explicable. The offices were informed but perhaps they are running a little behind. The NTA tells me that it is making every effort to accommodate those who have not yet submitted an application.

Senator Frank Feighan: I thank the Minister. I am delighted to hear that there was some leeway and that those who had not applied were given a second chance to do so. I am delighted to hear that an application was submitted by the Local Link office in my area of Sligo-Leitrim-Roscommon and I hope the Minister will look favourably on it.

Deputy Shane Ross: The NTA contacted them about two weeks ago and told them that it would consider applications submitted by 1 June. If the NTA does not receive applications from the remaining offices by this Friday, it should leave it open to them to make late applications. It would be absurd not to do so if they wanted to make an application. It would also be absurd if they did not want to make an application.

Senator John O'Mahony: I thank the Minister for his presentation. He has mentioned that the office for Sligo-Leitrim-Roscommon has applied. Did the other offices, and the one in Mayo in particular, indicate that they were applying?

Deputy Shane Ross: I do not know the answer to that because applications are made directly to the NTA. I do know that Local Link offices have been given every opportunity to apply. We do not want anyone to miss out on this opportunity.

Senator John O'Mahony: Mayo, Clare and Limerick would be the ones in which I am interested.

Deputy Shane Ross: The NTA is looking for feedback on this from those who do not apply. If offices do not apply, the NTA is going to ask why, in case there is some flaw in the application process or with what is being offered. I do not think there is any problem because it is almost unanimous at this stage.

Senator John O'Mahony: There does not seem to be any excuse in the sense that they have been contacted again and so on-----

Deputy Shane Ross: No, they have been contacted again.

Senator John O'Mahony: I thank the Minister. I have no further questions.

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome the Minister and his officials here this morning. Any new service is to be welcomed and while I am not going to start off on a critical note, I do have a number of questions on this new service. What additional funding has the Department given to the NTA this year to roll out the pilot scheme? The Minister said that the pilot scheme will cost €450,000. My information is that this is to come from existing resources as opposed to new or additional resources. My colleagues asked why five Local Link offices did not apply. My understanding is that the timeframe was very tight in terms of when expressions of interest were originally sought. Organisations had less than two weeks to put together a comprehensive proposal on the routes they would be able to roll out. I ask the Minister to confirm that was the case, and if so, does he believe that a two-week timeframe was adequate? To be fair to these Local Link offices, they are trying to continue with the work they are doing, providing services in their areas. I know that only one application was made in my constituency of Longford-Westmeath because of the tight timeframe. People were unable to do the necessary preparatory work that would be needed to put a business case forward on rolling out a greater number of services. In my constituency, which is very large, the only routes that have been identified are between Ballinalee, Granard and Longford two evenings per week, with the last bus departing at 11 p.m. I appreciate that the Minister is not from rural Ireland but-----

Deputy Shane Ross: I am from rural Ireland.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister represents an urban constituency.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Minister thinks he is from rural Ireland.

Deputy Robert Troy: I accept that this is a pilot scheme and that there is a possibility that it will be rolled out further. A pilot, however, must be designed in such a way as to give a scheme the best chance to work. Many people in rural Ireland would only be contemplating going out at 10.30 p.m. They are working on their farms and have family commitments, as do people everywhere else. If one is in rural Ireland and one goes out to socialise before 10.30 p.m. there

will not be too much going on, so cutting off the bus service at 11 p.m. may prevent the scheme from working as well as it possibly could.

The Minister has said that he will review the scheme within six months. What metrics will be used in that review to determine success or failure? We need to know now, not at the end of the six months, the key tests in terms of whether this is deemed to be a success or a failure.

The scheme is welcome on the routes that have been identified. The Minister said that he met the Vintners Federation of Ireland and the Irish Countrywomen's Association, which I welcome. He criticised others for proposing to meet the vintners on this issue but he met them. Did the Minister consider a community hackney service? These buses are not going to go down byroads or cater for the settlement patterns in rural Ireland? Many people in rural Ireland live next to secondary roads, byroads and boreens. How are they going to be able to access the buses? Perhaps rolling out a community employment scheme would work better. What I had in mind was a scheme whereby if a local person was prepared to work on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights, the person could retain social welfare benefits but at the same time would have the opportunity to earn or supplement the benefits money by providing a much-needed service in the locality. That would have had a greater impact in fighting isolation and ensuring that people would have access to a service on a weekend night regardless of how isolated or rural the location. This is something the Minister could consider now as part of the pilot scheme.

This was introduced as a result of the Minister's proposal for the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill, which is still meandering its way through the Dáil. Is there any reason or rationale that this is coming so late to the debate? Since the Minister has been 18 months debating this issue, I would have thought this pilot scheme would have been front-loaded. Then, provided the debate has concluded within the coming days or weeks, we could have been running not a pilot scheme but an actual scheme that had been tried and tested. The pilot should be completed and the full scheme should be in place.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank Deputy Troy for the general welcome he has given and for some sensible and constructive questions.

Deputy Troy asked about the timing. The announcement was on 27 February. The applications had to come in by 16 March. We are talking about a period of two and a half weeks. Deputy Troy is right to suggest that it is a little tight. That is a fair point. The period has been extended until 1 June for anyone who did not apply. That is quite a considerable extension. We received 50 applications. There was no indication of dissatisfaction with them in respect of the timing. I am only speculating but I believe there may be one or two of those who were left out or who did not apply who may have found the timetable too tight. That is why we extended it. I believe we should continue to be flexible about it and that is why it is a pilot scheme for six months. The idea is that over the six-month period we will make changes or the National Transport Authority will make changes or suggest changes. There will probably be new routes or services that will be considered and the Local Link groups that made applications will probably be welcome to change their applications during that period as a result of the findings. If there are gaps, I imagine the NTA will be more than happy to fill them. This is not only a pilot. It will also teach serious lessons about where routes are right or wrong, where the demand is, where society is benefiting and where it is not.

The timetable is tight. We were keen to get it in for the summer season. There are procurement delays of several weeks for one or two of these routes. We want to do it as quickly as possible. It is an urgent problem. My guess is that if we had said the window was six months,

then people would have asked why we could not do it in two or three weeks because the summer season needs the service. We will certainly consider further applications during this period and representations will be considered seriously. We want this to work.

I listened to what Deputy Troy had to say about people going out at 10.30 p.m. If that is true and there is a need for the service at 10.30 p.m., it may present some logistical difficulties. I have no operational role in this but I would urge the NTA to look at the possibility of people leaving after 10 p.m. If that is necessary, if it is the reality that people go out, if there is demand for the service and if it will help people and reduce loneliness, then we should consider it. We have to be reasonable about that and we should certainly consider it.

Deputy Troy asked about the metrics after six months. The NTA has said that it will look at this over six months. The authority has not spelt out what the metrics will be. This is not a commercial operation and it is not in place to make money. The main metric of this, as far as I am concerned, is to reduce the difficulties of society in rural Ireland in getting together and with connectivity with regard to the loneliness that many people experience. The idea is to improve the quality of people's lives. That is the metric I would urge those involved to use when they are judging whether it is working. Obviously, if it is not working in certain areas or if no one is using it, then it would be a consideration. The major consideration, however, should be the improvement to people's quality of life. That is the most important thing. Society should benefit and society must connect. That is the most important metric.

I gather the idea of a community hackney has been tried before and there was little take-up. I will come back to the Deputy on that point, but I think there was little take-up when this was tried before. From memory, I recall there were ten hackneys used nationwide. It was only a small number.

Many of the extensions will be demand-responsive units. This means they will go down lanes and various places that are not regular routes to collect people. I understand 30 of the 50 are demand-responsive and therefore they will be flexible.

The final question from Deputy Troy related to the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill. The Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill and this measure were not conditional on each other. They are completely separate. Rural isolation is one problem. Drink-driving is a completely different problem. If there is a connection, it is in the sense that people can go to the pub and come home having had two pints or more without fearing in any way that they will be stopped or breathalysed for committing an offence on the way home. If this improves the willingness in that regard, that is fine, but they are not in any way conditional upon each other one way or the other. The drink-driving Bill will go through the Dáil in the coming weeks and this will be initiated in the coming weeks, but regardless if one goes through and the other does not, this measure will go through anyway.

Deputy Robert Troy: I welcome that but it was as a result of pressure for support of this Bill at the time. This was alluded to by the Minister and Deputy Heydon. The two are happening together. There was no talk of this measure before the Bill. That is a fact. We are coddling ourselves if we are not being honest about that.

I am glad to hear the Minister say that the metrics will reflect a social service to improve the quality of people's lives. That is welcome. I will come back at a later stage and remind the Minister that he said as much. Many of the social services within Bus Éireann and the public service obligation routes have changed in recent times. Commercial realities applied in certain

instances. I welcome the fact that this is not a commercial reality and not based on commercial realism but on providing a social service within our community. We should encourage people to use it in the coming six months to ensure there is a far greater roll-out of this scheme after the six-month period.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I, too, was glad to hear the Minister say that it was not a commercial product. I was glad to hear him speak of improving the quality of life and talking about connectivity between rural and urban areas. I smiled when I heard that because that was the argument many of us made against the proposals to put some Bus Éireann and Dublin Bus routes out to tender. That is exactly what it is about. Perhaps the Minister will heed what he himself has said when it comes around to the next batch of routes he intends to outsource.

My questions are on the breakdown of the funding and how it is going to operate. I am also curious about how the pilot scheme will be monitored. I do not believe the Minister said anything specific about how it would be measured. Perhaps he could clarify that. I asked whether this would be a door-to-door service as opposed to a collection point-type service on main routes, and I was glad to hear that it is going to be a door-to-door service. If a person is living in a village, he or she can access the local community hall for social activities or the local pub, but the people who live up the lanes and the boreens are completely isolated. For this reason a door-to-door service would be good. I presume a phone line will be set up which those wishing to avail of the service can ring to schedule collection.

I could not believe it when I saw that the service would be operating until 11 p.m. at the latest. I do not frequent pubs, but closing time is midnight or 12.30 a.m., I believe.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: It is 11.30 p.m.

Deputy Imelda Munster: It is 11.30 p.m. I believe pubs close a bit later in the summer. If the bus is beeping outside the pub at 11 p.m. and a person has just walked in, it is hardly worth his or her while. Will the Minister give consideration to that? People generally go out much later in the evening, particularly if they live in a rural area, so 11 p.m. does not really suit the purpose of the scheme.

Deputy Shane Ross: The Deputy asked about funding. Deputy Troy asked the same question earlier and I did not answer him. The funding will come from the current resources of the NTA. There will not be an additional charge on the Exchequer for the current funding of the pilot scheme.

I do not blame Deputy Munster for asking operational questions. I would do the same if I was in opposition. I am not responsible for answering such questions. I know that the Deputy would like answers to her questions, but they should be addressed elsewhere. If she has any difficulty getting those answers, I presume I will be able to get them for her.

The NTA will measure this, and I have asked if it will carry out an interim report after three months. It has agreed to do so. I want to monitor the situation very closely and see how it is operating. I am not going to tell it exactly how to measure it because it has experts on routes and services who will do that work. This will alleviate rural isolation. That is the criterion. This is being done to ensure that people are happier, more comfortable and have better social lives in rural Ireland, and to recognise that the problem needs to be remedied. If we were spending millions on one route, the Deputy would be quite right to come to the committee and say that we are wasting money and that there has to be a balance. The thrust and motivation behind this

is not commercial at all, however, but rather to make people happier, to ensure they have better social lives and to ensure they are better connected. I am not saying that it will be done at the drop of a hat, but ultimately we want to reduce rural isolation. That is the metric we should use. Where there are new routes which are doing that, we should continue them and extend them. Thirty of the new routes are going to be demand-responsive, meaning that the service will call to the doors of customers in certain circumstances to make sure that they can get out. That is a pretty demand-responsive action.

I take the point Deputy Munster made about closing times. I am not very good with pub opening hours. If pubs close at 11.30 p.m. and the last buses are before that time, people's ability to enjoy themselves as others can is probably reduced. I will ask the NTA to consider that when the pilot scheme concludes and consider whether there is a demand for the service to go on later. I believe that is reasonable. Deputy Troy mentioned that issue as well. If that is a difficulty, it can be examined.

Deputy Mick Barry: The rural bus link is a positive idea. This is a pilot programme, and I am informed, to quote my sources, by Deputy Michael Collins that there are two links in the pilot programme in County Cork. If there were to be a comprehensive service for the county, the Deputy believes that 35 to 40 routes would be required, which is approximately 20 times what is available under the pilot scheme. Those 35 or 40 routes cannot be put on a pilot programme, but if it is successful, if indeed it does combat rural isolation and the service is rolled out to as many people as possible, there will be a big expansion of the programme.

The Minister mentioned that the cost of the pilot is €450,000. Five of the 17 areas have not made applications and are not part of the programme yet. If this is going to be an effective service for significant numbers of people in rural Ireland, a year after the pilot programme the price could spiral to €10 million, €15 million or perhaps more. The NTA has not received extra funding for the pilot programme. The Minister said that there was no additional charge to the Exchequer. It could not reasonably be expected to go beyond the pilot programme from within its own resources. Will the Minister indicate what his position will be in terms of extra funding for next year or the year after if the pilot programme is successful to roll out the programme to the maximum number of communities?

Deputy Shane Ross: I believe there have been three applications from Cork rather than two, namely, Kinsale to Clonakilty, Banteer, and Rockchapel to Meelin. There are three. That might change the calculations mentioned by the Deputy but it does not change his point. I am not sure on what basis the Deputy is saying that 35 services rather than three would be required, because the local links were invited to make whatever applications they wanted to the scheme. There were no limits at all and we received only three applications from the local links in Cork. That does not mean there is not an appetite for more. There might well be, but they were invited to apply and there was no cap put on what they could ask for. Every single application throughout the nation was accepted. There were 50 applications and all 50 were accepted. We are fulfilling and satisfying the appetite for the service that we can find. We cannot expect the NTA to go to local link services and tell them that they need more. The current allocations represent what has been sought by the link services. There may well be a demand for more and I accept that. If it works in some areas then other areas may see the opportunity and cash in on it. That is fair enough and actually a good thing. I am not disputing the €10 million to €15 million but it is speculative. If the NTA says extra funding is needed in future years because there is an appetite for more services, and that is justified, I will be happy to seek further resources for this scheme - if I think it is working.

There has been an increase in NTA funding in recent years and also an increase in Local Link services. Over the past three years, it has gone from €12.2 million in 2016 to €14.25 million in 2017 and €14.99 million - €15 million - in 2018. The trend is going up. If this scheme is working, I will be happy to seek fresh resources specifically for it.

Vice Chairman: Before I bring in the other members, I have a few questions. It is, as other speakers have said, a positive initiative. The Minister, Deputy Ross, in his statement said that one of the key features of these services is greater integration with existing public transport services and better linking of services between and within towns and villages. This does not go anywhere near breaking the back of the problem arising from the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act. The Minister has said this is a trial scheme. What parameters will be used to measure its success? Will it be that no more pubs have closed or that there are fewer reported cases of mental ill health in rural Ireland? I refer to how success can be measured.

The Minister also mentioned he met various interested groups from rural Ireland including the Vintners Federation of Ireland, the Irish Countrywomen's Association, ICA, and the Irish Farmers Association, IFA. They all suggested alternative solutions. The IFA proposed the provision of DIY alcohol test units - breathalysers. I asked the Minister about that in a parliamentary question and I thank him for his reply. He mentioned the issue of costs. However, if we take into account the number of rural facilities within the country and those that will be greatly affected by the impending legislation, this €500,000 could be used to give each of those publicans the breathalyser machinery. It is expensive. The Minister quoted a cost of €500 a unit in his answer to me. If the publicans had the machines, however, they could supply the refills. It is not for a legal determination, it is only for guidance. That initiative could let people know if they are drinking and driving within the current laws.

I am talking about people drinking a pint or half of a glass of wine. I will be blunt about the Minister's proposal - he is creating a binge drinking bus. That will be the effect. Once people know the bus exists, it will be like they are off to a stag party. The bus will bring them from A to B and back home again within a defined period. Myself and my colleagues who oppose this amendment were not talking about people going out for a session. We were talking about the social drinker, a person who calls to his or her neighbour on Christmas Day, who goes down to the local after a day in the field or working in the factory or stops in when passing by on the way home. We are talking about people having a courtesy drink or a glass of wine with their meal. I welcome the initiative but it is not hitting the nail on the head from our perspective. I reiterate my two questions. What are the measurement parameters for success and will the Minister consider funding the cost of breath test units for public houses and let them be responsible for them? They would not be legally binding machines; it would just be for guidance. That can save lives as well.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Chair. I am not going to do that and I will tell Deputy O'Keeffe why. The problem of rural isolation is not exclusively about getting back and forward to pubs. Deputy O'Keeffe suggests that money - if I understand it correctly - would be better spent on giving publicans breathalyser test units so that they could breathalyse their customers. That fails to recognise that the problem of rural isolation is much wider. It is misleading to suggest it is only about going to pubs. He knows rural Ireland better than I do but people get involved in all sorts of social activities in rural and urban Ireland that are not pub-orientated.

Social life does revolve around the pub in part, but other people go to play bingo, to dances, to sports events and to charities and fundraisers. These buses will transfer them from one place to another while doing those things. It is insulting to suggest that rural life is exclusively cen-

tred on drinking. The pub is a centre of social activity, and it should be recognised as such, but people do many other things to get together which are not in any way related to alcohol. These buses will facilitate both of those types of people. We cannot spend all of this money exclusively on providing breathalysers for publicans. People who do not drink and engage in other activities should be facilitated as well.

On the question of metrics, the idea is to connect communities, get people together, let them have a social life and visit their friends. It is as simple as that. They cannot do that at the moment. The measurement - as I said to Deputy Troy and Deputy Munster - will be whether it brings people together, reduces rural isolation and improves the standard and quality of life of people in rural Ireland. That will include people going to pubs, sports events, bingo and those visiting friends. It is much wider than just drink.

Vice Chairman: I thank the Minister. I am delighted to see he has been reading up on the background to rural Ireland with his mention of bingo buses. I call Deputy Michael Collins.

Deputy Michael Collins: There are two types of services. One is the day-to-day Local Link rural transport services. It is second to none in most cases. I have no qualm with those services. The daytime service in west Cork is well laid out, excellently managed and delivered to many people suffering from rural isolation. However, the proposed new service being piloted is doomed to failure before it starts. It is a city mindset not a rural mindset. The Minister said there are three applications from County Cork. I understood there were only two but I will not argue with him. He has the facts and figures in front of him and I do not.

However, €200,000 was announced initially. A transport service manager would have to be realistic. There would be no point looking for funding to cover the entirety of County Cork - the biggest county in Ireland. It could cost €400,000 to deliver that. There would be no point putting in €400,000 worth of required services when the operator is only going to get €200,000. That amount rose to €450,000 but that caught the managers off balance. They did not have many of the areas covered. It does not matter if it is €200,000 or €450,000 - we must realise Cork is a huge county. I can only speak on behalf of County Cork. In fairness, the two or three services the Minister named should be welcomed. I am not going to discredit any new service going to a community, but I have to reflect the reality as it stands on the ground.

A connection from Kinsale through to Clonakilty, which I would expect would take in Timoleague, Ballinspittle, Kilbrittain and any areas like that, is welcome. I would be quite happy to welcome that. Connections to Banteer, Rockchapel and other places are welcome. However, what is going to happen to the people in Adrigole, Eyeries, Allihies, Castletownbere, Kilcrohane, Ahakista, Ballydehob, Schull, Goleen, Union Hall and Glandore? I could go on for about a week naming the areas in County Cork that are not going to get any services. Is the Minister saying that the people who suffer from rural isolation should stay at home? When one looks at expenditure in the Department, one sees that €1.3 million was spent on evaluation for a sustainable transport service to Eachléim. If the Minister is spending €1.3 million on something like that, why is he not spending a little bit more than €450,000 on County Cork? That amount will not facilitate the provision of a proper service.

Another problem arises in the context of the time limits of 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. The Minister says he sat down with the vintners and the IFA. I do not want to be insulting, but if he sat down with them, he must have had earmuffs on. Common sense would tell him that coming home at 11 p.m. is not suitable for any farmer. Farmers are just going out at that time. The IFA representatives definitely did not open their mouths to the Minister. I doubt they were given

any chance to offer a viewpoint. The only reason the Minister is bringing the scheme forward and providing the extra money is that we pushed for rural-proofing. Initially, he did not look into rural-proofing this Bill. However, we he was compelled to do so in the context of the programme for Government.

I do not think the Minister meets many farmers. He says he is from a rural place. Maybe there are farmers there; he should go out and talk to them. When they have milked their cows - some of them have 60, 70, or 150 animals - fed their calves and carried out their work around the farm, they are lucky to be home at 9.30 p.m. By the time they wash and get out, it is 10 p.m. When they travel to the local community, whether to visit the neighbour or go to the pub, they will be lucky to be there at 10.15 p.m. or 10.30 p.m. They will then have to be ready to go home at 10.55 p.m. It is not going to work. This reflects a city mindset. In the city, one goes out at 7 p.m. or 8 p.m. People in the city wonder if we are crazy in rural Ireland. They say we do not go out until it is time to come home. However, those are the facts. The fact is that a farmer is in the same situation whether it is a Friday or a Saturday night. The same applies to fishermen. They work late. They work long hours because sometimes their season is short and they have to take advantage while they can. There are others who go to mass at 8 p.m. and go out for a nice sociable drink afterwards. That service is not going to meet their needs. Coming home at 11 p.m. is a joke.

This is designed to fail. That is the plan here. The Government intends to be able to revisit this service and claim that no one uses it, although no one will use it because it is no good for rural Ireland. However, the Minister should go ahead if he thinks this is going to work. I will be back to tell him again that he designed it to fail. If it was meant to work, I would welcome it. I want to see a service that lasts. The Minister is not inventing the wheel, he is reinventing it.

I remember being involved in a community council in Goleen with Ms Sue Hill, whom the Minister may know. She was involved in the Mizen Tourism Co-operative Society. We came up with a rural bus scheme to work at night, and we were able to run it effectively. However, we were trying to run it on voluntary funds. The then Minister for Rural, Community and Gaeltacht Affairs introduced the “booze bus”, which was unfortunately called the wrong thing. Again, it ran out of funds. The bottom line is, the service needs to be better supported. Forget about sixpence reviews; we can do the review here and now. If the Minister wants it to run properly, we will tell him how to run it.

I am worried that many transport service companies were put off applying for routes that would cover as many areas as possible when they saw the initial figure of €200,000. It rose to €450,000, by which time many had submitted their applications. Perhaps they applied again. I hope they did. To be honest, I find it difficult to believe that this will tackle rural isolation because people will find its operating times difficult. Moreover, I refer to the areas in County Cork that it covers. I estimate that 35 or 40 services would be needed to cover some of the areas I have mentioned. The Beara, Mizen Head and Sheep’s Head peninsulas are huge and nobody has covered them. That is where rural isolation takes effect. One can look at the age profiles in the census. As one goes farther into the peninsulas, the age profile increases. That is rural isolation. Somebody did not do their homework when writing this one. They are not servicing the areas where real rural isolation is suffered. Some areas may be covered by taxi services. These areas in rural Ireland are not. I rest my case.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank Deputy Michael Collins for his contribution, which was interesting. He cannot expect me to agree with it. He says that this is doomed to failure. It seems to me that the wish is father to the thought. He does not seem to want to give it a chance, and that

is not in the interests of the people he represents. This is not doomed to failure. This is directed towards a great success for rural Ireland. The Deputy says that a lot more could have been done for Cork. I wonder why Cork did not apply for more when we called for applications.

Deputy Michael Collins: I told the Minister about the €200,000. The Minister has to be honest. If a provider is putting a service together and is told €200,000 is available nationally, will he look for €500,000? Why not? The Minister is not silly.

Deputy Shane Ross: As the Deputy knows, we have now provided €450,000-----

Deputy Michael Collins: It was €200,000 initially.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----and rising. I would have expected them to apply for a lot more than they did, if that was where the demand lay.

Deputy Michael Collins: It is common sense.

Deputy Shane Ross: We have actually met the full demand that was made. We will not accept that it is doomed to failure. I also said quite plainly, before the Deputy spoke, that I am very happy to look for more resources if this scheme looks as if it is going to work or if it needs expansion. After the pilot scheme is over, I expect that the Deputy will join the link group in his area and that significant applications will be made. I look forward to the latter. That is the attitude I expect from him. We are trying to do things for his constituents. This will benefit his constituents. He says it is only in a small way but what is wrong with that if it is a start? Why does he not take this on board and see how it works? Yes, it is not enough. He wants a bit more or a lot more. However, the template may well work.

In six months, when the pilot is over, I expect the Deputy not to say that he was right and that it was doomed to failure. He has already given a hostage to fortune by saying it is doomed to failure. This means it will be difficult for him to back down. However, I expect him to say that it could be improved, that he would like the scheme to be expanded or that he would like more buses provided in different areas. He has already mentioned all of those areas - Allihies, Schull, etc. That is a perfectly legitimate argument to make, but I expect him to make it when this pilot scheme is over. I would welcome that.

The Deputy says that he pushed for rural-proofing and that is why this happened. I say to him that this happening has nothing whatsoever to do with him. I have to say that. I ask him not to claim credit for something for which he should not claim credit. This came from other sources, other places, where - patently and obviously - there was demand. The Deputy should not claim credit for a scheme which he then says is doomed to failure.

Vice Chairman: Were there many unsuccessful applications?

Deputy Shane Ross: There were no unsuccessful applications at all. Every application got a full response and a full allocation.

Deputy Michael Collins: I have been working in the community for many years. I have also been in political life for many years, albeit for a shorter period. If this initiative works, I will praise the Minister here, just as I have praised how rural transport works. The Department is funding rural transport. If something works it works; if it needs tweaking it needs tweaking. Tweaking is needed now. Six months from now will not be the time to put this right. If the Department is going to look after the people of rural Ireland and wants to be seen to be doing

so, it should realise that 11 p.m. is no time to be thinking that people should come home after being out, regardless of whether they are visiting friends or having a drink.

The Minister allocated €200,000 initially. We pushed him repeatedly for rural-proofing on the floor of the Dáil and the figure is now up to €450,000. We will push him further until we get the figure up to €1.3 million, which he is allocating for studies around the place. We are watching the Minister every step of the way.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Deputy for his comments but I repeat that his representations had absolutely no impact whatsoever.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: That is just insulting.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Minister is being dishonest. He is now trying to say the extra Rural Link runs have nothing to do with the road traffic legislation he is trying to push through the Dáil, which will isolate so many in rural areas. Both the Minister and Deputy Heydon stood up in the Dáil and said the initiative was to counteract rural isolation. This was a reactionary attempt by them when we proved to them that they gave no recognition at all to rural-proofing in the Bill, which is going to isolate so many in rural areas.

I welcome any extra transport in rural areas but the Minister cannot have it both ways. He and Deputy Heydon said in the Dáil that the initiative was to help to offset the rural isolation they were causing. One of the routes in Kerry, from Castlegregory to Cloghane-----

Vice Chairman: I am sorry to interrupt but someone's phone is on.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: It is not mine. I have to start again now. One of the services in Kerry that the Government made such a hullabaloo about was to take people from Castlegregory to Cloghane to a card game one Tuesday in the month for ten months. Clearly, this is not any part of the pilot scheme because the Minister is saying the pilot scheme is for six months. The initiative I am referring to is for ten months. It is something that Rural Link was doing in any event. I welcome it, however, and I welcome the fact that the people of Cloghane are being taken to Castlegregory.

While these routes are welcome, some of the people in the small villages are saying that if one takes people from a village to a town, one is hurting the village further. The Minister is kind of blaming the Rural Link services for not making more applications or more expansive applications. The Department said €200,000 would be available nationally. The Minister is all over the place now looking for this and that. When the service providers were asked about this, they knew the context and the areas in question. When the Minister gets a few more notes, I will talk again.

When the Department advertised or asked the local services to make submissions, the latter knew that, nationally, €200,000 was not enough. They also knew the extent of the problem. Consider the circumstances if one were to service areas such as the Black Valley, Lauragh, places off the Ring of Kerry, Sneem and the vast areas around it and Glencar. There is a mention of the latter. Regarding the servicing of Glencar, €200,000 would not service the area back to Caragh Lake and over to Glenbeigh and down into Cromane. A sum of €100,000 would not be enough for that area on its own. The service providers knew that. They have other things to be doing besides pandering and trying to make some kind of case to the Minister when they know they will not get the funds they require.

The Minister is saying that the Department will roll the scheme out further after six months. I put it to him that it will roll it in. Why is the Department not honouring the agreement on transport to the central schools? When the Government closed down schools in 1956, it gave a commitment that it would transport people's children into the central school in Kilgarvan regardless. It was to be free transport but that is not the case any more. The Department has put barriers in the way such that there must be ten children in order for a run to operate. The families in rural places cannot produce children like that. One must produce another child or another two more to ensure that the bus service remains in place. That is the honest truth. The Department cannot fund the transport services it is supposed to be providing. Therefore, it is hard for me to believe the Department is going to give endless money to help the people who will be isolated in rural areas. They will be isolated. They will be left at home.

The Minister alleged that my argument was to benefit my own pub. The fact is that people go from house to house. They have to travel three or four miles to a neighbour's house. The done thing was to give a fellow a drink. They cannot even have that now. That is the truth. They will be isolated in their homes. They will be like a rabbit inside a burrow afraid to come out because the fox would catch it. The same scenario will feature in rural Ireland. People will not be able to go out to have just the one drink. The Minister should forget it because his rural transport initiative does not go far enough. I welcome whatever is in place that the Minister might have had something to do with but I know he had nothing to do with the service from Castlegregory to Cloghane.

The trouble is that the Minister thinks he is from rural Ireland. My advice to him, bearing in mind that I will not take him around, is that he should get his Fine Gael colleagues to take him down to Kerry. He will not do it in a day; he might do it in three weeks or a month. He should take his summer holidays in Kerry in order to see what he is actually doing to the people there. The Minister is now admitting that there is a problem. This follows our vast representations in the Dáil Chamber outlining to the Minister how it will adversely affect people. If the Minister thinks this will satisfy rural-proofing, it will not.

When the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill is passed there will be no more mention about extra funding for rural transport to help people in their rural and isolated places down the narrow roads two, three and four miles into the lonely valleys. Massive sums would be involved to meet the requirements following the Minister's devastating Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2017. The Minister does not have those sums, and if the Department had them, I do not believe it has the liking to give them to rural areas. They are more likely to be given to Dublin and to the bigger towns and cities, which is the aim of the Project Ireland 2040 plan. The Government is forgetting about rural Ireland. I am sad that this is happening day in and day out. I put it to the Taoiseach in the Dáil Chamber yesterday; he did not know what a demountable home is. I do not believe his Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government-----

Vice Chairman: I will have to cut the Deputy short because other members want to come in.

Senator Frank Feighan: The Deputy has covered housing, education and now we are back to transport again-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have never interrupted the Senator or any other member.

Vice Chairman: Through the Chair, please.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: If the Minister thinks this measure will satisfy rural-proofing and that it will satisfy the people he is about to isolate forever, it will not.

Senator Frank Feighan: As a member of this committee I believe I can be helpful. A great deal of good work has been done with the Local Link service. I have seen it first-hand. I might disagree with my colleagues on many issues but one issue that needs to be reviewed is the 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. service on Friday and Saturday nights. Many years ago I had a pub and there was one man who came in every night at 8 p.m. and he went home at 11 p.m. After some six months he returned to England because when he went home most of his neighbours were going out at 11.30 p.m. I do not believe the six p.m. to 11 p.m. service will work. I do not know how the Local Link administrators arrived at these times. Perhaps 8 p.m. until 1 a.m. might work, but flexibility is needed. On Friday or Saturday nights, people will not go home at 11 p.m. As a person who once owned a pub, I found it harder to get people out of the pub than to get them into it. I am not sure if the local buses are needed after 11 p.m. but this needs to be reviewed, if it is helpful. Otherwise there are many positives in the proposal and I thank the Minister for the positive work he has done.

Deputy Shane Ross: I shall respond first to Senator Feighan's comments. He has made a perfectly reasonable request. This is a pilot trial. I shall ask the National Transport Authority, NTA, to examine the times in response to what Senator Feighan and others have said today, which is fair. How the NTA responds is up to it but if extending the hours reduces rural isolation further then it should consider this seriously. That is a perfectly fair suggestion.

Deputy Healy-Rae's questioning of our motives is unreasonable. This measure is a genuine attempt to tackle the curse of rural isolation. It is probably not perfect - and this is why it is a pilot - but if it works we are very happy to build on it. I do not welcome some people saying it is doomed from the start. It will help in a small way to start, perhaps not as much as the Deputy would like, but if it works in a small way there is no reason why it should not work in a bigger way.

I emphasise that rural isolation is a problem and the Deputy should take this seriously. It is a problem that is represented in this House by many Members, including Deputy Heydon, as mentioned by the Deputy. Drink-driving is a separate problem and we are not here to discuss that. This measure and the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill 2017, to legislate on drink-driving, are not connected, although they work in parallel. The drink-driving Bill would be through the Dáil by now if it was not being delayed and filibustered by the Deputy and others. The Deputies have a right to do that but they should think about the consequences of what they have been doing and how serious it is for certain people and families. We should consider one problem at a time. Today we are discussing rural isolation. Shortly, we will be in the Dáil to speak on the Bill to legislate on drink-driving. I appeal to the Deputy to cease the kinds of antics he has carried on with regard to that Bill because that will have serious consequences for people.

The Deputy said that I should go to Kerry. I spent two days there not so long ago. I met many Deputies and I sent a message to Deputy Danny Healy-Rae. I asked him if he would join me at various venues in Kerry and I received no response whatsoever from him. I was, however, grateful to be taken around Kerry for the two days. The guy who took me around Kerry for the two days was Deputy Michael Healy-Rae. It was a useful experience. I learnt a great deal about what was happening on the ground in Deputy Danny Healy-Rae's county. I am grateful to his brother for taking the time and trouble to bring the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport around Kerry. I met with publicans and all sorts of groups, because he had me run off my feet meeting people. This trip informed me a great deal about what we are doing here today

and we are acting accordingly.

I regret that the Deputy could not join me while I was there, although he was in Kerry at the time. It might have been of assistance if he had joined me; other Deputies did. It is all very well coming up here and making a lot of noise but when I was in Kerry, it would have been helpful to meet. I shall be in Kerry again soon and I invite the Deputy to join me and to show me what he is talking about in order that we can address these problems together.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: I have to respond to a couple of points. The Minister rang me at 8.30 on the morning he was coming to Kerry.

Vice Chairman: The Deputy's time-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: The Minister was coming into Castleisland when he rang me. I cannot jump like that just because the Minister cocks his finger and says "I am here in Kerry, come on." That was the first I knew about it.

Deputy Shane Ross: I never got a response.

Vice Chairman: The Deputy's time is up.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Hold on a minute. I want to ask-----

Vice Chairman: We have other speakers.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: If the Vice Chairman keeps interrupting me, I will never get out of it. I want to get out of this meeting too because I have other things to do. There are 25 missed calls on my phone. I just want to deal with this. Will the Minister-----

Vice Chairman: I have my phone turned off. The Deputy is supposed to have his turned off as well.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Clearly, the Minister does not know what is going on in Kerry or in any part of rural Ireland. The Minister paid €1,343,304 to a US company to provide transport solutions for I do not know where, but it was not for Kerry. He will also pay €450,000 for transport for the whole of the country. Come on, Minister. He also gave out €544,000 in 2017 for incidental expenses.

Vice Chairman: Deputy-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: That is what he has done.

Vice Chairman: I thank the Deputy.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Why does he not give that money to rural Ireland and rural transport? That clearly proves the Minister does not know what is happening in rural Ireland.

Vice Chairman: Okay-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: He is asking and paying a US company-----

Vice Chairman: Deputy, please.

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: -----to provide transport solutions for the country.

Vice Chairman: Deputy Healy-Rae, please-----

Deputy Danny Healy-Rae: Get out of it, Minister. It is time for the Minister to pull out and get out, and the people when he goes before them will give him his answer and the Government that is supporting him if that is his carry-on.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I have been involved in rural transport since as far back as 1999. I thank two people in particular, Fr. Gerard O'Connor and Fr. Pat Condon in Waterford and Tipperary who led it nationally and came up to the transport forum. The rural transport system is doing well in the limited areas where it is provided. I must declare I am a board member of Ring a Link, which operates in Tipperary, Carlow and Kilkenny. The Minister mentioned that on 27 February 2018 the NTA issued a funding application to all 17 rural links to arrange a trial of evening and night services. The deadline for receipt of applications was 16 March. The NTA received applications for 50 services from 12 Local Link providers. The figures here are vital and Deputy Collins was trying to deal with them. I am on the board and we meet once a month. It is very onerous and it is a voluntary board. We have an excellent manager, staff, team, drivers and people subcontracting. We are busy trying to keep afloat and trying to manage with the funding we have. The sum of €200,000 for the country would not do one county or half a county. That is the point. Why would they apply and waste their time? All of the application forms are huge. They have to be able to stand up and be accurate and viable. If there were €2 million the Minister would have received a flood of applications.

I graciously accept what the Minister said to Senator Feighan about looking at the 6 p.m. to 11 p.m. service because it is ridiculous. I know this from experience. Ring a Link offered set routes one Christmas. We are demand-responsive and pick up at the door. It is an excellent service but the Christmas service did not work out and it needs to be very different. There is a pattern of people who want to socialise or visit people; it is not all about the pubs. The Minister said everything is not about the pubs, but during the talks for Government I attended a pub, out of hours mind you, in the early morning and through the back door, for a meeting with the residents and business people of Stepside. The Minister uses pubs when he wants to also, so he should not be bemoaning that fact. Publicans pay wages to their staff and they pay rates. They do a lot of work. This funding is paltry in the extreme. As I said, if the Ring a Link service got it we might try to put on three or four extra routes.

Many areas in the Minister's Department are running amok and Deputy Healy-Rae mentioned the €2 million that has gone to consultants and on incidental issues while the Minister is giving us a paltry €200,000. In the Dáil during the debate on the transport Bill, the Minister and Deputy Heydon welcomed a representation from Fine Gael. Somebody operating under the auspices of the Minister spent €2 million trying to link the public services card to driver licences. To his credit the Minister pulled it, but €2 million was wasted on a nonsense scheme. There are millions for everything not to mind Dublin where there are billions for everything the Minister is announcing. He talked about going to Kerry and he visited Tipperary and I thank him for that. I brought him around and, in fairness to him, he looked at a lot of things, but he needs to be brought out much more to understand what goes on in rural Ireland because he does not know.

How are the board, the NTA and TII treating rural transport link groups and other voluntary bodies? All of the stakeholders were brought to the meeting mentioned by the Minister, including the IFA. The usual suspects are brought in and half the time the decision has been taken before they come in and the Minister knows this. He knows what happened with the statutory instrument regarding the test for tractors. Again, to his credit, the Minister revoked it when

he found out it was done without any consultation. The stakeholders come up here from their day's work. Most of them are volunteers and what are they coming up for? They are coming up for consultations that are finished before they get here. It is an insult. This has to change with regard to rural Ireland. I am a passionate supporter of rural Ireland. It is my duty as I represent rural Ireland.

The Minister mentioned rickshaws. He did not mention sulky racing, which is causing bedlam in my county and many other counties. I have a Private Members' Bill, which the Minister could have asked me about and examined to see whether he could bring in aspects of it if he is so interested in saving lives. There are ten year olds going around the main roads riding donkeys with no licences, no reflective jackets and no safety measures of any kind, but the Minister refuses to look at this. We also have animal cruelty. There were two horrible incidents in Tipperary where two horses were left for dead last week, one in Clonmel which thankfully recovered, and another incident last Friday morning. The Minister would not look at this but he presents us as rural representatives in favour of drink-driving, which is something we are totally not. The mental health issue in Tipperary is savage. It has never been more acute. We have a mental health services Bill, and what the Minister is doing by taking these measures is feeding into it.

The Minister has said we are delaying the Bill. We are delaying it but the Minister delayed it by recommitting it and now he will have to recommit the judicial appointments Bill also. He is a man who does not know what he is doing. He is not in control of what is happening. I have been here for ten years and I have never seen Bills recommitted but because the Minister has made, in the words of an Attorney General, such a dog's dinner of the Bill it has been recommitted. It is a pig's mess, a slop.

This year is no good to us. We are ready to take up money at Ring a Link with our manager, Jackie Meally, to try to offer some type of service to the people I represent in Ahenny, Faugheen, Kilcash, Ninemilehouse, Ballingarry, Killenaule, The Commons, Emly, and Cullen in south Tipperary. We also have Soloheadbeg and Hollyford, Newcastle, Burncourt, Skeheenarinky, Kilsheelan, Annacarty, Cappawhite, Drumbane, Holycross, Upperchurch, Newtown, Dolla and Templetuohy. We do not have services there either.

We have three or four five-day-a-week services, in fairness. We put on extra Christmas services some years ago when we got some extra money from the Department and it is all accounted for. One night we spent two hours at a board meeting trying to reconcile a €20 underpayment to Pobal for an audit and rightly so. That is the type of accountability we have for €20. The Minister can spend €1.3 million on a US company that knows nothing about Ireland; he can spend €500,000 on incidentals and he can spend €2 million on a hamfisted effort to try to force people to have their public services cards linked to their driver licences. Then the Minister added in L-plate drivers, which will totally isolate young people. It will deny them work and educational opportunities. Anyone here in Dublin tonight will fall over taxis and buses. There is also the Luas and the DART. I do not begrudge the people here anything but we are entitled to some modicum of service. The €460,000 would not operate the logistics. We have a very sophisticated service in Carlow and Kilkenny, and I invite the Minister to Kilkenny to Ring a Link's headquarters for the three county project to see the booking service. It is capable of doing an awful lot more but we need funding. The €460,000 would not organise the logistics for the 50 schemes because they need manpower to be operated. It is very sophisticated. There are tracking devices with which one can find people standing on the road if it were operated properly. It is exceptional equipment, funded by the Department in the main but with a lot of

hard work from voluntary boards. We must respect these voluntary boards, the volunteers, the paid staff and the bus contractors. This is like sticking a Band-Aid on a finger that has been cut off instead of going to have a serious operation in hospital.

With regard to the L-plates, the Minister will criminalise young people. They are applying for their tests but they have to wait-----

Vice Chairman: I ask the Deputy to focus on the committee's agenda.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I am. This is applicable because they cannot get a driving test. They pay €600 for lessons but if they apply for a test in my county they must wait six months. If they fail it, and they might fail it not because of driving but because of a fault the tester sees in the car, which is debatable, how will they get to college? How will they get to-----

Vice Chairman: They will not be going to college at night time.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Sorry?

Vice Chairman: They will not be going to college at night time.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: There are lots of colleges with courses at night time. A lot of colleges of further education have evening courses. I am making the point it is so discriminatory against rural dwellers. I will be going to a different building in this town to make sure it is stopped because it is discriminatory against people I represent and I will not stand for it. The Minister can laugh if he likes and make little of it. Several buses pass the Minister's house and he can get a taxi in a minute. I tried to get a taxi last Sunday night at 12 midnight. The pub closing time was 11.30 p.m. The taxi driver brought me and a friend three miles. He left me there for two hours until he finished all the local runs. I had to go ten miles but in fairness, he brought me home at 2 a.m. That is the type of service we have. We do not have these services in rural Ireland. Taxis are touting for business in Dublin and are in each other's way. I brought the Minister down to Tipperary to examine other issues as well - for example, the issue of rail crossings. I raised the issue of seat belts on buses in the interest of child safety. It is all relevant but to provide €460,000 for a service like this is an insult. I am not saying it is doomed to fail; it is not. It will help a small area but the number of services are only the tip of the iceberg. I know what I am talking about; I have been a board member of Ring a Link for 20 years. I know the services we have and the money we get every year, which is roughly €1 million. We are providing day services.

We have the Marine Casualty Investigation Board. Mr. John O'Brien and Mr. John Esmonde lost their lives off Helvick Head but who is policing the waters, the pleasure craft and everything else? Their boat was turned upside down and they were killed. A proper investigation was not carried out by the Garda or by the Minister. There are no answers for the families of those two young men. There are many other areas of safety. Deputies Collins and Healy-Rae and others who are passionate about rural Ireland should not be attacked and it should not be said that we are filibustering for the sake of it. We are filibustering in regard to this legislation because it is bad. The legislation is wrong, it is discriminatory against rural dwellers and it will never be right because the Minister will not listen to anyone. The main reason for the delay is that it was recommitted. The Minister made a hames of it and a dog's dinner of the other one.

Vice Chairman: The Deputy has gone over by ten minutes.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister is not often at the committee.

Vice Chairman: The Deputy gets long enough to look at him in the Dáil Chamber.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: No, I do not because he leaves it after voting, does not listen and will not engage with us. I have engaged with the Minister over the years and I thank him for coming to Tipperary. I am not saying he should know everything about rural Ireland or that I should know everything about Dublin, because I do not. It is a broad brief. Money, however, is being wasted. The Minister railed against quangos but the quangos he has under his remit, including the RSA and others, are bloated. The Minister railed against them all his life but is now defending them. He is providing €1.5 million for consultants to examine the logistics for rural travel. This is a patent and disgraceful waste of money. This expenditure should be raised at the Committee of Public Accounts, and I might raise it with it. A further €500,000 is proposed for incidentals. Money is flush in this Department. I know the Minister does not have a driver and he is prudent in that regard, but what about the waste that is going on under his nose? It is scandalous.

The proposal of a paltry €460,000 would not manage the system, never mind run it.

Vice Chairman: The Minister has promised to increase that funding.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We know he has and I accept his bona fides that he will try. I raise issues that €100,000 or €50,00 would fix but not a bob is available. The money is not there and he knows that as well as I do but one sees €460,000 against €2 million wasted on consultants and incidentals. The public are not fools. It is outrageous.

Vice Chairman: I understand where the Deputy is coming from. There are not only Independent Deputies from rural Ireland. There are Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister did not accuse them of filibustering but he accused us of doing so. He said an awful lot worse than that.

Vice Chairman: I told the Deputy not to go over that. I call on the Minister to respond.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will try to respond in as temperate a way as possible. What is important here is not what Deputy McGrath has been going on about because most of it has nothing to do with the subject of today's meeting. This is to do with Local Link and is nothing to do with the large number of subjects Deputy McGrath raised. To describe €450,000 as an insult is-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I know what I am talking about.

Deputy Shane Ross: It is not an insult. I have made it absolutely clear that this is a pilot scheme. There is money allocated for Local Link in Tipperary, which the Deputy should welcome. The Deputy should also welcome the fact that if that works, we have promised that we will look at expanding it. This is only a start. We are prepared to try this and the Deputy should be prepared to try this as well. I wish he would join with me in saying that we should give this the benefit of the doubt and that if it works, we will increase it if more resources are available. That is what rural isolation needs; it needs connectivity. Cities, towns and villages need connectivity. That is what this is an attempt to do. It may not be as fast as the Deputy would like and it may not be to his taste but that is what we are doing. It is not the tip of an iceberg; it is an honest attempt to address the problems which the Deputy undoubtedly finds in his area.

I do not want to address the committee on subjects like going to a pub early in the morning for a cup of coffee, as if there is some sort of secret about it. There is nothing wrong with that.

The Deputy and I went to a pub at 11 o'clock in the morning. That is absolutely fine; there is nothing wrong with that and no big revelation in that.

I am puzzled sometimes when people claim to be the voice of rural Ireland, which Deputy McGrath does. The majority of the voices of rural Ireland I hear welcome this scheme. They are saying it is not enough and that they want more but they want to see if it works and that they want it to work. Sometimes I wonder if those who claim to be the voice of rural Ireland really have the support of all of rural Ireland.

In that context, I welcome the fact Newcastle in County Tipperary voted "Yes" in the referendum. Clonmel voted "Yes", Tipperary voted "Yes"-----

Vice Chairman: Please-----

Deputy Shane Ross: I want to congratulate them on their decision. I am delighted-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: We live in a democratic society. What has that go to do with the Minister's insulting money?

Deputy Shane Ross: I am delighted-----

Deputy Michael Collins: It is easy to see that the Minister is trying to deflect attention from his Bill. The referendum has nothing to do with it.

Deputy Shane Ross: Sorry, I am saying that the voice of rural Ireland is very authentic and rural Ireland voted "Yes" in the referendum.

Deputy Mattie McGrath: Thank God we have freedom. The Minister would have all the rural dwellers locked up at night if he could.

Deputy Shane Ross: Those who claim to be the voice of rural Ireland-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: The Minister has plenty of experience of that, if he wants to go there. He has plenty of experience of locking people up.

Deputy Shane Ross: -----are not even able to carry their own village with them.

Vice Chairman: Deputies can continue this in the Dáil Chamber. What I want to say to the Minister is-----

Deputy Mattie McGrath: I apologise, Vice Chairman. I must return to one comment. I welcomed the money and I told the Minister my feet are worn from working on rural transport, something I am passionate about. I welcome any increase and I acknowledge it. I just said that €460,000 would not operate the logistics of the scheme never mind the scheme itself. That is all I said.

Vice Chairman: We will suspend for 15 minutes. The Minister will be in again on the rickshaws issue.

No one has said this is a bad idea. As Deputy Troy said earlier, our concern is that it has not been tested.

Deputy Shane Ross: Correct.

Vice Chairman: That is what we are worried about.

Sitting suspended at 11.19 a.m. and resumed at 11.45 a.m.

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd took the Chair.

Regulation of Rickshaws: Discussion

Chairman: I welcome the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, Deputy Shane Ross, back to the meeting. He is accompanied by three officials, Ms Maev Nic Lochlainn, Ms Denise Keoghan and Mr. Declan Hayes. I remind attendees to switch off mobile phones or switch them to aeroplane mode. I invite the Minister to make his opening statement.

Deputy Shane Ross: I thank the Chair for giving me the opportunity to address this issue. As it happens, this discussion is extremely timely. In recent weeks, I indicated I would make a decision on the preferred policy approach to the issue of rickshaws before the end of this Dáil term and I intend to do that.

Like many members of the committee, I have deep concerns about public safety with rickshaws and their activities on our streets. All of us have seen these vehicles. Complaints range from blocking footpaths and forcing pedestrians onto the road, weaving recklessly in and out of traffic, paying little or no heed to the rules of the road and breaking red lights to driving the wrong way up one-way streets and transporting passengers with little care for their safety. Collisions have also occurred. A National Transport Authority, NTA, survey found that 57% of rickshaw passengers reported accidents or near misses, which is a shocking, stark statistic, but there is much more.

While it is accepted that many in the rickshaw industry have no involvement in criminality, it is a fact that over the past 18 months, 154 rickshaw drivers have been arrested under section 15 of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977, which deals with possession of a controlled drug for sale or supply, while operating as a rickshaw driver in the Pearse Street district alone. This is not tolerable. The Garda is committed, focused and doing great work to tackle drug pushing and address criminal threats. My Department also has an important part to play as we decide the optimal regulatory approach for rickshaws.

As members will be aware, I asked the NTA to undertake a public consultation last autumn. My intention was that this would inform the regulatory impact assessment which must be undertaken in the context of developing new legislation. More than 4,800 responses were received, reflecting a keen level of interest and concern. The NTA consultation process reaffirmed many of the concerns that had been raised with me, including issues such as dangerous behaviour on public roads, lack of lighting, no insurance, illegal use of rickshaws in pedestrian zones, obstruction of buses and blocking of taxis from taxi ranks. It also found concern about the lack of a transparent fare structure, with 44% of passengers in the survey reporting issues with rickshaw charges. It seems that passengers are sometimes led to believe that one fare is to be charged but when they arrive at their destination, it turns out that the figure quoted was per person, rather than for the journey. Such behaviour is obviously unacceptable.

I will now address Deputy Munster's amendment. I am well aware that many members have been converted as regards the need to take action about the activities associated with rickshaws. We all have the same concerns about safety on our streets and protection for passengers. When Deputy Munster put forward an amendment to the Road Traffic Bill that would give

suitable powers to the NTA to regulate rickshaws, the Dáil was in agreement and I accepted the amendment, which the House passed. It was unfortunate that I was unable to commence the provision, which is now section 31 of the associated Act. However, it was wise to heed legal advice indicating there would be a real risk attaching to any regulations made under the section. The risk was considered unacceptably high with a strong likelihood of the regulations being challenged and ultimately struck down in the courts.

Despite this setback, I have made it clear on many occasions in the Dáil that I have always shared the concerns relating to rickshaws and that I am actively taking steps to address these. The NTA public consultation was one important element of this process.

I also instructed my Department to conduct international research and consider regulatory models in other EU member states' cities and to engage with a range of stakeholders like the NTA itself, the RSA, An Garda Síochána, Dublin City Council and others in the local authority sector. Considering the legislative options was always going to be the most critical step. It was also an extraordinarily complex one which few had anticipated initially.

It is clear to me that the choice is between a full and effective licensing regime and complete prohibition. Retaining the *status quo* is not an option. In relation to the public consultation, I must admit that I was surprised when the majority, at 54%, supported an outright ban. Introducing regulation was favoured by less, at 38%. In any case, a full analysis of both options was needed.

Any new regulatory regime for rickshaws would have to focus on public safety and consumer protection. To do this effectively, new legislative provisions would be needed in the areas of: driver and operator licensing, vehicle registration and licensing, rickshaw roadworthiness involving an NCT-style test, motor tax, fares regulation, regulation in the standards of service, and offences and penalties to allow for proper enforcement.

All this would lead to better customer experience and an improvement in the management of safety for passengers, as well as for other road users. Rickshaws are arguably meeting a certain niche demand which is not being met by the traditional public transport services. According to the survey, 38% want to retain them. Regulating would allow rickshaws to continue in operation, contributing a fun and vibrant aspect to city life.

However, significant resources would need to be invested. More administration and enforcement resources would be needed in the NTA and the Garda, possibly also in the RSA. Implementing a full licensing regime together with enforcement would come at a substantial cost to the State - all for a relatively small number of vehicles. It is estimated by the NTA that there are 1,000 rickshaws in Dublin.

Perhaps the biggest concern for me is the challenge in defining the rickshaw vehicle in law. The rickshaw is driven on the public road. This means, if we want to regulate them, that we first must amend road traffic legislation. Since there is extensive litigation under that legislation, we must be exact as to how we define a vehicle.

As the committee will be aware, there are different types of rickshaw – some are pedal powered and some have a motor. The NTA advises that pedal-powered rickshaws can easily be converted to motorised, in fact, within minutes, by attaching a small motor to the back axle. The motor can be removed just as quickly. One actually can change the creature within a few minutes. All this means that any new legislation for rickshaws will need to be developed with

extreme care. Of course, the new regime will bring benefits but it will be costly to implement, and it may well prove difficult to enforce in a meaningful way.

Allegations of dangerous driving by rickshaws, illegal movements in pedestrian zones and fears about public safety are growing all the time. A ban on rickshaws on the public road would deal comprehensively with these concerns. It would be a significant step forward in managing the risk for public safety.

New legislation would be needed but enforcement of a ban should cost significantly less than implementing a full new regulatory regime. We would still have to define the rickshaw vehicle in law, and provide for detention powers, but this would involve a much simpler piece of legislation. Enforcement should also be less resource intensive - the NTA would not need extra staff and gardaí could be empowered to act decisively when coming upon a rickshaw on a public road.

After a transition period, it seems likely that rickshaws would disappear from our streets. I am aware that some members of the public would be inconvenienced and it is true that with a ban, our cities could miss out on the sense of adventure and fun that rickshaws can bring.

I am conscious also that there are compliant people who earn a legitimate living from these services and that a ban would have an adverse impact on them. A small number of operators reported in the survey that they have invested in significant numbers of rickshaws and there are also many drivers who work part-time in the sector. Impacts would all have to be carefully weighed.

As this issue was raised first by members of this committee in the Dáil, I do not want to take a decision before seriously consulting what they have to say. It is not an issue, as far as I am concerned, that will be politically divisive. It is merely something on which we can combine to address and resolve. If members here today have suggestions which we have not thought of in the Department and have not been thought of by the NTA, the Garda, any of the other stakeholders or the operators themselves, let us have them and let us include them because the complications in addressing this issue have been somewhat surprising and it has not been as simple as it seemed it was the day that I accepted Deputy Munster's amendment in the Dáil.

Equally, I am conscious of the intentions of the Dáil as expressed in the adoption of Deputy Munster's amendment. I share deep concerns about the hazards of rickshaws. Regulation could be effective if implemented using comprehensive and tight controls, but this would come at a cost. Given the very small proportion of the market being served by rickshaws, the preferred approach would be to opt for an outright ban. It is believed it will achieve the desired outcome of improved public safety at a proportionate cost for the taxpayer.

However, this option is not entirely without obstacles. My officials are engaging with the Office of the Attorney General to consider the blockages which might arise with the preferred approach, including how best to weigh and balance private interests in the context of the public good.

Members here will say that legal advice causes delay. It always does, but I will not introduce a law which is subject to challenge because then, rightly, I would be told I had rushed it in circumstances where it was not essential. I know that I need to be clear, not only that the right decision is being made but that it is being made in the right way and that it is legally viable.

Once consultations with the Office of the Attorney General are complete, I expect to be in a

position to finalise and announce my decision before the end of this Dáil term. In the meantime, I wish to put the rickshaw sector on notice that, whether by regulation or prohibition, the days of indulging a reckless activity that appears to be running amok are coming to a close.

Chairman: I thank the Minister. The order of speakers will be as follows: Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, Sinn Féin and then the Independents.

I will ask the Minister for some information which is not in his statement. How many rickshaw operators does the Department estimate there are?

Deputy Shane Ross: The NTA estimates there are approximately 1,000 rickshaws in operation in Dublin.

Chairman: What are the implications of a ban? If the Minister banned them, would that have implications for those who have been legitimately investing in them? Would they have a claim for compensation for loss of earnings or loss of income? The Minister need not answer these questions now.

Deputy Shane Ross: I think I can answer that. That is one of the issues which the Attorney General is considering. I do not know everything the Attorney General is considering but there are two issues which obviously come to mind. The first is the ownership of the property and the right to the ownership of the property and whether it has implications for those owners, and whether compensation would have to be paid or whether we can even do it in those circumstances. The second is the issue of the people's right to work. To be depriving them of a living has possible constitutional implications as well. Those two matters are being considered.

They also have human implications as well. There are obviously people earning a legitimate living driving rickshaws and presumably doing all the right things, and what we do not know is how many are doing that and how many are not.

Chairman: Finally, the Minister referred to a Department analysis of custom and practice in other cities, particularly European cities. Does he have that information? Can he share it with us?

Deputy Shane Ross: I do not have it with me, but I know that it has made some analysis.

Chairman: Will the Minister share it with the committee? It will inform us.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will ask it to provide the information.

Deputy Noel Rock: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is clear that both he and his Department have given this issue thorough thought. I welcome what he has said about it and that he is putting the operators and drivers on notice. It is clear that he is close to making a decision and I appreciate him consulting us, particularly Deputy Imelda Munster who proposed the legislation. In politics people might forgive the making of a wrong decision, but they will not forgive not making a decision. It is incumbent, therefore, on the Minister and the Department to make a decision on this matter which has been ongoing for quite a few years. Rickshaws pose a danger to the public. It is clear from the National Transport Authority survey, in which 57% of people said they had been involved in either an accident or a near miss, that rickshaws are a danger to the public. If this statistic was related to any other mode or means of public transport, for example, taxis, we would have representatives of all of the taxi associations before us in the morning. The figure of 57% for persons who were involved in an accident or a near miss

cannot be overstated in any way. The issue is incredibly serious and it does not even start to take into account the issues exposed by Conor Lally in *The Irish Times* and the RTÉ investigations and exposés about the widespread dealing of drugs from these vehicles. It is clear to me and the public that something needs to be done about it. Some 4,800 responses to the public consultation process is a remarkable number. On the breakdown of the data, in his submission the Minister gives one subcategory - that 54% favour an outright ban, whereas only 38% favour some form of regulation. That gives a total figure of 92%. I presume the remaining 8% favoured retaining the *status quo*. Is that right?

Deputy Shane Ross: Yes.

Deputy Noel Rock: Would it be possible to supply us with a breakdown in tabular format of how people responded to the other questions in the public consultation process? It would be appreciated. It is clear to me that if 92% favour a change, it breaks down 40:60, with 40% wanting regulation and 60% a complete ban. I wonder what the 40%, or 38% overall in the survey, would say if the Minister only gave them a binary choice between a ban and keeping it as it is. It is clear that regulation would be fraught with unforeseen difficulties with regard to rights of property and of the individual to work. As it stands, on the challenges the Minister sees and the length of time we have devoted to the issue, is the Minister in favour of a ban? Would he prefer the Oireachtas to proceed in that manner? Would he prefer to see further related amendments to the Road Traffic Act? It is clear to me that regulation for such a small industry which would be fraught with difficulties that the Minister has outlined and which I have reiterated would be deeply impractical. I have never been to another European city, or any city, where I have seen rickshaws operate in such a haphazard manner which puts passengers and pedestrians in danger. This issue is raised frequently in my constituency office and clinics. It is of concern to the wider public. In politics we often talk about resolving the bigger issues of housing, the health service and so on, but what would the public say if, after two and a half years of this Dáil, I were to go back to people and say I could not even tackle the issue of rickshaws in Dublin city centre, given that 57% have reported that they have either been involved in an accident or a near miss? Time is of the essence. I would appreciate hearing the Minister's personal thoughts on whether we should proceed in a more wholehearted manner towards a ban, as opposed to tinkering with the idea of regulation any further.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister has said he does not want to be accused of rushing any legislation. In his over two years as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport he has brought forward two Bills. Therefore, no one will accuse him of rushing legislation. He can relax on that score. As far back as 2013 Dublin City Council tried to bring forward by-laws for rickshaws and we are still discussing the issue. In December 2017 my colleague, Deputy Imelda Munster, and I brought forward an amendment to the legislation that was going through. On 14 December 2017 the Minister said: "I appeal to the Deputies to withdraw their proposals at this point to allow the NTA to develop a comprehensive response and to introduce legislation under the right Act to regulate rickshaws." The Government tried to vote down the amendment, but, unfortunately for the Minister, or fortunately for those who were trying to have regulations introduced, we won the vote on it. Two months later I asked the Minister how plans were coming on for the regulation of the industry and the timeframe for commencing the regulations. He replied: "I share the Deputy's concerns about the need for regulation of rickshaws, but it would not be appropriate to commence Section 31 of the Road Traffic Act 2016 before (1) the legal position is clarified and (2) I have considered the NTA's proposals on an appropriate and robust regulatory framework for rickshaws." I asked again on 16 May 2017 and the Minister said: "I share the Deputy's concerns about the need for regulation of rickshaws and I hope to

finalise my consideration of both the legal advice and the NTA proposals shortly.” In July 2017 I again asked how things were coming along and the Minister said:

I am proceeding with the drafting of the Heads of a Bill to provide for a new Part to be inserted into the Taxi Regulation Act 2013 exclusively for the regulation of rickshaws. The approach will, amongst other things, ensure that the relevant interactions with the existing legislative framework under the 2013 Act for small public service vehicles (taxis, hackneys and limousines) are properly integrated; the definition of ‘rickshaw’ will encompass all known types of rickshaw, in particular the most prevalent type of rickshaw in operation which has an electric motor which provides assistance to the person pedalling the rickshaw, and the principles and policies will be set out in primary legislation as to the matters which the NTA may provide for in regulations, thereby giving the NTA the necessary powers to regulate.

That was in July last year. At the beginning of this year, on 16 January, I asked how things were coming along. The Minister replied that it was his intention to progress the drafting of the heads of a Bill without delay. It is evident that there has been much procrastination within the Minister’s Department. Meanwhile, both he and Deputy Noel Rock are right that there have been many unfortunate instances, that there has been criminal activity and that people have been put at risk by the lack of action by the Minister and the Department in prioritising this work. I am not convinced that an outright ban is the correct way to go. There is merit - judging by his replies to me in the past 18 months, the Minister thought there was merit - in bringing forward legislation. Last night on Wikipedia I looked at information on rickshaws. The first use of the term dates back to 1879. That is how long they have been in use across the world. If one looks at the section on their use in the 21st century, it states:

The 21st century has seen a resurgence in rickshaws, particularly motorized rickshaws and cycle rickshaws ... They are increasingly being used as an eco-friendly way of short-range transportation, particularly in urban areas.

Rickshaws are being used for tourism because of their novelty value as an entertainment form of transport. Rickshaws and trishaws are used in most large continental European cities, including Vienna, Copenhagen, Paris, Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Hanover, Budapest, Milan, Rome, Amsterdam, Oslo, Krakow, Saint Petersburg, Barcelona and Valencia. There are huge opportunities in this regard and the Minister’s approach is lazy. What interaction has he had with the authorities in the cities where rickshaws are regulated? Without doubt, they need to be regulated. Operators need to be vetted and insured, the vehicles need to be roadworthy and operators need to be compliant in paying their taxes as self-employed people. There are many people, particularly students, who see them as an opportunity to supplement their incomes. An Irish company, Ecocabs Ireland, has invested in 12 eco-friendly cabs which are certified roadworthy, safe, fully insured and create employment for 20 people. The Minister needs to go back to the drawing board and to bring urgency to address this issue. We know from reports in *The Irish Times* and from the RTÉ “Prime Time” exposé that there are practices that need to be rooted out but we know also that there are huge opportunities here. If people had to pay a licence fee for such vehicles, that yield would cover the costs associated with same.

Chairman: It was mentioned that there are 1,000 rickshaws currently in operation here, which means that at least 1,000 people are employed in this area.

Deputy Shane Ross: I do not know if there are that number of employees.

Chairman: Each rickshaw would have at least one driver.

Deputy Imelda Munster: As the Minister is aware, this problem has been on the radar for years. As mentioned by Deputy Troy, many countries have managed to regulate rickshaws. They enhance tourism and the experience for tourists, with a huge increase in take-up at weekends. They are an additional form of transport for students and so on. Many countries have managed to regulate rickshaws. Is the Minister saying that there is no expertise within his Department to do this or that he cannot be bothered to regulate by amendment of road traffic legislation, as per the amendment put to him 18 months ago? As I said, this problem has been on the radar for a long time but up to now nothing has been done. The Minister has come up with every excuse under the sun not to regulate. Following on from his opening statement, it appears to me that he is leaning towards an outright ban of rickshaws. That is the wrong approach.

The Minister has not updated the committee on the outcome of the public consultation. He stated earlier that he has instructed his Department to conduct international research and to consider regulatory models in other EU member states but he also did not bother to furnish the committee with that analysis. Will he supply a copy of those documents? The amendments put forward by Deputy Troy and I sought to bring about regulation of this area. The Minister's argument for banning rickshaws is based on safety issues such as that they block footpaths, weave in and out of traffic, do not have proper lighting and are not insured, particularly for passengers. However, the reason for these issues is the lack of regulation. Rather than regulate, the Minister is taking the lazy option of banning them. If other countries can regulate, so can we. The Minister needs to try to keep up with other countries. If it is the case that the expertise in this regard is not available within the Department then the Minister should say so. Otherwise, it appears he is just not bothered to regulate.

As I said, my amendment sought to regulate rickshaws, which would deal with the safety issues. Other Deputies are of the same opinion. We are asking the Minister to regulate them. Also, there are jobs at stake. If there are 1,000 rickshaws, then, unless they are in people's gardens filled with bedding plants, there are 1,000 drivers. That is a conservative estimate.

Chairman: If it is mostly student activity, and I understand it is, then a rickshaw might be being operated part time by up to five students. With proper regulation, people on low incomes could supplement their incomes from operating rickshaws.

Deputy Mick Barry: One would get the impression from the discussion thus far that rickshaws are only being operated in Dublin but that is not the case. For example, rickshaws are being operated in Cork. Earlier this year, 19 rickshaws were seized as part of a Garda operation, conducted jointly with the Revenue Commissioners. There are three options open to us: first, we can allow the current situation to continue; second, we can heavily regulate the trade; and, third, we can ban rickshaws. The first option is a non-runner. In a survey of people who have been passengers on rickshaws, 57% indicated that the rickshaw had been involved in an accident or a near miss, which is an incredible statistic. Approximately 44% of those surveyed reported a lack of transparency regarding charges, with people being told a price for a group only to be told later that the price quoted was per person. As I said, the first option is a non-runner.

On regulation, the Minister has pointed to the volume of work and cost involved in this regard, which I accept are points that need to be weighed. Rickshaw drivers are in competition with taxi drivers to a certain extent. One could talk about a level playing pitch, with regulation for taxi drivers and rickshaws. This would involve up to 20 things, one of which is public liability insurance. Some 57% of rickshaw drivers have had accidents or near accidents but not

many have public liability insurance so it is an absolute must. An NCT-style system whereby drivers would have work permits is also an idea.

It is legitimate to ask whether regulations to bring about a level playing pitch would cause the rickshaw industry to collapse. I would ask whether the industry was only able to be operated on the basis of exploitation, cost-cutting and dangerous practices. Examples from other countries and cities where the system works have been provided. However, we are talking about Ireland - specifically, Dublin, Cork and other places. If there was serious regulation, I would question whether the industry would be able to survive. That might point towards the idea of an outright ban and we would be open to a discussion on this idea but there are issues with that too, the main one being employment. It concerns me that no figures have been produced as to the number of people employed in this field. From the number of rickshaws, it would seem the number employed is more likely to be in the thousands than the hundreds. It is not full-time employment in the vast majority of cases and it involves the sort of money a student would have to assist them as they go through college. For a lot of the people who do the work, however, I am sure it is the money which pays their rent. If they did not have the income, they would not have the rent and it has unintended, knock-on consequences in that regard.

We would not be prepared to entertain the idea of a ban without some significant provision being put in place in the way of alternative employment, compensation or other measures for people who rely on their job as an income. The *status quo* is a complete non-runner and while we are open to discussing regulation, we would question whether the industry would collapse if it was too serious. We are also open to discussing an outright ban but a serious issue is how to cater for the people who do the work in this industry.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: It is not an insignificant issue because some operators are lunatics. They can be a nuisance.

Chairman: I ask the Deputy to watch his language.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: Okay. Having said what I have just said, the rickshaws do provide competition and, with the big urban areas becoming more pedestrianised and having more one-way traffic systems, people find that rickshaws provide a good service. Taxi drivers are doing their best to compete but using a rickshaw to get from A to B can save a third of one’s time, although they are not cheap. I will not be looking for an outright ban but I will support previous speakers who called for regulation and legislation.

Rickshaws are also a tourist attraction and we need competition. In central Dublin, the Luas gets the right of way over Dublin Bus at St. Stephen’s Green. The one-way systems and pedestrianised roads are an issue for taxi drivers. Rickshaws have to be catered for but I believe that legislation should be put in place. A ban on rickshaws would be like taking the jaunting car tour operators out of Killarney and rickshaws have become synonymous with our major cities. Legislation should be put in place for safety purposes.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: This is an issue I have been raising at the Dublin joint policing committee for a number of years. I am not in favour of an outright ban and I believe a middle ground can be achieved. Unless we get to the middle ground, however, I would understand where the Minister is coming from on this matter.

I have always believed that local councils should be able to regulate jaunting cars. There were issues with the number of horse and cart vehicles around the Guinness factory in my

area. Eventually, councillors came up with a regulation as to where they would park and what standards would apply, although we were told that this was not for rickshaws. The Minister mentioned the variety of rickshaws but the only ones with which there is a road safety problem are those which are cycled because the motorised ones are covered by the Road Traffic Act and drivers have to have insurance and all the other safety elements. This may not be the case with converted bikes, however.

Rickshaws are also vehicles for hire and that should mean a different approach. There are regulations around taxis, which cannot just go out and ply their trade willy-nilly. People complain to me about rickshaws ripping them off but I tell them not to pay them as they have no right to look for money. If a person gets into one and the driver is willing to bring him or her around the city, he or she can get out and say "Thanks a lot". It is just hard luck on the driver if the person does not pay because there is no commercial contract if a driver does not have a licence to ply his or her trade in this city. They are street traders and every street trader has to have a licence. I am a firm believer in a licensing regime and that a regulation system will pay for itself with the costs of registering a vehicle and having an NCT each year, as well as applying for a licence and sitting the driving test.

It is up to the Garda Síochána to stop what we saw on RTÉ lately. If that means harassing those who are illegally transporting drugs around the city in rickshaws, so be it. Taxi drivers have complained for years about the joint social welfare, customs, immigration and garda patrols targeting them so why should those who break the law not also be targeted? That should have been done on an ongoing basis, which might have addressed some of those who have become involved in these activities.

If the Minister wishes, from a health and safety perspective, I would have no problem in supporting him in banning rickshaws overnight as long as regulations were put in place very soon thereafter. I have seen the amendment which we were told could not be implemented. The Department was supposed to come back with an alternative but that was many months ago. My own joint policing committee wrote to the Minister and the NTA to try to ascertain when it could act on this because it is an issue in my area. I have dealt with a number of people who have been injured in accidents involving rickshaws. There is absolutely no comeback against drivers or owners because there is no way to identify them. There is no registration number on the rickshaws and those involved in these accidents disappear as quickly as possible. One woman broke her arm when a rickshaw toppled over, its wheel having come off. The driver simply legged it and left the rickshaw there. There was no way of contacting him or even determining if he was the owner of the rickshaw. There is no mechanism for chasing up drivers or owners.

The Minister said in his opening statement that this is a major resource issue for An Garda Síochána and the NTA. Kevin Street Garda station, one of the stations in the city centre that would cover a lot of the areas in which rickshaws operate, has 46 fewer gardaí than ten years ago. Even with the recent increases, that station only got an extra three gardaí. The Garda station itself is brand new and looks brilliant but there is nobody in it because very few gardaí are based there. I accept that this is not the responsibility of the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport. It may be under his control in Stepaside but not in this context. That said, he should ask the Minister for Justice and Equality when he will provide additional resources, not just to city centre Garda stations in Dublin, but also to stations in Cork, Galway and Limerick which also have a problem with rickshaws, to enable them to tackle the illegal activities in which some drivers are involved.

I am reluctant, given their quirky contribution to tourism, to ban rickshaws. It is something that people do when they go abroad. I do not get rickshaws in Dublin because I know my way around and I walk but some people enjoy them. We should consider regulating them. When rickshaws first came on the scene in this city, they were sponsored by a company - I think 7 Up - and they were all a standard size and the drivers wore a uniform. Rides were free, with the option of giving a tip to the driver. The rickshaws were basically mobile advertisements. That is something that could be looked at again in the context of regulation. Perhaps rickshaws could carry advertisements as a way of generating funding. Dublin Tourism could use them to advertise different attractions in the city and the same could apply in Galway or Cork. They could also be used by local authorities rather than just for commercial advertising.

I am very concerned about the state of some of the vehicles that are plying their trade, day in and day out. What goes on in this city, particularly at weekends, must be addressed. We have regulated other public service vehicles, including horses-and-carts. We can address both aspects of this. We can tackle the problems while allowing the positive trade to continue.

Chairman: Thank you, Deputy. Before I invite the Minister to respond, I have a few points to make myself. The first problem is defining a rickshaw. If we want to ban it, we must define it. When is a rickshaw not a rickshaw? Whatever way one defines it, one will find that others will have a different construction. It is hugely important, if we go down the road of regulating them, that we are very clear about what we are doing. We must know exactly what the cost will be. We must determine the number of users, which we do not know at present. We do not know how many rickshaws are operating at present. We know the problems they are causing and we also know about the good things they are doing. There is a balance to be struck here and I welcome the fact that the Minister is here today to listen to the views of committee members on this issue.

If a significant number of rickshaw drivers have been convicted of drug-related offences, that is very serious. However, if drug dealers have rickshaws taken from them tomorrow, they will resort to bicycles or other modes of transport to deliver illegal drugs. The issue is the demand for drugs. In that sense, banning rickshaws will not change the fact that drugs are being dealt on our streets; it will just mean that the vehicles by which they are delivered changes.

A lot of those driving rickshaws are students and others on low incomes who are trying to make a few extra shillings, which is both good and healthy. We must bear that in mind. We may be talking about up to 1,000 part-time jobs, which is very important to the economy. The economy benefits from rickshaws but not from those drivers who are breaking the law, including those who are on the road without insurance and who do not adhere to proper safety standards. Clearly that must stop but we need to know more. We also need to look at the rickshaw industry internationally to determine best practice in terms of regulation. We must find out and learn from the experience abroad. Obviously, similar issues would have arisen in other jurisdictions. If we ban them today, they will be replaced tomorrow by something similar. That will not solve the problem. There could also be huge costs involved in compensating owners if rickshaws are banned. Issues have arisen regarding the legal cessation of other activities which involved huge compensation pay outs.

In terms of dealing with cowboy operators, I would not have a problem with insisting that rickshaw owners and drivers have tax clearance certificates and go through the other due diligence processes that apply to taxi drivers. As I said, I welcome the Minister's willingness to come before us to discuss these matters. Would it be possible to designate specific routes for rickshaws initially? Would it be possible to confine them to the area within the canals, for ex-

ample? Where are they most prevalent and where is the greatest benefit to tourism to be found? I would imagine it is within the city's core. There are ways and means of addressing these issues. I now invite the Minister to respond.

Deputy Shane Ross: There is an awful lot there. I will try to address points in the order they were made but may end up jumping around a bit. I thank everyone for contributing to this discussion. We have heard completely differing views, which is what I expected, as well as different suggestions as to how we deal with this issue. The deeper one delves into this, the more complications one finds. There are individual and property rights involved here which must not be breached. There are other issues which are simply a matter of right and wrong but above all, there are the dangers that these vehicles pose to the public, with which we must deal. While there is no single, right solution it is principally a matter of public safety. We must find a way to secure public safety, which is endangered at the moment, without causing hardship to those involved in legitimate activities, as a large number of operators undoubtedly are at the moment. There are a lot of tangential arguments such as the drugs issue which was touched on by "Prime Time" and the article by Mr. Conor Lally which highlighted the problems which have to be recognised, and we cannot just skirt over this. If these vehicles are providing some sort of a channel for drugs, that has to be addressed and recognised and I think that any member of the Garda would say anecdotally that they are doing so because they made 157 charges in that respect. It is a difficult problem and I understand the frustration of those who say it has taken longer than it should, and they are right. It has taken too long and much longer than I intended. The day I accepted Deputy Munster's amendment I intended it to come into law there and then. It is quite unusual for a Minister to accept an amendment from the Opposition but I did it with the clear intention of sorting out this problem there and then. It became apparent over a period of a few months that it was not as simple as that and that there were real legal difficulties in what was proposed which could have ended in disaster. That is what we are trying to avoid. There have been different aspects to this as time goes on which have frustrated it. Some of them are legal, some of them are interventions elsewhere, but we will get it right and that is what is important.

Deputy Rock asked what my instinct was and because of the evidence of the NTA survey, my own experience and other evidence from many stakeholders, my instinct was that the best option at the moment, not the ultimate solution because there is no ultimate solution, is that they should not be operating, certainly not in the way they are, and the most sensible way to stop that is to prohibit them. If regulation is a more practical and not too expensive solution, we will actively consider that as well. My guess is that the majority of people in the committee are talking about regulation. I am not sure which way the Dáil would go on that but the great value of this discussion is that I do not want to introduce a measure into the Dáil which will be defeated. That is something I will not do, that would be foolishness and would frustrate the process of enhancing public safety. That is why what the committee members say today is very valuable.

I refer to the issue that Deputy Rock raised. I agree that I have to bear in mind the fact that that consultation, which involved more than 4,000 people, came in fairly decisively, 54% to 38%, that the people involved wanted these rickshaws banned. That is the reality and we have to take that into account. I take into account what Deputy Rock says and it is serious but only 38% want the *status quo*. That means it is urgent and it has to be done as quickly as possible. There is public dissatisfaction which is shared by members of the committee. The *status quo* will not stay for any longer than is necessary.

I refer to public consultation. I am not hiding that from anybody. I will have the public

consultation document from the NTA circulated today or tomorrow, if that is all right for everybody. That is no problem at all.

I refer to the final question from Deputy Rock. My preferred option on balance is that there is not a continuation of what is going on at the moment and the cleanest way to do that is to ban them, but I am conscious of what Deputies Barry, Ó Snodaigh and O'Dowd said as well that there are people in legitimate employment there and it is a serious measure to take to put them out of a job because of what is going on there. Maybe they have alternatives and there are other factors at play but that is something that I am conscious of, not just because of the constitutional right to work or possible constitutional right to work but because to take people out of a job is a dramatic thing to do and not something I want to do.

I have a couple of figures here about the employees. There are around 1,000 rickshaws in Ireland. I do not know how many are in Cork but nearly all of them are in Dublin. A total of 53% of the operators said they worked part time. Full-time stood at only 15% but it is very difficult and this is one of the problems about delay, because we are working in a world of late-night activities and people who are not easy to trace. It is very difficult to get statistics and the NTA figures, which are presumably the best ones we have at the moment, are gathered in those circumstances. Those people are not working in a normal working environment so sometimes it is difficult to trace who they are and to gather information on them. Until we have information which we can rely on as credible, it would be foolish to rush into decisions and I simply will not do that, despite the frustrations of some others.

Deputy Troy wants to regulate and when he says that he blames me, the Department and others for that, which is fine. I accept that it has gone on for much longer than I wanted it to but there has not been any delay on the part of Departments. Rather it has been due to a lot of complications which I hope I have explained, one of which is that the NTA wants to regulate them and the Department wants to ban them. That is very healthy but it means that both decisions have to be considered very carefully and there is no reason that sort of debate between the NTA and the Department should not be going on.

Chairman: For clarity, the NTA wants to regulate and the Department-----

Deputy Shane Ross: The Department recommended banning.

Chairman: That is clear.

Deputy Shane Ross: That is the situation. It is not unusual.

Deputy Robert Troy: Now it is the Minister's choice.

Deputy Shane Ross: It is quite healthy.

Deputy Robert Troy: It is down to the Minister.

Deputy Shane Ross: Exactly.

Deputy Robert Troy: I wonder from which mandarin, as the Minister regularly referred to them in a previous life, he will take guidance.

Deputy Shane Ross: I have become more respectful in recent times.

Deputy Mick Barry: Except when the Minister talks to Deputy Mattie McGrath.

Deputy Shane Ross: I accept the criticisms of it being delayed. That is frustrating and it may be a while before we get a final legal opinion but I will not take a decision until the legal opinion has come to me. Deputy Troy asked about the interaction with authorities overseas. They have not travelled overseas. It was a desk study but it was done very thoroughly. I do not think-----

Deputy Robert Troy: I did not mean to ask if the Minister had travelled overseas. I meant to ask with which countries he had engaged.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will issue the report with all of the facts about that. I have said that already. To say I would go back to the drawing board is somewhat unrealistic. That would cause further delay and I want to go full steam ahead. Deputy Troy said I should go back to the drawing board. I have it down in quotes. If he says he did not say it, it does not matter.

Deputy Robert Troy: We will ask to get the blacks.

Deputy Shane Ross: We will get the blacks.

Deputy Robert Troy: We will not today but I did not ask the Minister to go back to the drawing board.

Deputy Shane Ross: Deputy Troy said I would have to go back to the drawing board. That was the phrase. I have taken it down.

Chairman: Do not worry about it. We can check the record.

Deputy Shane Ross: I am not going back to the drawing board.

Deputy Robert Troy: We can check the record. Did the Minister take down all the quotes I rehashed about what he has said to me during the past 18 months? Perhaps it might be more appropriate for the Minister to concentrate his efforts in that area.

Deputy Shane Ross: When Deputy Troy is in this seat, I will take great pleasure in reminding him of what he has said.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: I look forward to that.

Deputy Robert Troy: I am referring to when the Minister is in the seat he occupies now.

Deputy Shane Ross: Deputy Troy has not had the opportunity to be in that seat yet.

I will address the point made by Deputy Munster. It does not help to be throwing around facts that are not true. Deputy Munster said that every other country regulates in this area. That is not true. Has Deputy Munster heard of London?

Deputy Imelda Munster: Yes.

Deputy Shane Ross: London does not regulate. Let us be accurate when we are making arguments.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I referred to Deputy Troy’s long list of countries.

Deputy Shane Ross: London does not regulate. The Deputy accused me of being lazy, yet the first thing she comes out with is so grossly inaccurate.

Deputy Imelda Munster: A period of 18 months has passed.

Deputy Shane Ross: Let me finish. I did not interrupt Deputy Munster.

Deputy Imelda Munster: No, I am correcting the Minister.

Deputy Shane Ross: Deputy Munster can come back in.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I will come back.

Deputy Shane Ross: London does not regulate.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I never mentioned London.

Deputy Shane Ross: Deputy Munster did not. She said every other country does it.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I referred to the list.

Deputy Shane Ross: London does not regulate and that is important. Deputy Munster said that jobs are at stake and she is right. Of course that is an important consideration. It is a consideration high on my priorities.

Deputy Barry referred to the question of putting the sector on a level playing pitch with taxis. That is an idea I would not rule out but I am unsure how it would work in practical terms. I am unsure whether there is competition between the operators at the moment because rickshaws operate on a short-term basis. The average journey is ten minutes and the average price for a rickshaw is €15.62 for a fare. I do not think they are competing. Taxi drivers regard them as a thorough nuisance because they are in the way, they take up the taxi ranks and they may be taking short-term business from the taxi drivers. Taxi drivers regard rickshaw operators as unfair competition because they are not licensed or insured and they are not obliged to do all the things taxis have to do. It may be a possibility to put them on a level playing pitch but they are somewhat different creatures. I take the Deputy's point about employment but I remind the committee about what I have said. According to the NTA survey, 15% appear to be full-time.

Reference was made to the Garda figures. They are pretty telling. I am unsure how far I am allowed to go with them, but I have some detail on the status of the 154 incidents. Some 41 cases have been convicted and 11 were struck out or dismissed. A total of 17 bench warrants have been issued, 46 are ongoing before the courts and 30 are waiting analysis. A total of eight people cannot be located. Drugs seized include all the usual drugs, like cocaine, ecstasy and so on. Given the number of convictions and cases before the courts as well as the number of cases struck out and dismissed, there is obviously a serious problem. That has to be considered when we are making a decision between regulating and banning. It is only a consideration but obviously it is a big problem.

I wish to respond to what Deputy Barry has said. I took a trip on the rickshaws myself not long ago late at night.

Deputy Mick Barry: Does the Minister have the video of it?

Deputy Shane Ross: No.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Is the Minister sure he is not on video?

Deputy Mick Barry: Was Deputy Mattie McGrath there?

Deputy Shane Ross: I was stopped by gardaí as I approached them. They were wondering what I was up to. I said I was simply doing work. I took a trip and I was rather shocked by what I found. It confirmed everything that I had heard. I made a note afterwards, which I have before me.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Did the Minister have his list? Did he nearly hit Deputy McGrath?

Deputy Shane Ross: They did not recognise me.

Deputy Robert Troy: With his years of experience he can tell whether they recognised him or not.

Deputy Shane Ross: I will meet Deputy Mattie McGrath in a different venue. They charged me €10 from Georges Street to St. Stephen's Green on the first trip. The driver certainly broke traffic lights willy-nilly. It was not comfortable. When I asked for the price on the return journey, however, the operator said it was whatever I liked, which was an extraordinary response. The person broke virtually every rule in the book. The rickshaw was going on the footpath along St. Stephen's Green at great speed and then over the pedestrian crossing on red. The operator treated red lights as if they did not exist and drove on the tram lines. Then, when I got out, I walked down Wicklow Street and there was a rickshaw travelling the wrong way up a one-way street. My experience of this is that-----

Deputy Mick Barry: We might have lost the Minister.

Deputy Shane Ross: Perhaps, but I would have been the first fatality and I imagine Deputy Barry would have regretted it. My experience is only anecdotal and only from one night, but it is a pretty bad situation and it badly needs remedy. I am unsure whether it can be done by regulation. I am not going to do it again.

Chairman: How much did the Minister pay the driver?

Deputy Shane Ross: On the way back I gave him a tenner. I have not claimed expenses for either trip. I gave him a tenner and he accepted that and there was no problem. There was no intimidation of any sort.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: Neither from the Minister nor the driver.

Deputy Shane Ross: Let me get back to the question from Deputy O'Keeffe. He referred to competition in the market. I am unsure about the competition argument because he was referring to taxi drivers competing with these people. I am unsure about the competition argument because they do such a different job. I gather that the maximum time taken is approximately 30 minutes. We can see this in the survey data as well. On the whole the rickshaws undertake short journeys that taxis would not do. Taxis are not driving up footpaths the wrong way either. I think the competition argument does not really apply. I had a meeting with stakeholders the other day that was attended by a large number of taxi drivers. They were vociferous about the rickshaws. They maintain the rickshaws are dangerous, they get in the way, they are not licensed or insured and so on but they are not competing directly with taxi drivers.

Deputy Kevin O'Keeffe: It is a pity that the Minister did not take a taxi the following night on the same route. He would see the difference in the time, but not so much in the fare.

Deputy Shane Ross: I could not go the same route because he was driving the wrong way

up one street.

Deputy Kevin O’Keeffe: I am referring to a journey with the same destination in mind. The time difference from A to B is phenomenal.

Deputy Shane Ross: Yes, I should have tried it.

Chairman: It would be better if we finished up because we have to be out by 1.15 p.m.

Deputy Shane Ross: I know Deputy Ó Snodaigh has been interested in this for a long time and I appreciate that. The local council argument is interesting, and we have looked at it. Deputy Ó Snodaigh will be aware of the fact that they use by-laws in Galway to do that and I gather it worked. We have looked at that and we are going to talk again to those responsible. Dublin City Council, of which Deputy Ó Snodaigh was a member for a long time, had maintained rigidly in writing that this is a national issue and the council does not want to handle it. We cannot funk it if the authority refuses to handle it, but we will speak to those people again before we make a decision to see if there is any possibility of them using the same type of by-laws. The council is saying it is a national issue and it will not do it. We cannot immediately expect a local authority to use by-laws to regulate rickshaws and we have legal advice that its by-laws would not extend to this level of detailed licensing. Certainly, it would not have powers to seize a vehicle for enforcement. There are obstacles to that. It worked in Galway but Dublin appears to be very reluctant and the authority has indicated it will not do it.

Enforcement has been mentioned and it is a problem. There is no point in saying it is not. The road traffic corps is being increased and it will improve fairly rapidly this year, but it is behind. Enforcement has been a problem for some time and it has been a problem for the corps in enforcing drink-driving laws as well. It is being remedied but it has been a problem. The Chairman is right in that one of the problems with any legislation of this sort, whether the vehicle is to be regulated or banned, is defining the vehicle. These are not defined in law at all currently and there is a switching between them being bicycles and motorised vehicles, which is very unsatisfactory.

Chairman: They switch from being a bike and a motorbike, and it will be very hard to define rickshaws.

Deputy Shane Ross: Absolutely. I cannot speak about Cork but the activity in Dublin centres on the area around St. Stephen’s Green. That goes to Camden Street, Harcourt Street and that particular area.

Chairman: It is quite a small area.

Deputy Shane Ross: Yes. They only go for a maximum of 30 minutes and that would be exceptional. They only go around a small area with nightclubs, pubs and other places of entertainment. The activity is confined to that area. One of the reasons there has not been many fatal accidents is because it is such a small area and some of it is pedestrianised. They use those pedestrianised areas as well.

Deputy Imelda Munster: I did a quick check and the Minister mentioned London. I referred to the list from Deputy Troy. These vehicles may legally operate inside London as stage carriers under the Metropolitan Public Carriage Act 1869. They can also apply for hire on any street in greater London charging fares per passenger. Outside London there are pedicabs that are classified as hackney cabs. There is clearly some regulation, although probably not enough.

We have none here.

Deputy Shane Ross: That is superb work. Well done.

Chairman: It is well researched.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister wrote to the committee asking for an opportunity to come before the committee to speak to the amendment of the Railway Safety Act. In the first session I asked permission of the members-----

Chairman: We will take that but we might take Deputy Ó Snodaigh's point to finish on this topic.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: If we go down the road of regulation, it would be useful. Taxis have onerous responsibilities and must comply with certain regulations. We should apply at least the same to plying this trade. In particular, there should be Garda vetting. There should be nobody with a history of the offences that some of the people have who are working with these rickshaws. The Minister mentioned there are people with bench warrants issued because they probably cannot be tracked. Others have been convicted of more serious crimes but are rickshaw drivers. They should not be able to ply this trade.

Compensation has also been mentioned. The vast majority of rickshaws are not paying tax so they would not be entitled to much compensation. Much of this is done on the black market. I would not shy away from this just on the basis of compensation if the decision is to ban it outright and approach it with regulation afterwards. I look forward to seeing what comes from the Department in the very near future.

Deputy Robert Troy: I agree with the Deputy's point with regard to Garda vetting and the drivers being vetted to the same level as those who drive any public service vehicle. I appeal to the Minister to accelerate these efforts and make a decision. I suggest he goes with the proposal of the National Transport Authority, NTA, with regulations being introduced. It is the best way forward. Further procrastination is not on.

The Minister wishes to progress pre-legislative scrutiny for the amended Railway Safety Act. I read somewhere recently that it has been brought to Cabinet for approval. There is no disagreement or issue with this. I cannot see any reason for this not to be supported. I question the priorities of the Minister to a matter like this. I tabled a parliamentary question and not one person has been found in breach of the Act in the past five years. What are the priorities when with rickshaws we have no regulation or legislation in an area where there is a priority need to introduce regulation? The Minister seems to have a focus in bringing forward proposals that might look good but in reality are not making a major difference.

Deputy Shane Ross: The Deputy does not expect me to agree with that. I do not want to let that go. I point out to the Deputy that for the second time he has miscounted the number of pieces of legislation I have introduced. I corrected him the last time and I will do it again.

Deputy Robert Troy: How many were there?

Deputy Shane Ross: I have certainly introduced three and this will be a fourth.

Deputy Robert Troy: How many pieces have made it into law?

Deputy Shane Ross: Let me finish. I sat and listened to the Deputy so he should let me

finish. Perhaps he has not been there for all of them-----

Deputy Robert Troy: No.

Deputy Shane Ross: I have not finished my sentence.

Chairman: Allow the Minister to reply briefly before we move on.

Deputy Shane Ross: I have introduced more legislation than the Deputy mentioned and it is the second time he has done that. The rail safety legislation arises because the Commissioner for Rail Regulation was concerned about it and wants the Bill to be introduced. It is urgent and it will be introduced. We will introduce more legislation and we will have heads of a Bill for speeding legislation this year. Every piece of safety legislation is urgent and will have to be done.

Deputy Robert Troy: The Minister corrected me, which is okay. How many pieces of legislation have been commenced by the Minister and seen through the Houses of the Oireachtas since he became Minister?

Chairman: The Minister has given his reply.

Deputy Robert Troy: He has not. He has not quantified it.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.10 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 13 June 2018.