

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN ROGHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS LÍONRAÍ

SELECT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Dé Céadaoin, 9 Feabhra 2022

Wednesday, 9 February 2022

Tháinig an Romhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Select Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies
Cathal Crowe,
James O'Connor,
Darren O'Rourke,
Ruairí Ó Murchú,
Eamon Ryan,
Duncan Smith.

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

Estimates for Public Services 2022

Vote 29 - Environment, Climate and Communications (Revised)

Vote 31 - Transport (Revised)

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Carey and Deputy Dillon may substitute in his place. Today we will be considering 2022 Revised Estimates. This is a special select committee meeting. The purpose of our meeting today is to consider the following Revised Estimates for public services: programme D of Vote 29 - Environment, Climate and Communications, and Vote 31 - Transport. I remind committee members that the committee has no role in approving the Estimates. It is an ongoing opportunity for the committee to examine departmental expenditure, to make the process more transparent and to engage in a meaningful way on relevant performance issues. I welcome the Minister for Transport and for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Deputy Ryan, and his officials to the meeting. They are most welcome.

I will read a brief note on privilege. All witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

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.

For anyone watching this meeting, Oireachtas Members and witnesses now have the option of being physically present in the committee room or to join the committee remotely via MS Teams.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that members must be physically present within the confines of the Leinster House complex to participate in public meetings. Reluctantly, I will not permit a member to participate where they are not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts of Leinster House will be asked to leave the meeting. In this regard, I would ask any member partaking via MS Teams that, prior to making his or her contribution to the meeting, that member confirms he or she is on the grounds of Leinster House campus.

Members and all those in attendance in the committee room are asked to exercise personal responsibility in protecting themselves and others from the risk of contracting Covid-19. Masks should be worn at all times during the meeting, except when speaking.

I call the Minister, Deputy Ryan, to make his opening statement.

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I thank the committee for the opportunity to present the 2022 Estimate for the Department of Transport and for programme A of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

For 2022, the budget has been restructured to make it easier to monitor and report on how funds are being invested. The former land programme is now split into three new programmes, namely, programme A, sustainable mobility, active travel and greenways; programme B, carbon reduction and public transport; and programme C, road safety and road networks. Programme D, civil aviation, and programme E, maritime safety and transport, remain unchanged.

The set of transport Estimates before the committee provide an overall gross allocation to the Department of Transport of €3.432 billion, which constitutes €885 million in current expenditure and €2.547 billion in capital. Core expenditure has increased by 7% in current expenditure and by just under 1% in capital, in line with the capital ceiling for 2022 agreed as part of the negotiations underpinning the revised national development plan, NDP.

Covid emergency expenditure has fallen by 46%, in line with the gradual recovery in the economy. Supports are still provided, where deemed necessary, to protect public services. In total, an additional €238 million in emergency funding is provided in 2022.

This year will see a number of significant milestones as major transport projects continue to advance and the number of active travel schemes in the pipeline continues to grow. In the budget, we secured additional funding to assist our investment agencies to continue to scale up to deliver on projects within their remit. The responsibility for greenways has been transferred to Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, which is in a position to utilise its knowledge and expertise to advance interurban networks. In addition, legislation is now before the Oireachtas which will, if passed, make it easier for local authorities to experiment with active travel proposals.

Turning to active travel and greenways, €358.6 million is allocated under this programme. Major urban projects to commence construction include the Clontarf to Amiens Street route in Dublin and the MacCurtain Street scheme in Cork. In all, an estimated 1,200 active travel projects will be funded. Some 170 schools are participating in the current round of the safe routes to schools programme.

Construction will continue on significant greenway projects, including Clifden to Recess and Middleton to Youghal. In 2022, an estimated 150 km of greenway will be under construction and 900 km in pre-construction. As bicycles take up, on average, one tenth of the space of a car, cost a fraction of a car to purchase and use, and properly designed networks have much higher capacity to carry people to their destinations than congested roads, their impact over short journeys simply cannot be underestimated.

Under programme B, sustainable mobility, carbon reduction and public transport, approximately €1.475 billion has been allocated, €102 million of which is allocated to carbon reduction measures, including supporting the continued rate of growth in the number of electric vehicles, EVs. Under this programme a number of schemes are funded, including the very successful electric small public service vehicle, ESPSV, scheme and the EV grant scheme for private cars.

Some €780 million is allocated to public transport investment. This year will see a number of key milestones in public transport projects presently under development. Just before Christmas, the preliminary business case for DART+ was approved, with DART+ West the first

project scheduled to enter the planning system. The contract for the DART fleet was signed, a major step in facilitating the increase in fleet capacity. In the coming months I expect to bring the preliminary business cases for BusConnects and MetroLink to the Cabinet. The Cork commuter rail project, part-funded through the EU's national recovery and resilience programme, will also be progressed. Some €538.8 million is allocated to public service obligation, PSO, services. Included in this allocation, emergency funding of €205 million will continue to support PSO services and to remediate the impacts of the Covid-19 emergency measures. New routes will be rolled out under the BusConnects, rural transport and Connecting Ireland network plans, and the new youth travel card scheme will be rolled out.

Under programme C, road safety and road networks, approximately €1.423 billion is allocated. This funding will maintain and renew national, regional and local road surfaces; assist in undertaking safety works and bridge maintenance and rehabilitation; meet our contractual obligations under public private partnerships that delivered parts of our motorway network; fund the construction of new national, regional and local roads; and fund vital safety-related services.

Construction continues on a number of major roads, including the Dunkettle interchange and the N5 Westport to Turlough road. The Listowel bypass and the N59 Moycullen bypass will commence construction in 2022. Projects with planning approval that will continue to progress towards construction phase include the N28 Ringaskiddy road and the N6 Galway ring road. Some €825 million has been allocated to protection and renewal. As for road safety, as well as funding for driver licensing services, additional funding has been provided to the Medical Bureau of Road Safety to support its vital work in detecting drug and alcohol misuse by drivers.

Under the civil aviation programme, €67.417 million is allocated to the sector. As the sector continues to recover, the amount of funding in emergency supports is significantly down in 2022. The regional airports programme provides targeted supports to regional airports that handle fewer than 1 million passengers per annum. Cork and Shannon airports are eligible to participate in the programme in 2022 alongside Knock and Donegal airports. Funding of €5 million is available in the event that customer refund or repatriation is required following the failure of a travel or tour operator. Some €10 million is available in additional travel trade industry supports, and €11 million is allocated to fund services such as air accident insurance and membership of key international organisations.

Under programme E, maritime transport and safety, €108.81 million is allocated for 2022. Most of that funding is directed to the Irish Coast Guard, and the main cost in this regard relates to the search and rescue helicopter contract. The programme also funds the Commissioners of Irish Lights, which operates buoys and lighthouses and keeps seafarers and their cargoes safe while in Irish waters. We also cover various administrative costs associated with the Irish Maritime Administration. We will continue the Coast Guard building programme to ensure the volunteers have adequate facilities for their operations and equipment. We are investing in IT infrastructure to enable the teams to enhance further how they work together. Some €1 million has been provided to Wexford County Council to assist in the cost of environmental remediation works at Rosslare Europort as part of the transfer of the port to management by the local authority.

I now turn to the connectivity and communications delivery programme of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications. The aim of the programme is to deliver world-class connectivity and communications. Over €255 million is being allocated to the

programme in 2022, consisting of €19.95 million in current expenditure and €235.2 million in capital expenditure. The current expenditure relates mainly to the Department's digital economy programmes and the National Cyber Security Centre.

The biggest item of capital expenditure within this programme is the national broadband plan, at €225 million. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of high-capacity and reliable broadband to ensure people, communities and businesses throughout Ireland can avail of the opportunities presented by the digital economy. Despite the unprecedented challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, National Broadband Ireland has continued the roll-out of the new high-speed fibre-optic broadband network under the national broadband plan, NBP. Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across every county in Ireland, with almost 292,000 premises surveyed or undergoing survey as of 14 January. More than 34,000 premises have been passed and retailers are now able to resell high-speed broadband services via the National Broadband Ireland, NBI, network to those premises. In excess of 54,000 premises are able to order or pre-order a high-speed broadband service, and nearly 5,500 premises are now connected.

The 2022 Estimate includes €3 million for Eircode postcodes. Since their launch in 2015, their usage has continued to grow and they are now used widely among the public, businesses and the public sector.

The Estimates also include €5.1 million operational funding for the National Cyber Security Centre and €3.5 million for the National Digital Research Centre. The National Cyber Security Centre is the central cybersecurity authority in the State, its key roles being to monitor and to respond to cybersecurity incidents and to manage and to share intelligence relating to threats to network and information security. In line with the Government decision of July 2021, the 2022 pay Estimate for the programme includes an allocation to increase staffing at the National Cyber Security Centre by 20 to 45 in 2022. The National Cyber Security Centre will continue to develop its incident response, threat intelligence, monitoring and research and development capabilities.

I am happy to take any questions on the 2022 Estimates of expenditure for the services provided by both Departments under this programme.

Chairman: By way of clarification, and for the record, the first paragraph of the Minister's opening statement reads "the 2022 Estimate for the Department of Transport and for programme A". Should that read "programme D" rather than "programme A"? It is probably a typo.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: You are correct, Chairman. It is a typo.

Chairman: I thank the clerk, Pádraig, for that. He is on the ball. As I said, it is just for the record. We now move to Members. I call Deputy O'Connor.

Deputy James O'Connor: Tá fáilte roimh an Aire and his officials to the committee. I thank the Minister for his presentation and the work he is doing. I know there is an awful lot going on in the areas of mobility and sustainability. I compliment the active travel measures. It is welcome to see such focus put on that area, which has been neglected for an awfully long time. For the coming financial year, it will be important for the Minister and his Department to put pressure on the local authorities to spend the money available to them. That comes up quite a bit.

Another thing I find deeply frustrating is when there are projects that those of us who have

served on local authorities know and that may be extremely expensive to undertake. There is sometimes a degree of fear on the part of local authorities in that they do not want to undertake projects of such large scale, such as long footpaths and pedestrian schemes. It might be nice for the Department to allow some Oireachtas representation on large-scale projects. We may want the Minister to report to the local authorities rather than it being *vice versa* the entire time, with local authorities reporting to the State agencies that have the responsibility to allocate that funding down. That would be very welcome.

As for the transition to greener modes of transport, we are in the midst of an enormous shift in vehicle patterns in respect of the types of fuel required to drive vehicles on Irish roads. Does the Minister think the Department, with this year's expenditure, is doing enough to realise and meet targets we have set down for the removal of diesel vehicles from Irish roads? Something I have a degree of concern about is that many families may be buying soft hybrid diesel vehicles, which have become quite normal, but where will they be in five and six years' time, when it comes to trading in and perhaps purchasing new cars? What will the knock-on ramifications be for the value of those vehicles? Will it still be legal into the 2030s to drive those vehicles on Irish roads, despite their being less than ten years old? Will the Minister give us some guidance on that?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy's comments around encouraging local authorities and Departments to make sure we spend the money. Covid interrupted a lot, but, hopefully, this year we will have a clear run. I expect all budgets will be fully utilised. In everything, I will be pushing for acceleration. This Government has to be about delivery and getting good value for money in that delivery. Applying the same urgency we saw in regard to Covid to the housing crisis, the climate crisis and the reform in the health system is the key metric for the Government.

With regard to diesel vehicles and the future - I do not have the statistics in front of me, but if my officials have them I will be happy to share them - the proportion of diesel vehicles within new purchases has fallen significantly in the past two to three years. I expect that to continue and to accelerate in its own right for a variety of reasons, but in the main because we are going to see battery electric, plug-in hybrid electric and full electric vehicles take off. All of the manufacturers are going to start providing such options. During an engagement I had yesterday with the SEAI on a separate issue, we were in agreement that we are not far away from the point of comparative life-cycle costs. They are actually more economic and, therefore, their use will start to accelerate.

The Fit for 55 plan, which I support, provides for the ending of the sale of combustion vehicles by 2030. I think it was the former Minister, Deputy Bruton, who introduced that in his climate action plan. That type of message and signal is very appropriate to give to the Irish public so that people and retailers and garages can start to plan for that. As I said, the EU Fit for 55 package contains a proposal around that timeframe. The signal that we are switching from combustion vehicles, particularly for passenger cars, is important.

Deputy James O'Connor: The Minister will be aware that time is precious. I have only five minutes remaining.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is the motorists' choice. We are not going to start telling people what to do completely. The electric vehicles are increasingly going to be the more economic, better resale, lower maintenance-cost option. That is where people are going to go.

Deputy James O'Connor: I am concerned that we are building a mountain that the Government may have to climb and that it could be quite a nasty one if we delay implementing a major scheme that will allow people to scrap older diesel vehicles. I am particularly concerned that tens of thousands of vehicles using traditional methods of combustion are still being bought and put onto Irish roads on an annual basis. The reality is that in the 2030s we will be in a new era when it comes to how we fuel our cars. There will be a financial burden and impact in terms of the trade-in value of vehicles, if it will even be permitted to trade them in. We all want to see a degree of clarity brought to this particular area. I ask that over the course of this year the Minister would work on a comprehensive scheme that will allow people to transition from diesel to hybrid vehicles. The schemes that are currently in place are very small in terms of the proportional cost of purchasing hybrid and fully electric vehicles, which often are significantly more expensive than their diesel and petrol counterparts. This is an area that needs to be worked on.

We had a lot of drama over the course of the past 12 months around the National Cyber Security Centre, and rightly so. As Minister with responsibility for communications, what assurances can the Minister provide that the Irish defence system, in terms of defence from cyber attacks into the future, has been strengthened by way of the actions he has taken in the context of this year's budget?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We had a very good discussion with the European Commissioner responsible for this area and the then acting and recently appointed head of the National Cyber Security Centre, Richard Browne, at which I gave a very clear presentation on the lessons we had to learn. We did have lessons to learn. There were mistakes made and networks were not secure. Work has advanced on closing those loopholes, but it is important that we learn from that attack. I am confident that with the additional resources, the additional staff and the willingness to learn the lessons from that cyber attack, we will have a more secure network. No system can be completely fail-safe, but there were significant lessons that we needed to learn and have learned from that crippling event. I am confident those lessons will be learned.

Deputy James O'Connor: While we are nowhere near the size of the United Kingdom in terms of its economy or population, in terms of its Government Communications Headquarters and other state agencies that are in place from a cybersecurity and security aspect, is the Minister confident that we have brought in enough expertise to secure the Irish cyberspace in terms of defending vulnerabilities that were badly exposed over the course of the past 12 months?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There was no expense spared when it came to the provision of further resources for the National Cyber Security Centre. The ask was for the optimal staffing with skills as well. It is not just about numbers; it is about skills as well. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform was immediate in providing us with the necessary resources. Staff are being taken on, bringing total staff numbers up to 44 this year. That was optimised on the basis of best international expertise advising us. That is what they felt we needed.

Deputy James O'Connor: Is it 44 personnel?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes. It is not about staffing on its own. It is interesting that the report of the Commission on the Defence Forces, which has been published today, recognises that the Department of Defence also has a key role on the cybersecurity side. That Department will, I am sure, be looking to enhance its capability. The other lesson is that we need this capability in the agencies and the main corporate entities in the State. It is not just about the National Cyber Security Centre; it is about the HSE and the Departments as well.

Deputy James O'Connor: I do not wish to be derogatory or dismissive, but perspective is key in this. It has to be acknowledged that the people working within this space are extremely committed and working very hard and they have been put through the wringer in the past 12 months, but 44 personnel is fewer people than work in a busy McDonald's restaurant or a major supermarket. For an economy worth hundreds of billions of euros, where we have tens of thousands of people working in the tech industry, is it not the case that we are in a better position than any other small developed economy in the world to bring in experts in encryption and the other people who are necessary?

I have an additional concern with regard to pay. If these people are expected to be paid salaries that are merited for their expertise - what they would get in the private sector is probably many multiples of what they would expect to get working in the public service - has the Department done any analysis from a pay perspective in terms of dealing with this particular issue?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I was involved in helping to oversee the management in response to that cyber attack. What we saw in terms of the calibre, dedication and sense of duty among the people we had was beyond compare. The Deputy is correct that a lot of the time these people would be earning significantly higher salaries within the private sector, but many of them come with a history of involvement with the state. Some are Defence Forces personnel and they have that patriotic sense. They also learn a lot in this role. There tends to be a relatively constant flow of staff from the private sector into the public sector and back out again. That can be healthy in terms of mixing skills and learning new skills.

As I said, when it came to beefing up the National Cyber Security Centre, there was no restriction in terms of what we needed to do around pay or positions. We went about that in a way that, first and foremost, involved increasing resources on an urgent basis. We have taken on a director, a principal officer and an assistant principal officer and competitions are under way for a whole range of different cybersecurity operations roles. I am confident that we will fill those roles and that we are able to get skilled people. The National Cyber Security Centre is a very good agency. In terms of the manner in which it shares information, it is an open and trusted organisation internationally, which means for anyone who is working there it tends to enhance their reputation. That makes it an attractive place for people to work in.

Deputy James O'Connor: I hope that in the years to come we will be able to scale up and get an increased number of people involved. It sends a chill down my spine, and that of anybody who is committed to State security, that this area is going to become an increasing risk in years to come. The world is becoming a more unstable place, unfortunately. Over the past few years, we have seen that pattern starting to emerge. Arguably, an individual group could do more damage using a hacking method to damage the capacity of a state in terms of its IT systems in times to come. I very much advocate the Minister doing all he can in that regard in the year ahead. I appreciate him taking the time to answer questions.

Chairman: I wish to make two quick points. The first is that when the national cybersecurity issue arose with the HSE, the committee wrote to all Departments to ask that they isolate cybersecurity costs. The Minister referred to the fact that each Department now has a role in the context of cybersecurity spending. I know the National Cyber Security Centre, NCSC, is under the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, but has the Department of Transport looked to isolate the costs involved in cybersecurity? The committee wrote to all Departments so that the Estimates, when they come out, will include a heading under which the costs within the Department that are incurred in dealing with cybersecurity are outlined.

The Minister referred to the Commission on the Defence Forces and its recommendations. He stated that all Departments have a role to play in this regard. I do not know whether he or his officials are aware that the Irish Aviation Authority appeared before the joint committee last week to discuss the Russian situation. The presentation from its representatives was excellent; their knowledge was second to none. They were asked about the fact that if planes without permission to come in beyond the 12 nautical mile limit do not have their transponders switched on, the IAA cannot detect them. Does the Minister see a role in terms of the purchase of primary radar equipment? It was a recommendation under the White Paper, as well as the updated one, that the State now needs to make that large investment in primary radar equipment in order that planes can be detected whether they have the transponder on or not. There is an issue that planes can fly very close to our coastline and if the transponder on a plane is not turned on, it undetectable by the IAA or even by the Defence Forces.

The first point is a housekeeping one; I ask the Minister to make an observation on the second point.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree that every Department has to see cybersecurity as central to its operational capability and its own security. The NCSC has a particular role, however. It does work with Departments and-----

Chairman: We accept that. When the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, appeared before the committee, he made the point that the amount that is down as spent on cybersecurity is probably far higher than what is allocated to the NCSC itself, so the committee made a recommendation. We wrote to all Departments to ask that they isolate as a spending item money spent on cybersecurity. One would then get a holistic view with all Departments.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is a very sensible suggestion.

I do not wish to comment too much on the second issue raised by the Chairman. The Government has agreed to give it a number of months before we respond to the report of the commission. It was independently published, in effect, today. The one point I will make is that the biggest economic development of this country in the coming two decades will be the deployment of offshore renewable power. It will be at the centre of our economic, energy security and climate strategies. I refer to the scale in particular. With 30 GW of power generation, we have a competitive comparative advantage that we can turn to industrial policy. Much of that will be beyond the 12-mile limit. It will be in the Atlantic off the north-west, west and south-west coasts and our interest-----

Chairman: That will probably be within the Shannon oceanic transition area, SOTA, the northern oceanic transition area, NOTA, and the Shannon flight information region, FIR, which are the areas that we currently have under our-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In particular, and probably initially, it will be out on the entry to-----

Chairman: Shannon.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: -----Shannon or from Shannon Port out and from Cork Harbour out. The ability to know what is happening with aviation in that zone where we will have a real economic interest is important, but also the kind of provision-----

Chairman: That is beyond the 12 nautical mile limit.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes. I refer to the ability to have speedy turnaround times for naval ships. The proposal is to have dual crews such that the ship can come in to harbour, swap crews and sail straight back out again. It is about ensuring that whatever number of naval vessels we have, they can be turned around quickly and spend most of their time at sea, manned by alternating crews. Either of those will have a good priority strategically because our economic future will be in the Atlantic.

Chairman: Looking at the issue in the context of security, even in terms of renewables offshore, have we reached a point as a country where we have to be able to detect all planes that come into the area we control, that is, that perimeter around Ireland? It is the Shannon region as well as the SOTA and NOTA, which are areas we manage on behalf of the UK but that are under our jurisdiction in terms of management of the airspace. Have we reached a point where we have to put radar in place so that we can detect all planes, whether they have the transponders switched on or not? Have we reached that point in terms of security, even that of energy supply?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I would like to consider all the analysis and information but it is probably going to be one of the issues at the centre of the debate in respect of the report of the commission. I would be surprised if the economic imperative for it does not support the case the commission seems to be making.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That was an interesting exchange on the need for radar and so on. I was very interested in the response of the Minister.

Before I crack into my questions, I note the €3 million for Eircode was mentioned in the report and there was reference to how successful it has been after a rocky start. It is worth mentioning that when we invest long-term in these things, they can bear fruit. I remember it being described as a big waste of time. It was claimed that no one would use it. I think everyone now knows their Eircode off by heart. I assume the €3 million is for new builds and that kind of thing.

Many Ministers in various Departments through the years have pointed to increased funding and investment in certain areas that the public do not see. The investment may be very real but it certainly is not visible to the naked eye. I do not think that can be said about active travel, to the credit of the Minister. It is clear there is significant investment going into active travel, such as measures in respect of segregated and other cycle lanes and pedestrianisation. It is a very positive move and certainly represents in real terms where the people of Ireland, particularly young people, want to go. They want more active travel options. They want the Government to invest in it and it is doing so, which is to be commended. Two weeks ago, we discussed objections to housing and other matters. Have there been many objections to active travel measures? Has the Minister been disappointed by such objections, be they from stakeholder groups, councils or politicians, such as councillors? Is it an issue? Is it increasing the cost of the provision and roll-out of these pieces of infrastructure? It may be too early in this mass roll-out we are seeing for him to comment in detail in that regard, but I would be interested in hearing his thoughts on it and just generally around the whole culture of objecting to change.

Subhead 5.2, dealing with public transport infrastructure, covers light rail projects such as Luas and metro, as well as and public service obligation bus replacement and fleet enlargement programmes for BusConnects and next generation ticketing. Does the Minister have a more detailed breakdown of that? Obviously, I am very interested in how much will be spent on MetroLink in the coming year in terms of pushing it forward. In response to my question on

Questions to the Taoiseach yesterday, the Taoiseach was very strong in terms of the Government being supportive of MetroLink. Representatives of Transport Infrastructure Ireland who appeared before the Committee of Public Accounts last week stated that 2035 is the earliest it will be delivered. That is disappointing. I would be interested in the response of the Minister to that projection. It seems like we are baking in as a given an awful lot of imponderables such as judicial reviews, environmental impact assessments and procurement timelines. It is like we are baking in the longest possible time those could take rather than trying to be positive and forward-moving. In fairness, what we are hearing from the State agencies is not what I am hearing from the Minister or from the Taoiseach in the Dáil. I would be interested in the Minister's thoughts on that.

On bus replacements, fleet enlargements and the electric buses we are now seeing in Dublin, I ask the Minister to comment on the investment in that regard into 2022 and what we will see in terms of these replacements. These buses can actually be seen now. It is another example of seeing things happen rather than just having figures on a spreadsheet. I am very interested in the accessibility retrofit programme for which €15.3 million has been allocated. Could the Minister provide further comment on what that is going to deliver and where we will see the money being spent? I have a young disability activist in my constituency, Conor Dillon, who has been working with Dublin Bus. He has been taking trips on Dublin Bus to highlight just how difficult it is for wheelchair users to use public transport. This is someone with a great desire to use public transport but is frozen out of it. It would be great to hear about where the money is going to go and what we are going to see from it.

I echo the comments of Deputy O'Connor about a scrappage scheme. That is something we will need to see down the track in advance of 2030. Whether it is next year or two, three or four years from now, it is something we are definitely going to need to see.

The Minister mentioned the national broadband plan. There have been delays with it due to Covid. Has there been any impact on the cost from the Department's point of view and is he disappointed in that?

The Minister said that our economic future will be based on the Atlantic in terms of renewable energy. We hear a lot about renewable energy, wind energy and offshore energy on the east and south-east coast. I assume all parts of the coastline will be important in that regard. This is the first time I heard the Minister being so definitive about the west coast. There is massive expectation that the east and south-east coasts are going to play a major role as well.

On a more local and regional level, the Athy distributor road is included as well. The sod-turning ceremony is due to happen in early March. I assume that is still going ahead. Are there any timelines for that project?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On the last question, it is going to construction. Contracts have been signed. My understanding is that it is proceeding.

On the Eircode, one of the other innovations or investment here is having shorter update and renewal of the Eircode system. Previously it was quarterly, and it is moving to monthly. A lot of people used to give out that it took a long time to be registered. One of the benefits of that is to speed up the registration.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Okay.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I appreciate what Deputy Smith said about active travel. He is cor-

rect about where the people of Ireland are, in particular younger people, but not only that group. I will be honest. My frustration is that we need to go faster. The Government must come out of Covid with the same sense of urgency and speed of delivery that we showed during Covid in three areas: housing, further healthcare reform and climate. The three key aspects of climate to my mind that require immediate acceleration are: retrofit, which we announced yesterday, offshore wind and sustainable mobility. I have been talking to the officials and my colleagues in government about how we can establish teams within Departments and evolving agencies that accelerate delivery. Our job is all about delivery. We have good plans in the climate action plan and the national development plan, but we need to be quick in delivering them and also make sure we get the most for the money we have. The €35 billion we have in transport will not cover all our needs or anything like it. The same is true of the €360 million we have in active travel. While we have had difficulty ramping up spending in the past year or two, very soon we are going to have many more projects ready to go than we have funding for, so we need to get good value for money as well.

Anyone could look at their own example of delays due to a variety of reasons, but I might just take three examples. They are not in any way inclusive. I refer to the likes of what happened in Strand Road in my constituency and the likes of what is happening at the moment in Salthill. I am touching wood thinking surely the good councillors in Galway will see the benefit of having a spectacular seafront facility for their people and for visitors to the city. I might also take an example from Kerry where we have had an issue on the Kerry greenway, which was one of the earliest projects, based on the old railway line to Cahersiveen. There are different aspects to all three examples. I hope some of the concerns will be addressed by the planning reform review the Attorney General is carrying out, for example, on Strand Road. I must be careful. I do not want to question judgments. It is not going against a court decision, but there is a real issue as to whether we sometimes over-apply the likes of the application of the environmental impact assessment, EIA, directive. I do not think many other countries in Europe apply it in some of the ways that we are applying it and I do not think it was designed in that way. Often, projects that would help the environment are being delayed and have to go through hoops that I do not think the original directive was designed for them to go through. I say that without any criticism of any individual decision. I hope the Attorney General's review will help make it a lot clearer and a lot easier, whether one is an objector, a developer or just a citizen who wants the services. That could provide significant certainty. The same applies in the Kerry decision. I hope the court decisions there will help us to get to good agreements with all landowners across the country quickly and not necessarily to gilt-edge everything, but to be able to deliver as many kilometres of network as we can.

When it comes down to it, the decision in Salthill is probably the most immediately interesting one, because a lot of what we need to do will not always be popular. There will be a lot of benefit for people, but if we are to provide a safe space, which is what we need for active travel, it does require taking space, whether that is from car parking or taking a lane out. That is where we need to go more than building out. Building out is expensive and it requires compulsory purchase orders, CPOs, and additional land. Covid gave us the opportunity to free up space because people were not commuting as much. We must use some of that space quickly to provide a safe space, in particular for walking and cycling. Those decisions are political decisions for local councils in particular. I hope councils across the country will see this as an opportunity and they will be willing sometimes to make hard decisions.

With regard to the metro, the exact same thing applies in terms of speed and urgency. Our public procurement process is so long and drawn out that it adds cost to projects. Increasingly,

in this current inflationary environment, time is money. I have full confidence in Peter Walsh and Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII. I have seen the business case which we are getting ready to go to the Government. It is a very good business case. TII is highly capable. It is probably the best agency in the State in terms of delivering large infrastructure projects. I will be honest. I am not certain that we must have this sequential process where we have two or three years in planning and then two or three years of procurement and then X number of years. What I would be looking to see is if we could not co-ordinate in some way and do some of that work concurrently.

Deputy Duncan Smith: Could we do that for metro? Could we please try to have a metro?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: What we heard from the Taoiseach yesterday is a clear commitment. We want the big transport infrastructure projects built. It does take a long time to build. The physical reality of getting from Lissenhall to Ranelagh is not a small project. It is huge and the complexity of it is not insignificant. I do not believe that people should look on the 2035 date as an inevitability. I believe it is our job to shorten that and to deliver it sooner if we can at all possible.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: With regard to electric buses, as Deputy Smith stated, the 165 electric buses are going to go into operation in a very public and visible way. They are very much city orientated. To date, electric buses are not working on the long distance Bus Éireann routes. That is one of the reasons we put three trial hydrogen buses on the longer distance routes. To date, the battery electric buses are more suited to shorter distances. A total of 165 electric buses are being contracted. That is the big investment in public transport this year. I refer in particular to the purchase of new battery electric trains, the intercity railcar, ICR, the rail carriages and the electric buses for rural and regional services. We will have a significant increase in capacity. We need it to coincide with BusConnects, which will require greater frequency and new services. Bus Éireann, Dublin Bus and the National Transport Authority, NTA, are going to have to be clever because the patterns of demand may be changing post Covid, so there will be a fair bit of flexibility as to where they go. The more those buses and those rail carriages go in, the more we can increase the capacity on the overall systems. That is what they are designed to do.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I thank the Minister. Thank you, Chair, for your indulgence.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister for his update. I have just a couple of questions. Am I right in saying the overall Department budget is down by 6%? Is that a trend the Minister expects to continue? What is the headline figure in that regard?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That is due to Covid support. We had an enormous budget and as that declines, the budget decreases but not in the underlying sense. In the national development plan, a political decision was taken that for the first four or five years of the plan, housing will scoop the full pot. That is an appropriate political decision. However, in the second half of this decade - and my colleagues from the Department of the Environment, Communications and Climate may wish to close their ears before I say this - spending on transport will ramp up. That is appropriate because it will take time to get some of those projects, particularly the public transport projects, ready to go.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: On a related point, will the Minister give me a sense of what he will do to encourage people back onto public transport? He said the Covid supports account

for a significant part of that 6% budget decrease. We have provided €208 million to subsidise the public service obligation, PSO, routes on top of what would normally be given. It seems strange there would be such a massive additional subvention for our public transport services at this time. It was fair enough during the pandemic when people were encouraged not to use public transport. Should we take this opportunity to encourage people onto public transport? It is fair enough to encourage people back onto public transport but it would be better again to encourage people onto public transport for the first time. That would align well with our climate objectives and modal shift. I understand a piece of work has been done on the youth travel card, and the Minister might give us an update as to when that will happen and how it will affect the private operators, but is there a big idea from Government to reduce fares or anything else to encourage people back onto public transport in 2022?

Chairman: Related to that is the whole issue around the cost of living. Does public transport have a big role to play in that regard? The Minister is dealing with the dual issues, one of which is encouraging people onto public transport, which has considerable benefits for climate change. I often use the train and am a great believer in public transport. The other issue is that of the cost of living. Does the Department of Transport have a role to play in the Government's measures and the announcement it will make around the cost of living for people at the moment?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will answer the Chairman first and then broaden out my reply. We have a Cabinet sub-committee meeting tomorrow. I was asked a similar question on the radio earlier and I said I cannot discuss the issue in advance of that meeting.

Chairman: Have there been any developments since then?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There would be no harm in the committee members sharing their thoughts with my colleagues the Minister for Finance, Deputy Donohoe, or the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Michael McGrath.

Chairman: We are here to assist the Minister.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I look forward to it.

Chairman: The Minister might give us an insight into his own views in this area.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There is sometimes strength in holding one's counsel and I will have to do that in this case, if I can, for the moment. On the wider point, Deputy O'Rourke is right. I will go back to what I said about this moment as we come out of Covid-19. Hybrid working and working from home have become realities, which is a positive development for towns and suburbs around the country because people will increasingly be working, living and staying in what might previously have been a commuter town for Dublin, Cork, Galway or Limerick. Life will be brought back into those towns as people work from home, shop locally and so on. That is positive. However, it will lead to very changing transport patterns. The reality is we are going to have to adjust our public transport system to suit that.

We are still providing significant Covid supports this year, to the tune of over €200 million, as the Deputy said. One of the reasons we expect to fully utilise that money is that our public transport numbers, according to the National Transport Authority, NTA, to whom I spoke during the week, are still only approximately 60% of pre-Covid numbers. As we all know, the level of commuting is not back to anything like the level it was. Tourism numbers are not there and even the level of socialising is probably still below what it was historically. Our numbers

are still down and the job is to get them back up. How can we do that? The youth travel card is one perfect way to do it because it is fundamental for those under 24 that we provide a 50% reduction in fares. It has taken some time, and will still take a number of weeks, to roll it out. We expect it before the end of April, initially on the PSO routes. They are much easier for us to administer and manage in this way because they are interoperable and fully accounted for, as it were. Commercial bus operations are useful and brilliant services but we do not set the prices for commercial bus operations. Those operators set their own prices and, understandably, the same accounting mechanisms do not apply to them as those which apply for PSO services. We are going to concentrate on the PSO routes first.

I will return to something I spoke to Deputy Duncan Smith about. My belief is that we need to look at some of the BusConnects measures, which are starting to be rolled out. Three more BusConnects routes in Dublin will be rolled out this year, two of which are already up and running. As soon as we get BusConnects through planning in different cities, I will be looking for political support in councils across the country to look at some of the elements that can be accelerated. There might be some instances, for example, where a bus gate could be put in. That does not mean any trees must be chopped down or anyone's front garden will have to be taken or any pavement has to be broken up. It may involve those areas where we can reorganise the traffic management system in this post-Covid time to give public transport a massive boost through more efficient timing, greater priority and so on. That does not require huge budget expense. It requires political commitment. To put a bus gate into Rathmines main street, to use an example from my constituency, does not cost anything. It is a traffic management measure and I will be looking to see are there examples such as that which we can accelerate ahead of what was originally planned. If we do not, what will happen is traffic volumes will increase to fill the road space and make it difficult for the public transport system to work. We are already seeing that happen. We need to give the system a leg-up and more than anything else, we can do that through the allocation of space.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I will point the Minister towards the issue of fares. They are and remain a significant barrier. If we are already providing additional subsidies to the public transport network when they are running well below capacity, there is real opportunity to do something in that regard.

The Minister pointed to the issue of hybrid working. Another issue that frustrates people is the lack of flexibility in the tax-saver scheme for people who are working in the city two or three days a week. There seems to have been no movement from the NTA or the Department in that regard. Is that something that is being considered and on which there will be movement? Can we expect to hear about that?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I happened to have discussions with some of my officials on that topic this week. Everyone recognises that the old system, which assumes everyone is commuting five days a week for 30, 40 or more weeks per year, is no longer most people's lived experience. The NTA is engaging with partners to look at options to deliver more flexible projects. Everyone wants to do that. I was explaining one of the difficulties in this area to Deputy Nash in the Dáil yesterday. Let us apply that notion to the Luas, for example. In that case, it could be done tomorrow because with the Leap card system, which is a swipe-in and swipe-out system, people could easily measure how many days a week they are using it or allocate a certain amount of days and use it up to that threshold. On a rail or bus system, we do not have those swipes on and off. We do not have the data on the number of days per week or what journeys people take. The absence of that data is a complication that makes it difficult. We would ide-

ally have a two- or three-day week tax saver system. Currently, the infrastructure is not there to back that up, which is why the NTA is taking time to look at every option and come up with a practical workaround solution.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: There is an urgent need for it. I have experience of trying to be committed to public transport while working part-time. The minute one moves away from it and back into the car, one saves time and money. From a policy perspective, that is the wrong incentive and needs to be addressed. There is huge opportunity to encourage people onto public transport if we make it make sense for them. If people are increasingly hybrid working, the option of public transport will be more attractive than if they worked and commuted full time. It behoves the Department, the NTA and all the stakeholders to do everything to resolve that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree fully.

Chairman: The current issue with the cost of living presents an opportunity to promote public transport. Cost is a factor for many people. At one stage, Irish Rail was pushing people to go online. It brought the fares down and there was a huge uptake. It is something that I ask be considered. I take it the Minister has a submission gone into the Government from his Department on the issue. I wish him well with that. I will respect his decision not to comment.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: *Omerta.*

Chairman: Good to hear. It does not seem to operate exclusively across the board.

I want to get my head clear on something on page 3 of the briefing document. In the programme for Government it says the ratio of spending on public transport to that on roads will be 2:1. That is under the capital programme. I am seeing that active travel is €356 million and sustainable mobility is €900 million. That is roughly 50% of the capital budget. Will the Minister elaborate on where the 2:1 is at?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We are not meeting 2:1 because we have a massively long list of road projects, local and national, which have been many years in planning and preparation. Many are close to construction or in construction and there is ability to deliver on all those. It is not the same in public transport. We have not had a history or policy of promoting public transport in the State. As a result, projects are only now coming to the planning phase, including DART+, metro and BusConnects. Without being critical of any individual, there was a mistake in allowing a gap to open where we had no public transport projects in construction in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Waterford, Limerick or around the country.

We are turning that around. The Connecting Ireland bus programme is one of the most significant and important new projects in public transport in the history of the State. The BusConnects projects for all five cities are hugely significant and will be delivered. Going back to what I said in the previous discussion, we can start delivering some of those elements. We are already starting to roll them out. Irish Rail was starved of investment over the years but that is being reversed. There are the likes of the DART+ programme and the Cork metropolitan rail. We will build DART for Cork in a short number of years. I think we can do the same in Limerick.

Chairman: We will hopefully have within a short period the second railway line restored between Limerick Junction and Limerick city.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I met with Irish Rail on this issue during the week. Could we not

reopen the rail line so that when the Ryder Cup is in Adare, people can get seamlessly from Shannon to the golf course on high-quality public transport? I think that could, should and will be done.

Chairman: The Minister would have to deal with getting from Shannon Airport to the rail line.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There would have to be a bus shuttle from Shannon to, probably, Sixmilebridge.

Chairman: The Minister would have a shuttle to Sixmilebridge or Cratloe.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes, either.

Chairman: He would take the existing rail line in.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It would come out at Colbert Station and come back straight onto the existing line. The line is there.

Chairman: That is the line that goes to Foynes.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes. A station at Moyross would be really cheap and quick to build because it is a single track. It is not a big wide station that has to cross over two lines.

Chairman: I am supportive of the rail proposal in Limerick. I think it is a practical thought process to take the commuter bus from Shannon Airport to link up with Sixmilebridge or Cratloe. There has to be some level of speed to get there in a reasonable time. I welcome that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is at concept stage but is utterly deliverable and will be delivered. When the Ryder Cup comes, we want to be green and proud. It is a showcase to the world. If we do not have high-quality zero-carbon transport from Shannon to the course, we will not be providing a world-class facility. It is symbolic.

Chairman: That gives the Minister a window of five years.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is utterly doable at low cost.

Chairman: It is not mutually exclusive in relation to road projects. I do not want to go down that line. I want to deal with the facts. Am I correct in saying for 2022 the ratio between public transport and roads is about 50:50 in the capital budget? Is that reasonable?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is complicated because active travel is a separate ratio. Maintenance is also not included. This is new capital investment. Much of the local and national roads investment is in the regular update.

Chairman: Under the programme for Government it is 2:1, but at the moment it is about 50:50.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Closer to that, yes.

Chairman: In addition, the bulk of the €360 million for active travel is coming out of the capital budget.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes.

Chairman: If I include the €360 million as part of public transport, it is still 50%.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Close to it.

Chairman: Okay. If I strip it out, it is probably about a 60:40 ratio in favour of roads. Is that reasonable?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I do not know if it is quite exactly that.

Chairman: What would it be roughly?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is closer to 50:50 if active travel is taken out.

Chairman: I looked through the Estimates and an interesting thing struck me on page 152 about electric vehicles. The number of new grant-aided vehicles purchased will go from 6,000 to 18,000 this year. There were 5,000 or some huge number purchased in January. That would represent a threefold increase. The number of grant-aided electric vehicle charging points has only doubled from 400. Could there be an acceleration of the roll-out of charging points in terms of their location and the speed at which people can charge? There is a public appetite to switch to electric vehicles. It is clearly evident. One of the features people mention is the lack of charging points. There is a level of insecurity that people may not be able to make a full trip without stopping at a charging point. The journey from Limerick to Dublin is an example. What can be done to expedite the roll-out of charging points?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will be heading to Ennis tomorrow and I am hoping to get there in one shot in my little ID3. The Chairman's point is well made. We have to accelerate it. The Department will be publishing or finalising in the coming weeks to two months a full electric vehicle strategy on the best way to do it. We are working in particular with local authorities. We have to start looking at experimenting. In rural areas this issue is much less of a problem. In a one-off house in the country home charging is very easy and an immediate solution.

Chairman: I have spoken to taxi drivers and other members of the public. I actively go out and ask people. In every estate we go into someone has a car charging. The one issue that is raised is the location of charging points and the speed at which cars can be charged. There is a belief that being on a motorway, for example the motorway from Limerick to Dublin, eats into the battery and uses it a bit quicker. The only way we can overcome this is with additional charging points. The batteries are getting bigger and they will get stronger. What can be done at a policy level to expedite this if people are buying electric cars?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On a policy level we will make sure competition exists. I believe petrol stations will have to switch over to cater for electric vehicles. I will detail my personal experience without promoting any one brand. Over the past year I have driven around the country a fair bit in an electric vehicle. Those stations with high-speed fast charging are out there and they are the ones I am using. They are the ones that will get the patronage. The revenue will be in the coffee dock and in the shop.

Chairman: Did the Minister say previously there was an issue about their closeness to the grid?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The real challenge, particularly with fast charging, is access to the grid. This is key. Getting the grid to these stations or moving stations to where the grid is strong is where we may go. When this scales up and when we have a large number of vehicles

charging at high speed it will require significant grid capacity.

Chairman: Is there anything the Government can do to assist with this?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In fairness to my predecessor, Deputy Richard Bruton, he started this by taking money from the climate fund to give to the ESB to invest in the high-speed charging network. It was slow at first. I met the Irish Petrol Retailers Association and told the retailers they needed to speed this up. I am glad to say they have done so over the past year.

Chairman: What is required so we will see this increase threefold or fourfold per annum? The number of charging points should increase commensurate with the increase in the number of cars. If there are extra charging points at a faster speed we will have even more people looking to purchase electric cars. Some people are reticent. As a non-technical person what are the challenges at present? Why do we not see faster growth in the number of charging points?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I do not think our local authorities have acted fast enough. This will be part of the-----

Chairman: In what sense?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: There was an open scheme for local authorities to apply for funding and only two-----

Chairman: What would they do with that funding?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I believe 28 local charging points have been put in place in Louth and Dublin. I said a year and a half ago when I came into office that I do not think we have been forward thinking enough in local authorities in particular.

Chairman: The Minister is the person in the cockpit. What needs to be done now with the existing or new apparatus to increase the number of charging points?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: When this new policy comes out, and we do need a policy approach and I do not want to pre-empt it, it will work in co-operation with local authorities to look at innovative local solutions. One of the reasons I am going to Ennis is to speak to the council to see whether we can start working together on where we would put these charging points and how the local authority would help to roll them out. This will be part of it.

Chairman: When will the Department's new policy be out?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Within the next two months.

Chairman: I will move on to broadband which is on page 5 of the Estimates. There is a spend of €225,000 this year. National Broadband Ireland came before the committee recently. Is the Minister satisfied with the pace of the roll-out of broadband? Does he believe the taxpayer is getting value for money? What is his overall perspective on where the roll-out of broadband is at present?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The job of the Minister is never to be satisfied at the speed of the roll-out of anything. It is our job to kick everything on. From my experience, and I said this in opposition as well as in government, the team we have in place in the Department is world-class in terms of skills, composition and dedication. National Broadband Ireland is giving it full throttle. It is in its interests for this to accelerate. It wants to get customers. It wants to pass

as many houses as possible. There have been obstacles. The committee knows this better than anyone. Many of those obstacles have been overcome. We had obstacles with regard to getting planning permission for poles to go in. Through very active engagement with local authorities, in fairness to them, they were overcome. There is a very particular and significant obstacle at present in terms of the quality of some of the ducting and the need for resolutions on a far more frequent basis than had been predicted or expected. The delay in getting some of these ducting issues cleared is one of the reasons it has been delayed. I am confident these difficulties will be overcome. The structure and teams involved are highly capable and highly committed.

Chairman: My next question is on aviation. The Minister is probably aware that Shannon Airport has no European hub connectivity. It does have flights to Heathrow. Aer Lingus was supposed to go ahead with a route from Shannon to Paris Charles de Gaulle in March 2020. Covid intervened and we have also had Brexit. Because of Brexit, Shannon Airport is exposed because we do not have direct hub connectivity with Europe. The Minister is aware of the Brexit adjustment reserve fund. It is for dealing with the impacts of Brexit. Is the Department willing to consider Shannon Airport making a case that the Department would apply under the Brexit adjustment reserve fund in Europe for funding under a public service order for a route to be established to a hub such as Amsterdam? There would not be a cost to the Exchequer. It would be a cost to the Brexit adjustment fund.

Ireland has been allocated €920 million overall. It is the largest single contribution. This funding is available for Departments and the Government to make an application. I understand any application would have to come from the relevant Department. I am trying to find something that would not be a charge directly on the Irish Exchequer. This would come from a fund that is there.

Shannon Airport has been heavily impacted by Brexit. We are the only Irish international airport that does not have direct European hub connectivity.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I certainly will go back to the Department and examine what the possibilities might be in that regard. Throughout the Covid pandemic, we have looked, on a number of occasions and in a variety of ways, at what we can do to help some of our airports, particularly Cork and Shannon. We looked in real detail at what can be done. Even though the Chairman's suggestion involves funding coming from Europe and so on, it would, in effect, still be a PSO-type operation.

Chairman: I am not denying that.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In European aviation terms, getting PSO routes requires showing complete market failure.

Chairman: However, I understand it has been done here. Is it something to which the Minister is open?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I certainly will look into it and come back to the Chairman if there is any possibility of pursuing it.

Chairman: I thank the Minister.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I welcome the Minister back to the committee. I am always impressed when he comes here and can rattle off the names of villages and various places. He has a very good geographical knowledge and I was brimming with optimism when he mentioned

Cratloe and some of the other stations on that rail line. We hope to see progress in this regard and that the Minister will plough on with it. We really want to see some of those projects in the mid-west delivered.

At the previous meeting he attended, I referenced the pricing of rail tickets. I hope he will forgive me if this is repetition but it is an important point. For my family of two adults and three children, a return rail trip to Dublin this coming Saturday to visit the zoo would cost €150.90, which is the lowest fare I could find. That is a return journey of four hours and 20 minutes. It would cost €152 to take me and my family from Amsterdam to Munich on a sleeper train, involving overnight travel. There is something fundamentally wrong with the chronically high cost of rail services in Ireland. I have already bought my ticket to travel by train to Dublin next Wednesday to attend the Dáil because I know what time I need to be there. It is possible to get cheaper fares when making travel plans a week or two weeks' ahead. However, for parents who want to load all the children onto the train, it may cost €150. The same journey would cost me approximately €40 in fuel if I were to drive from door to door.

People will only make the modal shift the Minister and all of us in this room want them to make when it makes sense from a pounds, shillings and pence point of view. I know much of the answer is to be found beyond this room. There is a role for my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and it is to do with PSOs. There really is a need for the Government to lead on this, grasp the nettle of expensive tickets and work to make rail travel cheap and viable. The Minister is a fan of the train, as am I, and our colleague, Deputy Matthews, who is often at these meetings, is an even bigger fan. In continental Europe, one can get across several countries for the same cost as travelling from Ennis or Limerick to Dublin and back. That is wrong.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree fully with the Deputy that this is an issue. He should by all means share his thoughts with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. He has a tough job, as do we all, in allocating scarce resources. It might be useful for the Deputy to share some of his thinking with him.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister. I want to talk about new aviation. I had a meeting in Shannon Airport yesterday and the people there are very excited about the return of transatlantic routes in March and the new summer routes out of the airport. As the Chairman said, they want to build more routes and more connectivity. One of the areas of real potential for Shannon, of which we are only scratching the surface, is new aviation. Last October, FedEx launched a drone from Shannon, which delivered a parcel across the Shannon Estuary to Foynes. We have a hub of testing facilities around Shannon looking at new aviation. The one issue we have not looked at yet is hydrogen-powered flight. We saw the first such commercial flight take off in December and many European countries, particularly Italy and Germany, are seizing all available European money to look into sustainable aviation. It is where people are going. There is a crazy irony that teenagers will go on the Internet and buy a pair of jeans that has to be shipped across the world but they may feel guilty about travelling on an aeroplane because of the environmental footprint. People will increasingly look to sustainable travel, particularly for international journeys. Is there anything the Minister hopes to lead out from his Department beyond scratching the surface in this area? We need to go deep and ensure we are leaders, as we always were in the Shannon region, on sustainable aviation.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Again, I agree with the Deputy. We are only at the concept stage in this area, as are all countries. When we read all the reports about great hydrogen plans, and there is evidence going into it now, we must remember that we are all at an early stage. It is not

yet clear and certain what exactly the alternative fuels will be. There is a variety of potential options as well as different modes and capabilities, including, as the Deputy mentioned, hauling goods across the Shannon Estuary with a drone.

I said on the radio earlier that I am looking forward to my visit to Shannon Airport on Friday. Shannon may have more potential than anywhere else to be a location for developing and testing such new solutions. It has a great history, including the use of flying boats, and was, in effect, our first real point of connection. Looking further south to Valentia Island, it was the first telecommunications connection with north-west America. Shannon has a very long runway and can take very heavy payloads, which can increase efficiency. It also has a small geographical benefit in being furthest west. If we are looking at the very large volume of transatlantic traffic from Europe to America, Shannon, even just at a concept level, has a comparative competitive advantage. As it happens, it is also in a location that will probably offer one of our greatest sources of clean renewable energy, with offshore wind that can be brought ashore and a very strong grid, the Moneypoint lines being very close. It has very advanced manufacturing and a very large transport industry hub. For that variety of reasons, there is great potential there.

At the Glasgow COP conference, I made the case for Shannon to the chief executive of United Airlines and a number of other people involved in the industry. We started initial talks about whether they would be interested if we had some sort of hub where we could test latest technologies. Governments providing that sort of safe-place location to test new sustainable transport systems makes a lot of sense. It is only at a concept phase but it may be something that gives Shannon an advantage over other airports and destinations.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: That is encouraging and I ask that the Minister deepen the process to pursue it. He is pushing an open door in Shannon. There is a lot already happening, he and the industry are interested in it and there is funding in Europe to guide and steer it forward. I hope it will be pursued further.

I must leave shortly to attend the Dáil but I have two more brief questions. The EU directive on the common system of VAT was amended in December, which potentially paves the way for action on the cost of bicycles. I cycled here today, as I am sure did the Minister. However, bicycles are still very costly. In fact, they have become more costly at a time we want more people using them. Is the Minister looking seriously, with his colleague, the Minister for Finance at having zero VAT on bicycles?

My final question relates to wind turbines. I know this straddles two Departments and we had a chat about it only a few weeks ago. I understand the guidelines are in the Minister's Department before they go back to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. It is crucial that they be updated. The current guidance is grossly outdated, going back to 2006. There are two sides of the coin when it comes to people's views on turbines. In fact, most of us take a middle position in that we embrace renewable energy but are concerned by what we are seeing in some locations. In parts of County Clare, there is a proliferation of turbines, some of them twice the height of Big Ben, the famous clock in the heart of London. The siting of turbines in Gougane Barra in west Cork was on the news last night. They are springing up everywhere. They are positive on one hand but there is a proliferation of them in some parts of Ireland. When I get the train, once I pass the Curragh towards Dublin, I do not see a single one. They all seem to be dotted along the west coast.

When will we get the updated guidelines? People will tolerate a certain number of turbines but it has now got to the point of proliferation and dumping on communities. We need more

rigorous guidelines that allow the industry to function - it, too, wants updated guidance - but also give some safeguarding to communities. At the moment, we are nowhere.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Communities must come first in everything we do and no community should be dumped on, to pick up on the Deputy's wording. There is a wider strategic move to offshore and away from onshore. There will still be onshore wind development but there are certain capacity limits to that, including the needs of communities, the requirements of the grid and the fact that the efficiency, capacity and power resource is in the north-west Atlantic in particular. The further north and north west we go, the more that power is available.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: When will the guidelines be issued? They have been in draft format for two years.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: They are but I will be honest. There is a real difficulty regarding how they would be applied. There is real uncertainty as to how they could be applied. That is the reason there has been such delay and difficulty. What we do not want to do is add to confusion, uncertainty or public controversy by having guidelines we cannot enforce, measure or monitor. That is the reason why they have been delayed and why there is such difficulty around them.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: What about zero percent VAT on bicycles?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Often the hardest thing to change is VAT. VAT rates are not easily adjusted or changed. The Minister for Finance rightly protects that because it is often seen as such an easy solution to every problem. My experience is that VAT rate reduction is not the easiest one to get over the line and it is not centre stage in the plans. The key thing for active travel is safe space. That is what is holding people back from taking to bikes in even greater numbers.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I agree with the Minister. Being environmentally minded is in some people's DNA and they are already making modal shifts in their lives but for others, it will not be until it changes what is in their pockets - pounds, shillings and pence. The cost of living has been a national debate this week. As many people will make the modal shift when it makes sense economically, in that regard, there needs to be a bit of carrot and stick - more carrot than stick, of course. Things like reducing VAT and making the train to Dublin much cheaper than going in the car will eventually get families and individuals off the armchair and on to the bike rather than taking the diesel or petrol engine car. I think pounds, shillings and pence still matter to a lot of people. I hope the Minister can lead that within Cabinet.

Chairman: Can I follow up about active travel and greenways? The Minister spoke about people feeling safe. Obviously, we saw the terrible tragedy that befell Ashling Murphy. I was reflecting on the security aspect of greenways earlier today. If people are to use greenways, they must feel safe. Obviously, councils are rolling out most of the greenways. What is being done in terms of the planning and design of greenways in terms of installing cameras and making areas safe because that is the one core element in terms of encouraging people to engage in active travel - walking, running or cycling? People must feel safe. Has policy changed in this area? Are there areas the Minister can change or put resources into in order that when a local authority is building anything relating to active travel, a core element of that must be the provision of a safe environment for the public using it? The acid test for me is whether a man, woman or family - obviously women are particularly vulnerable - feels safe.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is vital that they feel safe. It is not just about active travel. It also relates to public transport in particular. There was a very good research paper on this issue. It is by design from start, particularly around bus stops, stations, public transport itself and active travel routes. We need incorporate this thinking at every turn in everything we do.

Chairman: Can I make a suggestion with the aim of assisting? There is a need for the Department to ask all local authorities to carry out an audit of their current active travel facilities, including greenways, to ensure they are safe. I am not in any way questioning whether local authorities have done it but at the same time, certain points come along. The murder of Ashling Murphy was utterly tragic. Her parents were down in Limerick. They are exceptional people. Is it something the Minister is looking at?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am looking at it constantly, not just because of that incident but because it is something that is increasingly in public consciousness and the consciousness of policymakers and rightly so.

Chairman: Would the Department look to carry out my suggestion that there should be a review, even of existing infrastructure?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It is also down to streets and stops and stations. It is as wide as that.

Chairman: Perhaps each local authority could carry out a formal audit and bring it back to the Department. The Minister could instigate this. It must be a safe environment.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Absolutely.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I follow on from some of the questions about NBI. There was a considerable amount of conversation around the investors. Peter Hendrick has told us that on some level, the investor profile he has is not the investor profile he wants. He spoke about two things. One of them was how at some stage, NBI would become some sort of European super-telecoms outfit - I am not entirely sure how. Beyond that, he also spoke about ensuring that one had somebody who was in it for the long haul. I imagine this would be a telecoms investor. Anyway, that is what it is. Has there been discussion with the Minister about any of those possible investors or ensuring the viability of the entire project?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: On that point, I have the highest regard for *The Business Post* and its currency. It has some of our best journalists and does really good reporting. Obviously, there was real concern in some of the stories. They raised issues around ownership structures and so on. In response to that, we immediately commissioned independent legal and accounting review advice at the highest level to see whether we need to act and go further. I have to be straight up. There was a quick turnaround but the response from the independent review conducted by the lawyers and accountants, EY and William Fry, was that what had happened was as per the contract and normal business practice. We responded immediately by asking for an independent assessment, which told us that it was within the contract and within business norms.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth, stated the project is viable and nobody is particularly worried. I know there were certain fears around performance bonds being paid early and people thought it was a possible cash flow issue but I accept the argument that this was not the case. Has there been any further communication relating to any possible future investors? Perhaps we are not that far along.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will check with Mr. Mulligan but “No” is the answer. Certainly nobody has approached me or the Minister of State, Deputy Ossian Smyth.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is okay. I appreciate that. We spoke previously about another story that had broken about the encroachment numbers, which came to 45,000. I think other numbers have been quoted. The Minister always disputed that. Do we have a figure? This involved the crossover between Eir and NBI in the intervention area.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Perhaps Mr. Mulligan might answer that question rather than having to pass me a note if that is acceptable.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is acceptable to me.

Chairman: On a technical point, the clerk has advised me that we would love to hear from the officials but the Minister has to-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am quite happy to answer that question. We do not have exact precision regarding what the figure is. NBI and Eir are working and it does not in any way interfere in the project. It does not materially affect it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That is an answer. Nobody is happy that this has not reached the deadlines. There is an acceptance regarding the Covid delays. I will ask a couple of questions rather than have a couple of pieces of paper cross over. Are we fairly sure 60,000 premises will be reached by the end of March? Do we have what will be the new figure for the end of this year? I know it was somewhere between 100,000 and 130,000 but it was to be firmed up. Are we still talking about June for the piece on the acceleration? I know it is twofold. It involves the catch-up owing to Covid, the figure for which is a little higher than it was, and reducing the timeframe for the whole project to what NBI has said is six years. We had all hoped it would be five but at this stage we need to ensure it can be reduced to six.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We expect the target of 60,000 to be reached in April. There is no end-of-year figure. I am up front in recognising there is this issue at the moment-----

Chairman: Was the target of 60,000 to be reached by the end of March or the end of April?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: In April.

Chairman: We were told by NBI that it expected to reach that number by the end of March.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am informed it is April. I would expect an earlier-----

Chairman: The Minister will appreciate that these dates become very important because they are in the public domain.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: One of the differences here is that they will be built in March but will only be fully open and operational in April. It takes a short period to go live or to activate.

Chairman: So both answers are correct.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Once we can keep close to the target. Everyone can allow for an element of slippage. Unfortunately, there has probably been too much in the past while.

Are we still talking about June for the hardening up or the contractual information on the acceleration and catch-up?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The key issue we will have to resolve is that of how to get into the ducts and solve the problems quickly.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness, NBI had two asks, one involving what it calls the self-install product and the other involving Eir make-ready works that allow NBI to attack more, for want of a better term. NBI has the capacity to finish the last piece rather than calling Eir in, even though there has been a slight improvement.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Once we get over those sorts of obstacles or arrive at those sorts of solutions to the problem we have, I will be very confident that the acceleration will take place. The solution must come first.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I get that. I imagine the Department is engaging on all this work at this point.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Absolutely.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The other issue, which I believe I raised with the Minister before and which I definitely raised with others, concerns the mobile phone and broadband task force, which falls between the Departments of the Environment, Climate and Communications and Rural and Community Development. Despite the best of intentions, several areas will not see broadband rolled out for some years. There may be interim solutions, some of which may involve engagement with providers, including those providing low-Earth-orbit satellite broadband. I suppose it is getting to a point whereby we can say to people that we intend to get to them in year four while also presenting them with the available alternatives. That task force may be the body capable of doing this work.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: May I make a point on working with industry? It concerns the wider, national picture. Almost ten years ago, the idea of task forces and collaboration in what is an inherently competitive market was touted. The approach involves open-access networks, shared ducting and such elements. That approach has actually delivered for us as a country. While we have had some difficulties and delays in the roll-out of broadband nationally, the wider national picture - it is important to be aware of this - shows we are shooting up the international league tables in terms of high-speed broadband access. The really significant investment being made across a variety of operators, which are competing to get to the householder as quickly as possible with fibre, means we are starting to see really high-speed broadband roll-out right across the country. Obviously, the national broadband area has specific characteristics; that is why it exists. The decision on it was the correct strategic decision. It will be delivered upon. That will put the country in a remarkably strong position. Whether delivery is in five, six or seven years, it will happen. Practically universal access to high-speed fibre broadband affords us the potential to be transformative because it means we can roll out public services, educational and other services-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are all in agreement on that. In some cases, there are plenty of people who will have the capacity and ability and who will do the due diligence work and research. What we are talking about is just engaging with those stakeholders that might provide interim solutions for those who will be waiting several years. Could the mobile phone and broadband task force be the body that could do some of this work?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The point I was making is that working with the industry makes sense, particularly when other options can be provided. Technology evolves and develops, but that will not stop us from rolling out fibre-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am not referring to an alternative.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My answer is “Yes”. Co-operation and collaboration, particularly with the industry because there are so many technological innovations, make sense.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness, the committee has spoken about engaging with the mobile phone and broadband task force. We want it to consider this work and the idea of getting the State to do it, probably resulting in better engagement between constituents and Deputies on broadband provision. This is an alternative to our submitting requests to telecommunications companies on the basis of what they cannot do, particularly regarding the national broadband plan.

I realise I am probably out of time. I want to follow up on Deputy O’Rourke’s remarks on the NTA. We are all aware of the value of remote working and we all realise people are considering the idea of hybrid working. A flexible tax-saver scheme is logical in this regard. The NTA seems to have jettisoned this idea in the past while. I accept what the Minister is saying about obstacles but we knew about those beforehand. The NTA had said it was working on the matter and at times gave dates for completion. What is the timeline? Before we even have the infrastructure in place, could we not consider offering people the facility in question? We could introduce the tests afterwards.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Everybody here agrees on the desirability of the outcome. I would be very open to members of the committee showing me technological solutions that we could implement realistically at the railway stations in Dundalk and Drogheda. There is no lack of desire to deliver; it is about having real-time solutions for the tens of thousands of customers who would have to be able to avail of the facility.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I get it. In the medium term, we need to put in place those technological solutions. I was going to refer to clicking tickets.

Chairman: One of the biggest issues that has arisen for all members concerns the gap intervention areas, which are basically those areas that run alongside the existing blue area. I am referring to where an individual in a country area has Eir fibre broadband while their neighbour over the ditch does not. NBI has agreed to tender to determine whether we can expedite broadband roll-out in those areas. I am sure the Minister is aware of this. NBI is due to come back to us in the not-too-distant future on how it has got on with the tender. I assume the Minister would be supportive of this.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We are considering every solution-----

Chairman: What I describe is quite commonplace, particularly in rural areas, but not necessarily in rural areas. It is welcome that the Minister is well aware of the proposal. I apologise to Deputy Ó Murchú for interrupting.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is all fine. In the medium term, we need to find the technological solutions. I am not trying to be funny here. Is it not possible in the short term to go back to something that is almost prehistoric, such as the practice of clicking tickets? Is there not a viable short-term solution?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: One of the solutions that is possible, the new Transport for Ireland 90-minute fare, gives flexibility and capability. The extension of the Leap card areas, such as into Mallow, could be considered. There are possible initiatives and we should consider all options.

The Deputy asked why the commitment was not delivered upon and whether the complexity was not understood. It required an examination of how to proceed to find there were technical problems. That is the only reason-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We have no notion about a timeline; that is the problem.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: As I said, if there is any-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept that. There is an onus on the Minister to engage with those concerned. It is probably work that we have to facilitate.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I am meeting this week on it.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We did the all-Ireland rail review. The Minister will not die of shock if I speak about electrification, particularly in respect of the Enterprise line. We are still talking about 2027 as the date for delivery on that. I am working on the basis, whatever the outworkings of this review, that the resources will be in place to deliver it, with all the caveats surrounding planning, etc.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The review is just concluding its first consultation phase. It was a very large consultation, especially in the North and, as I understand it, in the desire for connectivity to the north west, which makes a lot of sense, including quite radical solutions-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Anybody who has ever looked at that map will see there is no rail in the north west.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It included quite radical solutions, potentially, such as considering going back to the historic route of the line, which went via Omagh and Strabane up to Derry, rather than running the line from Portadown up the north-east and north coast. That would require UK Government funding. Nichola Mallon and I had meetings with Sir Peter Hendy twice on this issue to make the case.

Separately, the reality of the rail review is that it expanded from initially looking at the high speed Dublin-Belfast-Cork line to a much wider consideration of freight and other underutilised rail lines, such as Waterford-Limerick and the western rail corridor. It will be very all-encompassing. I am looking forward to seeing the results. As we just talked about, I hope it will come up with innovative solutions to optimise the existing network and, where appropriate, expand it. It is very expensive to expand the network but, to go back to the issue of Limerick and four underutilised rail lines in and out of a city, it is about whether we can optimise existing assets under the national investment framework for transport in Ireland, NIFTI, strategic direction. I do not think we are making the best use of the existing network.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I completely agree. We will have a level of engagement regarding it. It is interesting what the Minister said about local authorities, EV infrastructure and the fact that there has probably not been a sufficient amount of work done. That is something we probably need to butt into, for want of a better term.

Chairman: We need to get some understanding of the whole issue of the grid and the ESB.

There are technical issues, but the one thing that is coming across from the general public is there is a major appetite for the purchase of electric cars. People are now, in many cases, holding back. There is a tide in the affairs of men and, at present, electric vehicles are something the public has very much bought into, but there is a reluctance in some quarters regarding how far they can go.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness, somebody came to me from the other perspective. He is a mechanic and a car salesperson who was clear in saying to me that he has an agenda in that he wants to sell more cars. I know he had approached the local authority. I assume a greater number of those conversations need to happen, but they have to go beyond that and towards putting operational projects in place wherever we can. If we do not, especially if the funding is there, it will be a misstep and we will all miss out. Even when someone looks at buying a car, the first consideration is not being caught out in the sense of not having the infrastructure to deliver. This will probably be fine in two, three or four years, but that will only be the case if we do that groundwork now. We have to do a chase on that.

I will very quickly raise a few issues before I leave the meeting. There have been a significant number of conversations about cybersecurity. The Minister also spoke about the likes of the wind energy investments we will be talking about into the future. Some of this may necessarily fall under defence, but it is that difficulty of cyber to physical and ensuring that we have all the capacity necessary. The last thing I will ask the Minister relates to the An Post taskforce. Where are we on that piece of work? It is all about the sustainability and viability of the network.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Again, it is a very similar example of using existing networks to the maximum, both the post offices and An Post's distribution network. An Post is facing a difficult transition but one it is successfully managing as letter post decreases and parcel deliveries increase. The company is expanding significantly in the latter area. The real key is also expanding the post office network as a supplier of government services, for example, the one-stop shop capability we announced yesterday. An Post has already gone into the market for retrofitting, where it brings the pieces together, which are energy expertise, finance and the management process.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Where is the process and the piece of work that the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, was drawing together?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The ongoing work with the Minister of State is-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It was the review of the post office-----

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will have to get an update from the Minister of State and come back to the Deputy on it.

Chairman: I know it is not quite in the remit today, but I will make a general point on one-stop shops. We understand there is a free scheme, the best energy warmer homes scheme and the one-stop shop. Will the Minister elaborate on that a little more? What does he envisage we will see?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I have one slight concern. I have a commitment to Limerick at 4.30 p.m.

Chairman: Sorry.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I will quite happily go into that, but it is a different-----

Chairman: I will raise just one thing. Page 158 of the Revised Estimates relates to national aviation policy, which we understood was going to start next year. There does not appear to be a commitment on it. It states “Delayed due to Covid. May commence in 2022 but not expected to be published.”

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I do not expect it to be published, but it will certainly commence this year. Covid-19 stopped a lot because no-one knew what-----

Chairman: Will it be commenced?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Yes.

Chairman: That is fine. The recording of penalty points is in the Revised Estimates. The figure was 180,000 last year and it will be 195,000 next year. Is that a target?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Will the Chairman explain the question to me?

Chairman: Is the recording of penalty points a target?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The recording in terms of-----

Chairman: The numbers.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The numbers we want to see or-----

Chairman: I am just wondering why it was 180,000 last year and there is an estimate of 195,000 for next year. It is a little unusual that under recording of penalty points the Department is estimating a figure in advance of the year itself. Is that an estimate?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I expect it is an estimate. I will have to come back to the Chairman on that.

Chairman: I would very much welcome the Minister’s thoughts on the commuter rail link that will link into Adare. One of the bigger issues in Adare has been the lack of a bypass. I know the Minister has tried to get through Adare. Once again, rail and road are not mutually exclusive. We also need to bring people from other areas of the country, such as Cork, via the M20. I am once again saying, and it is a philosophy of mine, that road and rail are not mutually exclusive. I totally buy into rail but, equally, there is a serious problem in Adare with the lack of a bypass and the bottleneck. The bypass is before An Bord Pleanála at present and we are looking at the M20 project coming forward as well. I ask the Minister to bear in mind that Adare has a serious problem with traffic.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: It does. I am very familiar with Adare and it is clogged with traffic. When that bypass goes in, and it is in planning at present, we should be radical in looking at mechanisms to really reassess the public space and possibly move away from through traffic. A village like Adare would really benefit from that sort of space.

Chairman: That is what the bypass is very much about. It is due to come through An Bord Pleanála imminently. I presume it is something that the Department will very much factor in. I know the Minister is under time pressure.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: The reason I was concerned is that I saw the names on the board. If

all six people were to get ten minutes each, that would run me into trouble.

Chairman: What time does the Minister have to be in Limerick?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I have to join a call to Limerick at 4.30 p.m.

Chairman: On the phone. I thought the Minister would be driving there.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Not at all. I did not want to let-----

Chairman: The motorway does not quite do that for the Minister, but it helps.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I did not want to let the people in Limerick down. My only concern was when I saw six names, I thought I would run late.

Chairman: Not a problem.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I will come back to a couple of issues. I have concerns about regional balance, how it will be achieved and how it is playing out in practice. I am looking at two issues in particular. The first is the trans-European transport network, TEN-T, review. As I understand it, DART+ and MetroLink are included in that review. My colleagues in the west of Ireland are concerned that the proposed western arc project is not included, and that that does and will put that region at a considerable disadvantage between now and 2030 in respect of accessing European funding.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My officials inform me that the TEN-T review is looking at existing infrastructure. Subject to the strategic rail review, however, we will be able to go back to the European Commission and reconsider this aspect. If the rail review were to come up with recommendations in that regard, then that would help us in being able to go back and reopen this issue with the European Commission.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Therefore, there is an opportunity. The concern is that this TEN-T review closes the door for a considerable period. The Minister is saying that is not the case.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: My understanding is that there is flexibility, and we will use it. The strategic rail review is designed to give us that capability.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We will be hearing about the western rail corridor and rail links to Navan and elsewhere as part of our considerations. On a related point, we asked specific questions about the NTA funding for active travel projects undertaken in 2021, broken down by local authorities and other bodies. We did the same for cycling and walking projects in 2021. The geographic spread of such projects is incredibly stark in respect of the advantage enjoyed by certain areas. I appreciate that we are not always comparing like with like.

To give some examples, University College Dublin, UCD, in the south of Dublin, got €607,389 in funding. Meanwhile, County Laois got €413,100 and County Westmeath received €205,000. Those are the smaller figures. As might be expected, the Dublin local authorities got significant allocations. Those local authorities that I mentioned in the midlands, however, are in the just transition area, which is most impacted by the effects of the transition away from fossil fuels. They are particularly disadvantaged in this transition and they seem to be faring poorly in the allocation of State funding. I wonder how the Government will ensure that there is going to be an element of fairness and equity in these schemes.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: That point is well made. To a certain extent, however, much of this is in some ways demand-led, although that might not be the right word. It does require-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: That is my concern. I refer to this being a case of the survival of the fittest and of first up, best dressed. When it comes to local authorities competing to see who will be the best dressed, for me it is no coincidence that these schemes were launched in the Dublin suburbs. I say that with the greatest of respect for those areas; they are as entitled to fight their case as anybody else. There is a particular challenge here, however, that must be recognised and addressed. I refer to ensuring there is capacity at local government level to avail of these schemes and to put them to use. I say that because everybody has an equal right to have liveable towns and villages.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I agree with the Deputy. In the broader context of this planned climate transition, the fundamental underlying political reality we must live up to is that every place and every person matters. It cannot be a situation of rural versus urban. We must try to provide for both. Much of this would come down to local authorities saying they are not resourced and that they do not have the resources to be able to apply for these schemes. It is not because of a lack of will or a lack of interest. If that were the case, then they would have a real problem. We provided significant new numbers of engineering staff, particularly for active travel projects around the country, and, to be honest, it was not just the rural local authorities that were slow in this regard. Dublin City Council, DCC, did not fill its positions either. It beggars my mind as to why that was the case.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: From speaking to members of local authorities, some of the issue here concerns the nature of Ireland and the pool of potential staff. Having spoken to people in my region, they would say their local authority got additional staff, but they came from the local authority next door. In turn, that same local authority which got the extra staff might also have lost staff to its neighbouring local authority. Therefore, I understand that this endeavour will take time. What I am saying, in the context of an initial exploration of the practical out-working of this significant State investment, is that it does not seem to be equally distributed across the State. This is something that may require intervention in future

Deputy Eamon Ryan: One of the strategic changes we have made is to give TII specific responsibility in respect of the national network. Greenways are connected to active travel; they are not separate. That body does undertake its considerations and operate in a national context, and that may help in connecting everything up.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Regarding the NDP and the roads projects, there are useful interactive maps of which projects exist and what stage they are at in that context. We can be frustrated by projects not having reached particular stages, of course. Those interactive maps exist for the Twenty-six Counties. The Minister already has a long list of things to be done in this area, but I think we should map the projects now under way in this context and have them interactive in respect of where they stand in the context of this roll-out.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Those are exactly the riding instructions we will and should give to TII.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Turning to the subject of hauliers, there has been and is great frustration in the sector. It is under great pressure and hauliers took to the streets before Christmas. The Minister met with members of the representative bodies, and he indicated that some moves would be made after Christmas. What is he doing for that sector and what does he intend

to do for it? Will anything be included for this sector in the cost-of-living proposals to be announced? Equally, has consideration been given to supporting the sector in making the transition to using engines and fuels which give rise to low carbon emissions?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: We had a good meeting with representatives of the Irish Road Haulage Association, IRHA. They have a good reputation in respect of how they represent their members and how they have worked with the Department over the years. Even recently, in the context of some of the Covid-19 measures, the members of the IRHA played a helpful role in the context of the flexibility we needed. The same applied with Brexit as well. This issue of high fuel prices is not an easy one to resolve, to be up front and honest about it. We have had extensive discussions with the Department of Finance and we are looking at a range of different options in this regard. I do not think the cost-of-living proposals to be announced tomorrow will be the time to deal with this aspect. What will be announced then will be a small number of more general measures for the wider population.

We have, however, committed to talking to the representatives of the road hauliers again to explore what we can do for the sector. Whatever it is we do, it must help in the decarbonisation of society. There is no point in us going down the wrong road and delaying this transition. I am keen to try to support the haulage industry in adapting and to help it thrive. It is typically often a low-margin industry, with many good small family businesses. The supports the Deputy referred to will not be contained in the measures to be announced tomorrow. As I said, we must go back to the hauliers to drill down further into how we can work together on this issue.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Time is of the essence here. The hauliers have protested on the streets twice now. The economic challenge posed to them has not got any easier. There are aspects that could be addressed, including, for example, the fuel rebate and the alternative fuels excluded from that measure. If one speaks to hauliers, they will point out the types of supports they require to move towards Euro 6-compliant vehicles, or an alternative. Equally, some of the schemes we have are oversubscribed. There is an opportunity here to undertake both endeavours, but the hauliers must be supported.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: One must be careful, regarding the rebates or similar schemes, to be mindful of the whole Fit for 55 approach in a European context. The European transport plan is to move away from such fuel rebates. It is effectively being said that they will come to an end. Therefore, there are no easy silver-bullet measures in this regard. I refer to the use of alternative fuels and alternative engines. My own view is we should look to see whether we can make the journeys quicker and help hauliers through improved journey times in a variety of ways. It is not just about the fuels. We could also look at our haulage system in the context of the ongoing wider haulage strategy, in addition to the rail strategy review. Can we devise new haulage systems that mean hauliers are running empty less and so are getting paid more? We need to look at a whole range of different options. Can we look at alternative vehicles? They are very expensive at present compared with diesel vehicles, but we will have to look at a variety of options. The existing rebate scheme is the easy option, while even European directives and legislation are coming to an end. We will have to be more creative and look at a variety of options.

Chairman: On page 23 of the Minister's summary document, under subhead C3 on road improvement and maintenance, the capital programme side has been reduced from €1.319050 billion to €1.260450 billion, which is a reduction of approximately €60,000. Why has there been a reduction in the road capital budget?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: Many very big road projects go through. The likes of Westport to

Castlebar is a quarter of a billion euro project, as is Macroom. They are lumpy, big projects. A variation on that scale is just an issue of project scheduling rather than anything else.

Chairman: Timing. What is the Minister's view on the Adare bypass project? We spoke about it, but I should have asked because it is nearby.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I think it is in the middle of the planning process so I will have to be very careful.

Chairman: Many other things are in the middle of planning and the Minister is very vocal on them.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: To go back to what I said earlier, there is a clear realisation regarding Adare. I know it very well and it is a bottleneck. We need to free Adare from the through traffic heading through it. How exactly we do that will first be subject to An Bord Pleanála's recommendations.

Chairman: If the outcome from An Bord Pleanála is for a bypass, is that something the Minister will support?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I have constantly said that our roads programme, more than anything else, needs to prioritise bypasses that take through traffic out of our towns and villages. Does that mean we have to have major capacity motorways in all cases? To my mind, no, but we have to first and foremost focus on towns. The Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Deputy Peter Burke, launched our towns first strategy this week. Transport is part of that, as is taking traffic out of the centre of our towns as best we can.

Chairman: Before An Bord Pleanála, there is currently a process under way with TII in respect of the N20 and M20 projects. I presume it will continue that work.

Deputy Eamon Ryan: I think that is at an earlier stage than An Bord Pleanála. That is-----

Chairman: No. I am saying a process is still under way, as is the case with the Limerick metropolitan area transport strategy. My primary purpose was to ask the Minister about the Adare bypass. In fairness, he has given an update on that. As I said, the other two projects are going through a process of their own at present. Does the Minister wish to make any concluding comments?

Deputy Eamon Ryan: No. I was worried about the time when I saw six names come up. I am very glad to meet committee members.

Chairman: I thank the Minister and his officials for attending and engaging with the committee. The next meeting of the committee will take place next Wednesday, 16 February at 2 p.m., with the Minister again in attendance, for Committee Stage consideration of the Merchant Shipping (Investigation of Marine Casualties) (Amendment) Bill.

Message to Dáil

Chairman: In accordance with Standing Order 101, the following message will be sent to the Dáil:

9 FEBRUARY 2022

The Select Committee on Transport and Communications has considered the following Revised Estimate for Public Services - Vote 31 - Transport.

Under Standing Order 100(2), the message is deemed to be the report of the committee.

The select committee adjourned at 3.44 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Wednesday, 16 February 2022.