

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN ROGHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS LÍONRAÍ CUMARSÁIDE

SELECT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS NETWORKS

Dé Céadaoin, 21 Deireadh Fómhair 2020

Wednesday, 21 October 2020

Tháinig an Roghchoiste le chéile ag 11.30 a.m.

The Select Committee met at 11.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	
Joe Carey,	
Cathal Crowe,	
Michael Lowry,	
Steven Matthews,	
James O'Connor,	
Darren O'Rourke,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú,	
Duncan Smith.	

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

Estimates for Public Services 2020

Vote 31 – Transport (Revised)

Chairman: The Dáil ordered that the following Revised Estimates be referred to this committee for consideration: Vote 31 – Transport; and Programme A of Vote 29 - Environment, Climate and Communications.

The committee has no role in approving the Estimates. Instead, this is an ongoing opportunity to examine departmental expenditure, to make the process more transparent and to engage in a meaningful way on relevant performance issues.

Due to a scheduling clash, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, is unable to attend today's meeting. The Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, has indicated she will be dealing with Vote 31 today. The Minister's office has indicated that he will attend the committee at a later date to deal with Programme A of Vote 29. I hope that will be next week.

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

I welcome the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, and her officials to the meeting. I call on her to make her opening statement.

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildgarde Naughton): I thank the committee for the opportunity to present the 2020 Estimate for the Department of Transport. As stated by the Chairman, the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, will attend the committee at a later date on Programme A of Vote 29 for the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications.

The Estimate is, in fact, a further Revised Estimate, published in September 2020 to take into account the significant and ongoing disruption to a number of services caused by the Covid-19 crisis. As a result, from time to time, I will make a distinction between the budget planned for core services and investment, and additional funding provided in two areas, namely, emergency Covid funding and the July stimulus 2020 funding. The reason for this is to make a distinction between the general trend of services, investment in the budget and temporary expenditure that, to a large degree, will be unwound in the coming years, once the crisis eventually abates.

In addition, the endpoint of Britain's trade negotiations with the EU is fast approaching. We will learn what the UK's post-Brexit relationship will be with the EU for the foreseeable future. This continues to present the risk of an additional transport crisis, impacting principally on the aviation and road haulage sector. Once again, as we approach a Brexit deadline, interconnectivity will be at stake and we need to be prepared for the impact of the outcome of trade negotiations on aviation, road haulage, the land bridge, as well as the export and import of goods to the island.

My Department has diligently worked on these matters throughout 2020 at three different levels. These are: ensuring Ireland's connectivity priorities form part of the EU negotiating mandate; working with colleagues in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to ensure

the European Commission is fully aware of Ireland's contingency needs should a deal not materialise; and putting our readiness preparations in place for 1 January. All this is being done, despite the greater crisis represented by battling Covid 19.

Today's set of transport Estimates provide an overall gross allocation to the Department of Transport of over €3.05 billion. We are using the funding to provide ongoing services, protect services that are impacted by the Covid-19 emergency and to continue to invest in maintaining existing infrastructure, as well as continuing to develop new infrastructure with a focus on climate change.

This funding for 2020 represents a €1 billion increase on our investment levels for 2019, of €2.045 billion. Each of the Department's three programmes share the funding to some degree with the bulk going to the land programme.

In line with the Central Exchequer guidance in advance of the 2020 budget, the Department had prudently stayed largely within its existing level of expenditure for current expenditure. Of the three programmes, aviation, land and maritime, there had been a small increase in investment in national roads maintenance with €8 million secured in the budget and an additional €1.2 million in public service obligation funding for public transport, to support the transport requirements for Ireland's share of matches in the Euro 2020 finals.

Capital increased from €1.844 million to €1.981 million, which is more or less in line with the profiled capital ceiling for 2020 as set out in the five-year capital ceilings underpinning Project 2040. The Department reprofiled €125 million from its capital ceiling, without affecting progress on planned projects for 2020, to assist the Exchequer reach a balanced budget. At the start of 2020, early indications and expenditure returns for the first two months of the year showed expenditure largely on track, with an underspend in the PSO budget, in particular, indicating that fare revenue was still rising in PSO services, although it was forecast by the National Transport Authority to plateau as the year progressed and services reached maximum capacity on the public transport network.

The advent of the Covid-19 crisis and the commencement of a lockdown on 12 March had an immediate impact on public transport services. Public health guidelines meant that capacity was restricted on public transport to 25% of the maximum capacity and it rose to 50% when the initial phase of the crisis had passed. The impact on fare revenue and the cost of PSO services to run the transport network was immediate. The National Transport Authority estimated that a shortfall of €460 million would emerge before the end of the year. As the allocation for PSO for 2020 was €303 million this meant the prospect of the entire PSO budget, which constitutes 54% of the Department's total current budget, would be spent by July. On 4 June, based on the advice of the National Transport Authority and the Department, the Government sanctioned an additional allocation of €460 million for public service obligation expenditure.

The crisis has had an impact in three other areas - commercial bus services; maritime transport services; and the refund and repatriation of travellers. Commercial bus services suffered the same impact as PSO providers and to such a degree that their viability was threatened. The Government decision of 24 June approved up to an additional €100 million in funding on a temporary six-month basis. The 2020 tranche is being drawn down from the main emergency PSO allocation.

The collapse in passenger numbers also affected ferry services. Ferry services do not just carry ferry passengers. They are also key transporters of goods and cargo and are an integral

part of our national supply chains. The collapse in passenger numbers threatened the viability of the combined passenger and freight services, in turn threatening the stability of the supply chains. In response, on 7 April, the Government sanctioned €15 million in PSO support to certain key ferry companies to assist the companies through the crisis.

The crisis has severely impacted the aviation sector. One of the earliest manifestations of stress in the sector was in the tour operator market that although not strictly an Aviation matter is, in practice, bound up heavily in aviation through flight bookings as part of holiday packages. Under the EU Directive 2015/2302 passengers are entitled to a refund for packages and the cost of repatriation to Ireland. The Government sanctioned €15 million to meet the costs of repatriating or refunding customers affected by the collapse of the tour operator businesses.

As well as the emergency funding that I have outlined, the Government sanctioned additional funding as part of the July stimulus package. Additional capital formed the bulk of the stimulus with the Department receiving €113.5 million in capital and €2 million in current funds. The capital was targeted at ready-to-go projects in line with the Department's overall investment strategies with a jobs rich component. The current expenditure was used to finance the commencement of additional bus services.

In addition to the emergency funding that I have outlined, my Department continues to provide essential ongoing maritime and aviation services, and invest significant funds in road, aviation and maritime safety. My Department is also a key driver of Project 2040. Despite the current crisis we cannot lose sight of the long-term strategic priorities represented by Project 2040. Indeed, one positive development in 2020 is that there has been little substantive delay to many major projects already under construction, despite the shutdown of construction sites at the height of the lockdown.

Project Ireland 2040 recognises the role played by our ports and airports in the international connectivity of our island nation. The importance of interconnectivity and reliance on interconnectivity have been starkly highlighted by the crisis.

Project 2040 is very focused on moving towards a fundamental transformation on how people work, live and move in an environmental context through a better integration of towns and cities, and more sustainable forms of transport. I have intensified this focus since my appointment as Minister of State. The Department has a number of sustainable transport projects within its remit that are funded in 2020, particularly BusConnects, DART Plus and Metrolink. These projects, alongside the replacement of existing diesel buses and commuter trains with hybrid models, will see a steady move away from modes of transit that rely on carbon based fuels and too reliant on the private car to a public transport system that is capable of being powered by renewable sources of energy. Of course, public transport accounts for less than 5% of land transport CO2 emissions. That is why my Department actively promotes the growth of electric vehicles or EVs in the private car market.

I will briefly go through the three programmes of investment within my Department, and the funding levels and plans for 2020.

Programme A is civil aviation. During 2020 direct investment in aviation will be roughly €52 million or over 1.7% of expenditure in my Department. Much of the work we do in this programme involves working with regulators and international partners. The international commercial nature of air travel means that my Department's involvement in investments focuses mainly on regional access. Regional airports have faced particular stresses in 2020. Therefore,

the key priority for investment in the aviation programme over the short to medium term is to support the regional airports and ensure their continued viability.

In 2020, the regional airports programme was allocated €22.3 million. Steps have been taken in the 2021 budget to provide further support. A sum of €10.2 million was allocated to cover costs associated with our membership of EUROCONTROL, and cover costs incurred by the Irish Aviation Authority for certain services and subscriptions to international organisations.

The 2020 Estimates in the aviation programme also contain a new budget line not present in the 2019 Estimates, with €15 million allocated for the repatriation or refund of passengers affected by the collapse of tour operators.

Programme B is the land transport, which is by far the largest programme in my Department's Vote and representing 94% of our overall budget. This year, the allocation will increase by over €599 million or 26% to €2.9 billion. Most of the increase is a step-up in investment in our roads and mass transit services. The main components of the programme are: public service provision payments at €766 million, PSO; roads improvement and maintenance funding with an overall budget of just over €1 billion; €115.250 million in additional funding that was allocated as part of the July stimulus funding; the public transport investment programme at €805 million; and the active travel programme that constitutes Smarter Travel measures of cycling, walking and greenways at €128.6 million, which constitutes €76.6 million in initial funding and supplemented by €52 million from the July stimulus package; the provision of €7.750 million towards the carbon reduction programme; the operating costs of the national vehicle driver licensing system at just under €22 million, which is a system that helps us to collect motor taxes and fees such as toll fees on the M50; and €81 million is provided for the main investment agencies of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, and the National Transport Authority, NTA.

Next is public transport, programme B. The most significant current expenditure allocation is €766 million to public transport PSO funding. We will continue to support strongly the delivery of these socially necessary but financially unviable services throughout the country. This constitutes €306 million in existing level of service funding for 2020 and €460 million in emergency funding to meet the cost of the reduction in fare revenue. As the NTA forecasts that not all the €460 million will be required in 2020, a portion of the funding is sanctioned to support key services provided by commercial bus companies on a temporary six-month basis.

In 2020, we again allocated investment to protect the quality and value of our existing public transport networks. The €200 million in funding being made available in 2020 to Irish Rail in its role as infrastructure manager continues to be at the steady-state level as measured on an annual basis.

We have commenced the transition to a hybrid bus fleet as part of the ongoing fleet replacement programme. We are progressing plans to expand and upgrade the rail fleet, the commuter element of which will also commence a transition to dual battery or electric in the coming years.

The expansion of capacity on the Luas is well advanced, with 26 tram extensions planned for 2020 and eight new trams purchased. We continue to guide BusConnects, MetroLink, and DART plus through the planning and design process. We are also committed to ongoing retrofitting of older existing public transport facilities to improve their accessibility features. Accessibility is built into new projects and new assets as part of the integral design.

We have provided significant funding for active travel measures, greenways and dedicated

urban cycleways. We have utilised the July stimulus funding element to support active travel measures throughout the country. Some of this funding has been used by local authorities to introduce wider pavements and new cycle lanes to provide alternative means of sustainable transport, given the reduced capacity on the public transport network. Additionally, rural transport services that respond to local needs have also increased and we have provided an additional €2 million in funding for the launch of new services in 2020.

We continue to target new and innovative ideas to help decarbonise the transport sector, including pilot initiatives for low-emission technologies and incentives to encourage the national taxi fleet towards greener fuels and private car drivers towards electric vehicles, EVs. We have provided €1.5 million in funding to support the introduction of more EV charge points at transport hubs nationwide and €250,000 in July stimulus funding to provide EV grants to local taxi service providers.

Approximately €1.128 billion is available for the roads improvement and maintenance programme. With this we will continue to provide grant support for the national, regional and local road networks. This investment will be used to maintain and renew the national, regional and local road surfaces, with the total network being 99,000 km; meet our contractual obligations under public private partnerships that delivered parts of our motorway network; maintain motorways in safe and usable conditions; undertake safety works, and bridge maintenance and rehabilitation; carry out improvement schemes throughout the country on some minor roads; and undertake essential routine maintenance such as signing and lining, verge maintenance and preparatory winter maintenance.

With our partners in Transport Infrastructure Ireland and various local authorities, we are progressing a number of major Project Ireland 2040 projects during the course of 2020, including the Coonagh-Knockalisheen distributor road; the Westport to Turlough road; the N8 Dunkettle scheme which will commence construction; and the Sligo western distributor road. There is also additional funding in the July stimulus to undertake climate proofing on our roads.

Road safety is of paramount importance and our support for the operations of the Road Safety Authority and the Medical Bureau of Road Safety will continue. There are significant driver theory testing and driver testing backlogs at the Road Safety Authority due to the shutdown in the spring, with social distancing measures being an additional complication for the driving test. We are continuing to monitor the situation in conjunction with the Road Safety Authority. The Road Safety Authority is primarily self-financed and is continuing to meet its statutory obligations without requiring support funding in 2020.

In the maritime area, other essential safety investments that we make as a Department are seen across the work of the Irish Coast Guard. They are funded through our maritime transport and safety programme, programme C. Funding for the maritime programme in 2020 is at €118 million or 4% of the Vote. Most of that funding is directed to the Irish Coast Guard and the main cost here relates to the search and rescue helicopter contract. The programme also funds the Commissioners for Irish Lights which operate buoys and lighthouses, and keep seafarers and their cargoes safe while in Irish waters. We also cover various administrative costs associated with the Irish Maritime Administration. It is also important to note that we will be continuing the Coast Guard building programme to ensure that the volunteers have adequate facilities for their operations and equipment, and we are investing in IT infrastructure to enable the teams to enhance further how they work together.

An additional line with €15 million in funding has been added to the 2020 Revised Esti-

mates Volume to provide temporary public service obligation, PSO, support to ferry companies and ensure that supply chains are protected. I now expect that only a third of this funding will be required in 2020 and additional funding is not required as being forecasted in 2021.

In 2020, we will have built on progress of recent years. We will push our transport and communication strategies forward. We will continue to build and prepare for construction of a more mobile and connected country. We will continue to provide necessary support to alleviate pressure in public transport arising from the Covid-19 crisis. We will monitor supply and demand in the transport network closely to generate up-to-date forecasts, based on ongoing public health measures. We will place increased emphasis on the importance of active travel and on improving pedestrian and cycling facilities throughout the country.

I am more than happy to answer any questions on the 2020 Estimate of expenditure and investment for the services provided by my Department.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Minister of State, Deputy Naughton, for being available on the fringe of Dáil sittings to answer some of our questions. Chairman, is the format an exchange over and back with the Minister of State?

Chairman: Yes, it is entirely at the Deputy's discretion.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I ask about the Expressway bus service from Dublin to the regions. Three weeks ago, Bus Éireann indicated it was considering closing them early in 2021. They are essential, as the Minister of State will understand given that she is a Deputy from the west. If it was to withdraw, it would be punitive for the rural counties. Has progress been made on that? What are the real issues? Is it just funding or are there other issues with passenger restrictions that it feels are inhibitive at this time?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The NTA is monitoring the gaps being created in the bus routes. While it was a commercial decision by the company, at the same time the NTA has committed to looking at routes that are critical to ensuring we have connectivity. That work will be ongoing with the NTA. It was disappointing to see that news, but those routes were not commercially viable. The NTA will monitor and work with the Department on routes that will need that connectivity to ensure that passengers have a service.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: We are at the end of October. It would be good for everybody who uses that service if we could get some certainty before Christmas.

On the civil aviation programme, I welcome last week's announcement of the €10 million shared capital investment in Cork and Shannon airports. What is the breakdown of how that will be spent? Is funding planned in the very near future? I know the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, announced on Clare FM that a suite of measures would come before Cabinet this week to support aviation and the airports.

Mary Considine, the chief executive officer of Shannon Group, assured me in a phone conversation last week that she and her colleagues have the capability to roll out rigorous testing. They were waiting on green lighting. How is that progressing in the Department?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: As the Deputy knows, a suite of supports was announced at the outset of the pandemic, which I outlined to the committee, so he is very well aware of them - the temporary wage subsidy scheme, the commercial rates waivers, and access to liquidity funding through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, ISIF. In the 2021 budget we allo-

cated €21.3 million to our regional airports along with the €10 million the Deputy mentioned, which is capital funding. Airports will be asked to make applications to the Department for that capital funding. Obviously, we have put supports in place for the workers who have been severely affected by the news of Ryanair pulling its bases from Cork and Shannon airports. I have been in discussions with the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Humphreys, about contacting the local welfare offices as well. It is important to say that.

As the committee knows, at the Cabinet meeting on Tuesday we agreed to align ourselves with the EU traffic light system. We had an agreement at Cabinet this week on that approach and we will be coming back on it. There will be a high-level technical group within Departments monitoring it every two weeks. From midnight tonight, there will be no restrictions for travellers from a green list country travelling to Ireland. Many countries across Europe, including us, are on a red list. For orange and red list countries, we are asking people to restrict their movements for 14 days, as is currently the case for all travellers. For orange list countries, there will be an exemption from restricting movements if the person carries out a validated pre-departure test. The requirement for red list countries remains as it is at the moment and people will have to restrict their movements.

The high-level technical group will be looking at and assessing the types of testing we can carry out. As we know, the polymerase chain reaction, PCR, test is the gold standard. There is also work ongoing on other potential types of testing that could become available or be validated in the future. We want to leave that open in order that we could potentially use that for pre-departure tests.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I spoke about this matter in the Dáil last night with the Minister of State, Deputy Thomas Byrne. One of the Europe-wide failings of the traffic light system is that there is no uniformity in how amber and red regions are being treated. Incoming passengers in France will be treated quite differently from how we will treat them. Passengers must grapple with that, but from an airline's point of view there is uncertainty across the European Union regarding scheduling flights into spring 2021 and beyond. There are also measures lacking beyond the Union. We are very reliant in the mid-west on Shannon Airport and flights coming in from the US. There does not seem to have been any in-depth discussion about reactivating that air connectivity westbound to the United States. That is something that urgently needs to happen.

I will make a brief comment on rail, in which I see there is to be major investment. I spoke to one of the Minister of State's colleagues, Deputy Matthews, last week over tea break. He is a huge advocate of rail travel but I made the point to him that it is unaffordable for many people. I would love to take the train to Dublin every day but it is simply not affordable. The car is probably half the price. Pricing must be tackled. I lived in Belgium and the Czech Republic for a year, split on a six-month basis, and I could travel 300 km or 400 km by rail for €12 or €15. It was very viable and that is what really got people using it. It has to make economic sense.

The other point I wish to touch on is the Coonagh to Knockalisheen distributor road in County Clare, which is a phased project. Phase 1 is getting under way, but phase 2 was not mentioned in budget 2021. Many questions are being asked about it in the region. It will be an information highway between Limerick Institute of Technology, LIT, which will get university status in March 2021, and the University of Limerick, UL, campus. Is that project progressing in the Department?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: As regards the Deputy's latter point, all the road projects

mentioned in budget 2021 will be under construction in 2021 and that is why they were named. In general, further phases that are not ready will come on board as the designs and planning are completed. Regarding what was announced in budget 2021, the first phase will be under construction next year. I can come back to the Deputy and get the Minister to come back to him with more detail on that matter. I know officials are listening to this meeting so we can get him the exact state of play on phase 2 of that project.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: My final questions relate to driver licensing. I have a number of quick questions which I will bundle together. Will there be an extension for those whose licences are expiring in the coming weeks? Will driving licence centres be allowed take appointments for renewals or will they facilitate renewals via the postal system during this period? People have to present in person at the desk which causes many problems for people. What is the position on someone driving with an expired licence while awaiting an appointment in a licensing centre? Is there clarity on that? It would be useful if the Department issued a circular or clarification on that issue.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I thank the Deputy. These are very important questions, especially now that we are in level 5. A number of services, including the driving test service, the National Driver Licence Service, NDLS, the driver theory test and the national car test, NCT, are considered essential services. However, there is a backlog and many Deputies have been in contact with the Department about it. Due to health protocols, we had to shut down driver testing in February. There are health concerns about someone sitting in someone else's car, which is an uncontrolled environment, so we had to reduce the number of driving tests taking place every day. I have been assured this is an essential service and we will be prioritising essential workers getting tests and licences. If someone is an essential worker and is waiting for a new driving test appointment, he or she can email urgentdrivingtest@rsa.ie and he or she will be prioritised. Anyone who has an appointment is advised to go to the test centre. It is an essential service. People should not cancel that appointment unless they cannot attend. Obviously if they cannot attend, they should cancel because there is a huge waiting list. All those services are seen as essential.

The RSA stated last week that anyone over 70 does not have to present in person to the NDLS to renew a licence. If a person's licence is about to expire and he or she is over 70, he or she will be sent an application pack in the post. People do not have to contact the NDLS but if they already have an appointment online, they should cancel that and return the application by post. They do not have to present.

I will come back to the Deputy with the specifics on his other questions.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the Minister of State for the update she has given. I will pick up on some of the questions Deputy Crowe has raised. Does the Minister of State know if there are plans to increase testing capacity for driver testing? Are there plans to recruit more testers at this time? If so, when might they be in place?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: During the initial lockdown, all testing stopped and it slowly opened up again over July and August. As I alluded to, the issue related to the health and safety protocols. The RSA is looking at rehiring temporary testers who had been laid off during the initial lockdown and bringing them on board. There is another cohort of temporary driver testers whose contracts will expire this month or next, and the RSA is looking at keeping them on and hiring further driving testers as well. It is important to say that because of the level 5 restrictions, the number of tests that can happen per day will be restricted. We are in a real

dilemma here. I know people are concerned about trying to get tests but we are moving as fast as we can and trying to do it as safely as we can.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I raise a related issue that has come to my attention. I am sure it has come to the attention of other committee members as well. Driving instructors are identified as essential workers but they have been experiencing difficulties with accessing testing centres even just to wash their hands. They have many sanitisation protocols now because there is usually a pre-runaround lesson with the person doing the test. They wipe the car down before and after the tester gets in. There is a lot of sanitisation. I have been contacted by a number of instructors dealing with a number of testing centres and I just want to raise it as an issue. Maybe the Minister of State could follow up on that with the RSA because it will be increasingly important as we try to get through level 5. I thank the Minister of State.

I want to follow up on a point Deputy Crowe raised regarding the Expressway. I support that and make a particular case for Belfast. It is the second largest city on the island and I hope that it will be included in the NTA's assessment of essential routes. I hope there will be consideration of reinstatement or extension of the Expressway service or some equivalent.

I have a question about airport Covid-19 testing. This morning, the committee received an update from HIQA about its assessment of testing platforms, specifically with regard to rapid antigen testing and other forms, with questions over all of them, including PCR. As the Minister of State said, PCR is the standard. That work has been done by HIQA. It will present that work and may already have submitted it to the Government. It seems clear that at present, PCR is the main viable option. HIQA suggests that we should move to clinical validation in the appropriate settings, so ports and airports in our case. Has the Minister of State received that report from HIQA? Is it under consideration? Are we in a position to move towards clinical validation for PCR departure testing at our ports and airports?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: It is important to mention our ports too, which will need to have these testing facilities. PCR is recognised by the Department of Health as the standard test. There was an understandable call from the aviation industry that it wants a rapid, efficient, low-cost test that will help passengers, not add to the financial burden of connectivity. To answer the Deputy's questions, there is a range of tests such as antigen tests and LAMP tests. Work has been done on validating those. We have to work with the Department of Health to validate those, so it is not just the Department of Transport working on those. It also includes the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Business, Enterprise and Innovation. It is a cross-governmental approach. We have to ensure that we are not impacting on the PCR capacity of the country's health system. As those extra tests become validated, they will be very welcome.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Is the State considering bearing some of the costs or is it expected that it will be borne by passengers themselves, though I presume it will not be the airports or ports?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I expect the cost will be borne by the passenger. It would have to be. People could be travelling to Ireland from across the world. They would have to ensure that they had their own pre-departure test, validated, recognised and certified within their own country, and there may be a request to have another test here on arrival, depending on the location the passenger has come from, to ensure that we adhere to safety protocols. We want to get people back to flying again when the time is right. Some 90% of passengers who flew to Ireland this time last year are currently in red zone countries. Nobody will want to come to Ireland

at present because we are all in lockdown, but this prepares us for the weeks and months ahead.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We had replies to parliamentary questions about the passenger locator form to state that it was at a 70% rate of follow-up and is now only at 18%. There was a report in the media about an individual case which was probably an example of the type of thing that can happen when we do not have adequate controls and follow-up at our ports and airports.

With regard to the Estimates and Brexit contingency, specifically road haulage and the land bridge, what plans and contingencies are in place for road haulage? The Minister of State mentioned a public service obligation for a number of ferry routes. There has been a call from hauliers for a specific public service obligation for ferries directly to France. Is that being considered? Is there funding in the Estimates allocated for that?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Brexit is a significant concern within the Department on a number of levels, from public transport to aviation, at the ports, and in the road haulage sector. We have had continued engagement with the haulage sector. It is rightly concerned about the backlog and disruption at the UK land bridge. It is important to say that even if there is a deal about this, there will be disruption at the UK land bridge. We call on businesses and the industry to investigate direct routes to the Continent. There are existing direct ferry routes to the Continent. I have been told by the shipping industry that routes are available, reliable and have capacity. We ask businesses to talk to shipping companies to assess their needs and to trial those direct routes to the Continent now, and not to wait until 31 December to do that. This is the window that we have. Assess, communicate and then test and trial it. Act now to make the switch.

The shipping industry is resilient. It proved that throughout Covid. It is not the same as Brexit but the industry has assured us that it has capacity and availability. It is up to businesses not to wait until 31 December. They should take it on themselves to communicate with shipping and logistics companies, assess their own supply chain, and try to get on those direct routes to the Continent.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Regarding supports for travel agents, will they be eligible for the Covid restrictions support scheme? I am conscious of the €15 million allocated for the travel package fund. Will the Minister of State outline her engagement and supports for the sector?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I met with the travel agents and had much communication with them. I share the concerns of Deputies here. Travel agents put in hard work over the past few months, dealing with difficult situations of people who were losing out on their package holidays. We put €15 million in place in the budget to support travel agencies in the event of them becoming insolvent. There are talks between the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform about the new Covid restrictions support scheme to see if travel agents can avail of it. I hope that will be the case. To answer the Deputy's question, there are ongoing discussions about it. I know it is critical that the travel agents get that support.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the Minister of State and thank her for her presentation and engagement with the committee. With regard to some critical roads projects, the Minister of State referred to the Coonagh-Knockalisheen distributor road. That is phase 1 of the northern distributor roads project. I welcome the progress made on phase 1 but phase 2 is of critical importance to the mid-west region. It is of strategic importance to business, to ease congestion within Limerick. It will also open access to the University of Limerick and facilitate its

further expansion. The Minister of State may not be aware but there is a proposal to establish a strategic development zone on the grounds of the University of Limerick. This project is of considerable importance and it should be included in the capital plan being put together, which will be in place for a number of years. I am aware that Clare County Council is driving this project in conjunction with the Limerick local authorities. Will the Minister of State give some comfort relating to that project? If she does not have the information today, she might come back to me about it.

There has been much development work at the Killaloe bypass and Shannon bridge crossing, which the Minister of State might give an update on.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Tenders have been received for the Coonagh-Knockalisheen distributor road and the contract is ready to be awarded. A submission was sent to the Minister on 16 October 2020, recommending that this important regeneration project in Moyross be approved. There is provision in the regional and local road proposed allocations for national development projects in 2021 to accommodate this project. I can come back to the Deputy on specific roads. It is under the remit of the Minister, Deputy Ryan, as to where they are at. Anything that was announced in budget 2021 is ready to go. The work has been done. They will be under construction in 2021. There is more work to be carried out on the other projects before they are ready to be rolled out. I can come back to the Deputy with specifics on that.

Deputy Joe Carey: Yes, specifically in relation to phase 2 of the Limerick northern distributor road, which is of huge importance. On bus services, there is a proposal to establish a town bus service for Ennis. It is incorporated in the Ennis 2040 strategy that will soon be published by Clare County Council. Does the Minister of State have any update on that? Clare County Council has liaised with the National Transport Authority on it. It would be of huge importance to the town. If she does not have that detail now, perhaps the Minister of State will come back to me on it.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I will come back to the Deputy. Again, that is under the Minister's remit. I will revert back to Deputy Carey in writing on where it is at.

Deputy Joe Carey: With regard to rail, I was Chairman of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development. A working group was set up between the Department of Transport, Irish Rail, Clare County Council, the Office of Public Works, OPW, and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, to consider the flooding of the rail line between Ennis and Limerick at Ballycar. Has the Minister of State any update on the Department's input into that report? Is the Department willing to provide funding to alleviate this problem? It is an annual issue whereby the rail line is covered in floodwaters for months at a time. It is an important point within the western rail corridor between Ennis and Limerick.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I can do that. I will get a briefing for the Deputy on that with regard to funding. Perhaps the Deputy might write formally to the Department with that specific request and I will get him an up-to-date briefing on it. That is under the Minister's remit and I do not have the detail of that exact project, so I do not want to say something to the Deputy today that is incorrect.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the progress made on Shannon Airport and the €5 million awarded in the previous budget. Does the Minister of State know what specific project it will be allocated to in Shannon or will it be up to the Shannon Group to push ahead with a particular capital project it has in mind? Has the Minister of State had interaction with the Shannon Group

on that?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: It will be up to the Shannon Group to put forward an application to the Department on those capital projects, as will Cork Airport. That would then be assessed by the Department. I am aware of the concerns of Deputy Carey and his colleagues on Shannon Airport, but I can assure him that we acknowledge the importance of connectivity for the mid-west and the need to support the airport, the workers in the region and the Shannon Group in its entirety. Covid-19 means aviation is in an evolving crisis.

Our decision at Cabinet around testing and trying to open up connectivity in a safe way while adhering to all the health protocols will help the likes of Shannon Airport also. The number one ask from the aviation industry when it met the Minister, Deputy Ryan, me and our officials, was to open up that connectivity. We have to be cognisant that most of Europe is now red zone countries. Now is a good time, however, to start planning and preparing for that preflight testing regime. I know the Deputy's question was on capital funding, but part of the concern is about attracting tourism when we do rebound, along with foreign direct investment for the Shannon area and for the mid-west. A number of different supports will be needed.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the Minister of State's comments. It is important that we get the strategic routes such as Shannon-Heathrow and the north American traffic such as to Boston and JFK. Will the Minister of State confirm that she has had engagement with Aer Lingus with regard to providing supports to them to protect those strategic routes? If so, when does she expect an announcement on that matter?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: We have had ongoing engagement with all our airlines and we have provided a number of supports. They have availed of a number of the supports, including the temporary wage subsidy scheme and commercial rates waivers. We have continued this engagement. It is also important to say that decisions made by Ryanair or Aer Lingus are commercial decisions and we understand there is a global crisis in aviation. If we do not have passengers flying, then it is not commercially viable for these airlines. We have to put in place supports for our airports and the workers, and give a clear indication to the aviation sector of where we are going with regard to testing so that, when things do turn, we will enable passengers, business people, families and friends to travel safely. Every single country is grappling with this testing regime and how to roll it out in a safe way.

Deputy Joe Carey: I welcome the Minister of State's comments on this. We have had a lot of engagement and next week the committee will speak about it a little bit more. I welcome the progress the Minister of State has reported to date and the setting up of a technical group to look at this question in real detail. Perhaps it should have happened a number of months ago, but nonetheless we are where we are. Perhaps the Minister of State will indicate when the work on testing will be concluded? The Dublin Airport Authority, DAA, came before the committee last week and told us it could roll out 15,000 tests a day. The CEO of Shannon Group, Mary Considine, indicated to me that they can facilitate private contractors who can deliver these testing facilities at the airport. It brings Ireland in line.

I welcome that Ireland has signed up to the EU traffic light travel system. In practical terms, how many countries are on the green list, the amber list and the red list currently?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: On the timeline, part of the reason for the delay was because Ireland had to sign up to the EU traffic light approach and that Council meeting took place last week. We had to align with our EU counterparts and see what that decision was going to be.

From midnight tonight, 90% of the passengers coming in will be restricting their movements for 14 days. There are not very many people travelling from green list countries. It is about 10% of the passengers who would have come here this time last year. The amber list country requirement will become effective at midnight on Sunday 8 November, with a pre-departure test for people travelling from amber list countries. The red list countries, like Ireland, will be as it is for the moment where people will have to restrict their movements for 14 days. The high-level technical group will be looking at testing regimes for red list countries and how it would work.

Deputy Joe Carey: The Minister of State referred to 8 November. Is that a significant date? Would she hope that Ireland would have its own regime in at that time?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: A decision on the amber list country passengers coming here with a pre-departure test will be effective from the 8 November. There will be clarity. If a person is travelling to Ireland from a country in an amber zone, there will be clarity on what he or she needs to do with regard to a pre-departure test before coming to Ireland. This is important because many of our friends and families may be returning home for Christmas and we are very conscious of the timing. Currently, we are asking people to restrict their movements for 14 days. This is an extra check and is helping as a safety protocol for people when flying, which will be more effective than what we currently have.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I thank the Minister of State for her attendance at the committee and for her detailed submission. It is very welcome to see the increase in the Minister of State's departmental budget, which is a significant increase from budgets before. It is reassuring to see the focus on investment in public transport. As a country, we planned around cars for the past 40 or 50 years. As such, we have ended up in circumstances in which there is major congestion and urban sprawl, at least before Covid. Emissions from transport have been spiralling upwards and we have had air quality issues in our towns, cities and villages. It is no wonder that we get this if we plan for it for 40 or 50 years.

Our current focus is Covid related, which is correct, but we must also think forward to a time when we will be Covid free, which I believe will happen. I do not know when it will be but that is what we are all working towards. Investment in public transport takes time. Capital investment is required and projects take time to design and to get up to speed. Land acquisition may be required. It is timely that we are aiming this budget towards public transport investment.

Let me move on to some of the transport areas. Rural bus services were touched on earlier. Deputy Cathal Crowe mentioned the Expressway service. It is critical that we provide options to people in smaller towns and villages so they can leave the car behind. It will never be possible to provide a service with a ten-minute frequency, as BusConnects could for a highly populated area, but it is still necessary to provide a service that is attractive and offers an alternative to driving a car. It opens up options for employment, recreation and education. Someone who lives in a town or village does not have to be car dependent if there is a bus service in the morning.

In the Minister of State's statement, she mentioned investment to maintain the steady state on the railways. We need to have a higher ambition, whereby, instead of maintaining the steady state, we improve frequencies and levels of service and give people more options. Therefore, we have to up our game. There are towns in my constituency, such as Tinahealy and Rathnew, where people are forced to own a car if they want to get to work in the nearest population centre, such as Gorey or Arklow. That adds a cost. In this regard, consider the argument that a service

must be pulled if it is no longer viable. If a service is made so unattractive and unreliable that it is not an alternative, it is of no use and will not be used. If appropriate services are provided, people will use them.

Let me move on to the urban transport brief. It is positive to see the investment in the budget for BusConnects. It is an important project for the greater Dublin area. It will increase frequency. It gives options in that it will reconfigure the bus service into orbital and radial routes, which we should have done a long time ago. It would have been quite easy to do because it just means changing bus routes around. There is now an option whereby a passenger does not need to go into the city centre to get back out again. For example, a passenger going from Bray to Tallaght does not have to go into the city centre and back out again. I am happy, therefore, to see BusConnects proceed and the investment in it.

With regard to active travel and transport, it is really positive to see the increased budget. There is a huge desire for active travel. Every person in the room will have seen the uptake in cycling during the Covid period as a result of a reduction in capacity on public transport. People have come to realise that there are routes on which they can cycle to work or to recreational facilities. They recognise all the options that exist.

The investment in greenways is welcome. We should regard greenways not only as tourist attractions or as infrastructure for people who might want to go to a county for a week or two on holidays but also as attractive commuter links from town to town, especially where they are off-road and provide safe, segregated infrastructure. I am delighted to see the investment in greenways.

Safer Routes to School is a related matter. Most children would like to be able to cycle or walk to school safely. In the 1970s and 1980s, many more children were walking and cycling to school. Much of the time nowadays, it is unsafe to do so. When I get the opportunity to walk my own children to school in the morning - I am fortunate to live within walking distance of a school - my heart is in my mouth looking at children struggling through traffic and at roads we have given over to cars and not given over fairly to other forms of transport that are healthier. I am delighted to see the investment in these.

The Minister of State mentioned the investment in the Luas. It has been a massive success. I am glad to see the investment in the additional, longer carriages. A number of Luas projects are in the design and feasibility stages. We should actively pursue these. The existing Luas lines have been very successful and are absolutely jammed at commuter times. It is a little uncomfortable but I suppose this is an indication of success. Public transport should be busy. It is an indication that it is well designed and functioning. It should not be half empty. There are a number of routes on which I really hope to see progress. The Luas route to Bray has been talked about for so long. It is dependent on a metro south upgrade. A Luas to Finglas is another viable concept, as is the DART+ proposal. Electrification to Drogheda and, I hope, beyond, and also to Hazelhatch and Maynooth, makes perfect sense. These are major commuter growth areas. Before Covid, the roads to these locations were absolutely jammed. Commuters should be given the opportunity to use an electrified rail route. It can add capacity. More trains can be put on the line and there is better acceleration and braking capability. As we move from diesel-dependent units to electrified units, it will obviously fit very well with our desire to reduce carbon emissions in the transport sector.

I suggested to the National Transport Authority, NTA, two or three years ago that it look further south. Many of the transport objectives in its strategy were focused on the north and

west and did not seem to focus much on the south. I asked the authority about the electrification of the lines from Greystones to Wicklow. Wicklow is set to grow under the regional transport strategy. I will continue to engage with the Department on that to examine the feasibility of electrification to Wicklow.

I have spent all my time welcoming where the investment is going. It is positive, which needs to be noted. With regard to electric vehicles, there seems to be a massive desire in Ireland to purchase larger vehicles, such as SUVs and crossovers. They are expensive. An electric crossover model costs €40,000 to €50,000. There are perfectly good, adequate smaller electric vehicles that can be obtained at a much more affordable price. Will the Minister of State consider incentivising the purchasing of smaller, more affordable adequate vehicles rather than the bigger, more fashionable ones that may not be required, especially in urban areas? I understand fully that there is a need for SUVs and 4x4s and rural areas. In urban areas, they are totally unnecessary.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I concur that the rolling out of public transport and sustainable mobility is crucial. We have seen a great example of greater buy-in during the Covid period, when we have all been locked down. We have noted the importance of safe walking and cycling routes. This relates to the Safer Routes to School programme, which is under my remit. It is not just about safe routes to school but also about safe routes within rural towns and villages. It is important to get the message across that this is not just an urban or city initiative.

The Minister, Deputy Ryan, and I started straight off the bat, through the July stimulus, by asking local authorities to identify shovel-ready projects within their towns, villages and cities. We provided significant funding in this regard. The initiatives are now being rolled out and will be completed by the end of November. It was a challenge for the local authorities because some of them were probably taken by surprise by the significant funding. They had to grapple to try to get the works done. I would like to see a multi-annual programme allowing the local authorities to plan, over a number of years, for the rolling out of walking and cycling infrastructure across their areas. When I meet local councillors, I ask them to identify the areas in their own local authority areas that need to be invested in. It is only through our local councillors as well as the executive within the local authorities across the country that we can identify and spearhead these initiatives. I know the goodwill when local communities get a safe footpath or cycleway. We need to look at the safe routes to schools outside our school settings and this is where the schools need to work directly with the local authorities. I appeal to local authorities to work on this because the funding will be there and there are health benefits, which the Deputy mentioned. The cycle buses going to schools, which we have in my constituency of Galway West, are so effective and an advertisement in themselves. We do not want a cycle bus but just that children can cycle safely on cycle routes to school eventually, so they do not need these organised cycle buses, though they are fantastic.

The rural transport programme now operates under LocalLink. The NTA has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. There are 15 LocalLink offices around the country and they manage the delivery of that service on behalf of the NTA. They are critical in our rural towns and villages to ensure we have connectivity for employment and health services, and access to social and educational opportunities. I do not need to tell Deputies about the importance of that. There has been a substantial increase in funding for LocalLink services since 2016, going from €12.2 million in 2016 to over €21 million in 2019. In 2020, the total amount allocated for LocalLink services is €23.4 million.

Deputy Steven Matthews: Will the Minister of State come back to me on the electrical

vehicles suggestion?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I will come back to the Deputy on all the issues, and that goes for every Deputy.

Chairman: We have time at the end of the meeting. Depending on numbers, we can accommodate Deputy Matthews. I call Deputy Duncan Smith

Deputy Duncan Smith: I can say to Deputy Matthews that I would love a list of affordable electrical vehicles because all such vehicles of any size seem to be unaffordable at the moment.

Deputy Steven Matthews: I do not want to name a particular brand but I will send the Deputy the details of one that was announced this month.

Deputy Duncan Smith: I welcome the Minister of State. As she is aware, this committee has put front and centre of its initial work the issue of testing and getting our aviation sector ready for when safe and increased travel can happen, when, hopefully, our part of the world can knock the pandemic back. I am encouraged by some of the Minister of State's words today. She mentioned it is a good time to start planning for this testing regime. The aviation task force reported in July recommending a testing regime and we have lost that time but Deputy Naughton is the first Minister or Minister of State who has spoken in the Chamber or in committee who seems proactively ready to move forward on this, which is encouraging. I ask that it be moved forward as quickly as possible. This six-week period, as difficult as it is going to be, provides an opportunity when we come out of it for the aviation industry to have this regime in place. This is the missing piece for those involved. The Minister of State said their one request was to protect connectivity but they know they need a testing regime to do that. She said many countries are grappling with the provision of it. Many of them are no longer grappling and have already provided it. We are hoping to welcome next week an individual who assisted Rome airport in rolling out a pretty good testing regime. I hope the Minister of State and her officials will tune in and listen to that. Much has been and will be said on the matter, but it has to be acknowledged that the Minister of State's briefing and opening statement sets out a great deal of money and investment.

On the PSO for public transport, the Minister of State stated that €766 million, which is an eye-watering figure, is available for PSO services throughout the country to ensure such services remain viable given the challenges of a 50% reduction in maximum capacity. With the move to level 5, public transport goes to 25% of capacity. Will that €766 million be enough to retain the viability of those services going into a six-week period of 25% capacity?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: We do not know but we are monitoring it because we know how critical public transport is for our communities. That is why it was part of the budget and contingency funds were put in. There is a national economic plan coming up. Our biggest challenge, and it is not just Ireland's challenge because it is global, is the uncertainty of this and that is why we had an €18 billion budget allocated. We are looking at protecting as many sectors as possible, ensuring we are protecting public health at the same time. We are asking people not to leave their homes under level 5 unless it is for essential purposes or exercise within 5 km. We all know the protocols around that. We want to emerge from this six-week level 5 situation in a better place where the virus is contained and, at the same time, get our public transport and other sectors up and running as quickly and safely as possible.

Deputy Duncan Smith: The Government has been successful in ensuring public transport

workers and infrastructure feel like they have been insulated for the most part. The Expressway service is a non-PSO service run by Bus Éireann and it is a vital service that must be retained in some fashion. The PSO services have been comforted by the funding that has been there this year and I hope that will continue.

Many projects such as MetroLink, the DART upgrade and BusConnects are in desk-based phases of their evolution. What impact will Covid have on the furthering of these projects in terms of delays or are they still on track?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: On MetroLink, two rounds of public consultation have been undertaken by the NTA and TII. The finalised business case is expected to be submitted by the end of this year and then brought to the Government for approval in line with the public spending codes. It is expected that the railway order, which is the planning permission application, will be lodged with An Bord Pleanála in 2021 and construction can begin once that procedure is complete.

We are all in the area of essential work so whatever work can continue should do so, if possible remotely. An Bord Pleanála is carrying out oral hearings via video call. It is important we ensure that as many sectors as possible continue to work on the construction of these critical pieces of infrastructure, which will be important for our economy. I do not think there should be any delay in relation to that but we have to see where we stand with level 5 after six weeks.

Deputy Duncan Smith: That is encouraging. People expect and understand minor bumps in the road with regard to projects, given the year we are having. From what I can see and what the Department of Transport has published, the major projects still seem to be moving forward more or less at the pace that has been set out. Hopefully, that will continue.

I will make a small point the Minister of State might consider. During the previous lockdown earlier this year, the Dublin Port tunnel, which operates at €10 during peak hours, southbound in the morning and northbound in the evening, reduced to €3 and that was seen as a measure for essential workers. There are many people living in north Dublin, Louth and Meath who work in hospitals or critical infrastructure in south Dublin. Is that something the Minister of State might consider re-implementing for the next six weeks? She does not need to answer that now but she might come back to me on it.

A great deal of funding is going towards active travel, which is fantastic. Walking and cycling to school safely is a key priority for all of us. I live in an estate that is right beside two schools that one does not have to cross a road to get to and I still see parents, even on a fine morning, drive their kids 50 yards up the road to school, which can be frustrating. I am not sure what more we can do for people like that - probably nothing. Correct me if I am wrong, but the Government announced that it would aim to spend the equivalent of €1 million per day on cycle lanes. I do not see that matched up here. I might be thinking of two different pots and confusing a promise with reality. Would the Minister of State be able to fill that gap for me in terms of the funding for cycle lanes in particular?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: Some €366 million was announced in the 2021 budget for walking and cycling infrastructure and with 365 days in a year, that is more than €1 million a day. I will return to the point I made to Deputy Matthews about the call on local authorities. The funding will be there. It is about identifying projects. As I said, the July stimulus package may have caught some local authorities slightly on the hop, which is why we asked for projects that were ready to go and did not need planning or compulsory purchase orders. It was for

footpaths that needed upgrading, segregated cycleways and other projects that could be done easily. We want to continue that.

The Deputy mentioned schools. We need to try to work with schools to target people who do not need to drive 1 km or a couple of hundred metres to drop off children outside the school. That is not going to change without consultation between school management and local authorities. We need to work and provide the infrastructure to have safe zones around schools that will enable parents to feel safe in dropping off their children.

Deputy Duncan Smith: On the issue of active travel, I believe there is a lot of low-hanging fruit by way of paths and junctions. We need to put people with disabilities in the frame. These are works that do not require planning permission. There are backlogs of minor works that make major differences in operations departments of councils up and down the country. I hope that this funding will trickle down there and pressure can be put on CEOs and directors of services to make sure that is done.

Deputy Michael Lowry: I welcome the Minister of State to our meeting and thank her for her attendance, informative presentation and personal knowledge of the brief. I am already briefed, in the sense that some of the questions I had intended to ask have already been asked and there is no point in repetition.

What level of driving tests is being conducted at the moment? Based on the feedback that I am getting from applicants for driving tests in Tipperary, the system would appear to be at a standstill. The waiting list is getting longer and longer and, as a result, many young people who require a test are inconvenienced because they cannot access the service and are therefore unable to drive for essential purposes. What is the current period of delay from the time an application is made to an actual test?

I will also ask about Bus Éireann and the Expressway service. Bus services on routes from Cork to Dublin and Limerick to Dublin, which takes in a large part of Tipperary, are under a cloud at the moment. Bus Éireann has effectively said that it is going to dispense with them. Towns along the route from Limerick, including Nenagh, Toomevara and Roscrea, and along the route from Cork, including Cashel, will be affected. Cashel is a busy town and it is crucial to have connectivity. For many, that bus service is the only connectivity. It is an important service that is valued locally and used extensively in Cashel. Is the decision to curtail the Expressway service final or is it under review? Does the Minister of State understand the absolute necessity for Expressway services to be continued and can she intervene to see if they can be restored?

The Minister of State said that there is an increased budget for rural transport services that respond to local needs. Some €2 million is available in funding for the launch of new services in 2020. How is that additional fund accessed? Is it by way of application and, if so, what are the criteria and procedures to seek those funds? This is obviously important in rural areas.

What is the position regarding private bus operators? Many of them are effectively non-viable. They have had no income, despite the fact that they have overheads, for the past seven to eight months. They are leaderless and rudderless at the moment and have an uncertain future. The Minister of State mentioned in her statement that there is €100 million in additional funding. Who is in charge of that fund? Who makes the decision on how that funding is allocated? Is that still open or have decisions been made on it?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the Deputy. That €100 million for private bus

operators and Local Link is managed by the National Transport Authority, NTA, and applications to access that funding happen through the agency. It is identifying the gaps in service as a result of the cessation of the Expressway service. That work is ongoing and falls under the remit of the NTA.

The Deputy also raised the issue of driving tests. Eight driving tests were carried out per day before the onset of the pandemic and five tests per day are currently being carried out. In March, during complete lockdown, zero tests were being carried out and, as we opened up, five tests per day were being carried out because of issues around having to sanitise the test centres, minimising the numbers of people attending and ensuring the sanitisation of the cars into which testers were sitting. Essential services will be prioritised. If people have a driving test already and know that they can proceed, I ask them to proceed with the test. It is an essential service. Anyone who is an essential worker, and www.gov.ie outlines who qualifies as an essential worker, for example healthcare workers, can contact urgentdrivingtest@rsa.ie.

To answer the Deputy's question, there is a large backlog in testing and it is of concern. People are not able to access tests. We have been grappling with this and trying to rehire temporary testers who were laid off during the initial lockdown. Another cohort whose employment was due to cease this month and next month will be kept on. We are increasing the number of testers. I suppose the fundamental issue is the amount of testers that we can have within the centre at one time and the amount of people who are looking for a test that can attend. It is a matter of balancing the health protocol and the backlog. At the same time, we are looking at procuring further testers to come on board over the next few months. It is an issue of concern for people. I say again that essential workers can contact urgentdrivingtest@rsa.ie for priority.

Deputy Michael Lowry: Does the Minister of State have a response to the questions I asked about Bus Éireann Expressway and the effect on Cashel and Nenagh?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: The NTA is assessing the gaps in service and will determine which services need to be put back in place. That is ongoing work within the NTA. I can ask the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, to come back to the Deputy more specifically on that matter. That is his area.

Deputy James O'Connor: I thank the Minister of State for her engagement on the issues facing the aviation sector. I gave an extensive commentary at the most recent sitting of the committee on what was required to try to assist our airports and it is fantastic to see that the Government stepped in and provided that support. I know it is appreciated and it will be an ongoing situation to try to help the aviation sector in the next number of years. It is not going to happen overnight and a lot of other issues need to be discussed but first and foremost, implementing financial supports was welcome. I know it is appreciated in Cork and I am conscious that I am only Deputy here from Cork county. I sincerely encourage the Minister of State to continue her engagement with the airport and the DAA.

It was welcome to see a €1 billion increase in investment from the Department of Transport in the budget for 2020. I have had engagement with the local authorities, especially Cork County Council, which is the local authority for the entirety of my constituency. There has been a degree of concern around the funding allocated and the inability of the council in some cases to get the opportunity to fulfil or to get through the entire amount of money allocated for different grants and so on. The active travel grant was flagged with me. There was concern around the lack of timing to plan for this. The grant is an excellent measure and I really welcome it. I am an avid walker and I know it will make a fantastic difference around the county. Fair play to the

Department of Transport for putting proper investment in place. There was a degree of anxiety relating to local authorities that have ongoing projects. They want to try to get proper timing and planning in place so that they can actually spend the money allocated. Can the Minister of State look into ways the funding could be carried on from 2020 into 2021?

There is a bad situation in Cork County Council. We know Cork County Council has one of the lowest funding rates per linear metre in the country. It comes down to economies of scale and the fact that it is the largest local authority in terms of geographical size and it has the largest road network. Unfortunately, I would be the first person to tell the committee that it is not good on the ground. It is certainly an area in respect of which I call on the Minister of State to reach out to the director of roads. I know the Minister of State has engaged with him already. The council staff are doing excellent work. They are doing their best, but when it comes to funding the council is in a bad situation. I was a member of the transport committee in Cork County Council before I was elected to the Dáil. Certainly, it was in a bad place with funding. Perhaps this could be one area the Minister of State might get an opportunity to look at in the months ahead and coming into 2021.

Another area where I have done significant work since I began my political career has been the relationship around Bus Éireann's Expressway services and its public service obligation services. I spoke in the Dáil about this when the Minister of State was present. This is really an area on which the Government could focus in the coming years. We could have a significant improvement in the percentage of people in the community using public transport services to get to and from work. I know the pandemic has changed people's lives and the way they live. It might be a long time before we see a major increase in the number of people using public transport services but we should start putting a plan in place now, while there is an opportunity and while things are fairly quiet with public transport companies, to try to see how we can improve on it.

There is one particular area in County Cork that needs to be addressed. I know the Cabinet signed off on the contract for the Dunkettle interchange. One problem that always bothered me was the fact there are no public transport services servicing the large employers on the south side of Cork city with the major residential areas like Middleton, Carrigwohill and Youghal on the far side. Thousands of people are commuting up and down in their cars every day. The only reason they are not utilising public transport services is, frankly, that there is no option. A motorist who goes through the tunnel in Cork has access to Mahon Point, Ringaskiddy, Cork University Hospital and the university and colleges. This is a great chance for the Government to look at the services throughout Cork city and county and consider how they could improve. We need to look at how people in the metropolitan towns are getting in and out to the city and to and from work. I was on Cork radio recently. I suggested that Cork could address this under the Cork metropolitan transport area strategy. I said there was perhaps potential for a Cork bus service to be the same as the service in Dublin, whereby there is a focus on Cork as a county rather than having Bus Éireann trying to manage the entire country with public service obligation services. There are several problems with this. Even from a reliability perspective, a great deal of money is going to PSO services. The return to the public could certainly be improved on. I do not mean that as a criticism but I certainly believe there is an opportunity for the Minister of State to take some time to look at that. I would welcome any engagement the Minister of State could have with me on that. I will give her an opportunity to respond.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Deputy O'Connor referred to the July stimulus. This issue has come up. We have talked to local authority chief executives. There is concern about the

November deadline and completing the July stimulus projects. I have said to them in my meetings with them that they should work as fast as they can and get as many of these projects up and running and under way. A legislative provision allows some capital to be carried forward into next year. I urge them to really try to get the works done and to prioritise them. I know some local authorities have left other projects, for which they have received funding, on the backburner to get this done. I know Cork County Council and Cork City Council have ambitious plans and put in very good submissions on active travel, and I commend them on that.

There is an issue throughout the country. It is not only about funding. Sometimes it is about the resources too, including the technical and engineering experience needed to roll out these projects. That is something we are looking at with the National Transport Authority. We are looking at how to do this strategically to ensure this funding is used. Local authorities have to lead but we may need technical expertise for active travel measures. That is something I am looking at currently. We need to do it in an effective way. It is not simply a matter of appointing someone. It should be the role of a person to roll out these active travel measures. I hear the message from Deputy O'Connor loud and clear. The funding is positive.

Deputy O'Connor mentioned the issue of bus services and public transport. We have this issue in my city of Galway as well. The issue is with public transport and having an efficient service. People will use it if it is available. The NTA will be looking at that. The local authority will be in regular contact with the NTA around lack of service provision and where it is needed in the county. We can address this through engagement and highlighting the areas where we have a population mass and people at work and where there is demand. I urge the local authorities to engage with the NTA in this regard as well.

I recognise the concerns raised by Deputy O'Connor around the airport. This is of critical importance to the Government. We need to ensure we support Cork. The DAA has done considerable work in respect of testing as well and this will benefit Cork as well as our regional airports when we roll it out.

Deputy James O'Connor: My thanks to the Minister of State for the feedback. I will offer some simple suggestions to her in terms of giving people a greater impression on reliability of public transport services. This is a big problem in rural towns and villages, especially in my constituency. Live feedback signs would help. I would really like to see an opportunity for Bus Éireann to put in place live feedback signs, like they have in Dublin for Dublin Bus services, in some of the rural towns. It would give people the impression that they know when the bus will arrive. That comes up repeatedly. I get many calls to my office from people who are unsure whether they have missed the bus or whether it is coming or on the way. There is no reason places like Killeagh and Castlemartyr, which are being serviced by Expressway and Bus Éireann PSO services on a main arterial route connecting to Cork city, should not have this infrastructure.

Another area where we could make fundamental changes to transport structure in Cork is the fare structure. The green commuter zone area is not spread out wide enough throughout the county. This impacts not only my constituency but well into other areas around the city. Towns are being locked out of accessing cheap fares. The consequence is that people do not want to use the services because there is no financial incentive for them to do so. That is very important. We talk about just transition and we need to allow people that opportunity.

I wish to stress one point again. Roads funding for small rural and local roads in the Cork County Council area is a major problem. I appeal to the Minister of State to engage with the

council on the matter. I do not like having to tell people their roads cannot be repaired or fixed while they are paying road tax and other taxes and charges. For many people it is difficult to understand why they can cross the border into Waterford and drive on perfect roads while in County Cork, because of a lack of funding in Cork County Council, the roads are not as good as they could be. Our national roads in County Cork could be far better too. I look forward to engaging with the Minister of State on that matter.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: We are dealing with two things. The first is the pre-flight testing. The Minister of State referred to a date of 8 November. That applies to people coming here from another state. I assume there is no facility decided on for that period whereby we would carry out the same sort of operation. I have a specific question. Obviously we have the Health Information and Quality Authority report, which does not exactly endorse anything as regards rapid testing at this point. About two weeks ago the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, spoke about a pilot project where rapid testing is being carried out in parallel with PCR testing, which is the gold standard, but I have not heard any other mention of this. I am just looking for clarity on this. I think antigen testing and possibly loop-mediated isothermal amplification, LAMP, were the two methods he spoke about. Is there any information on that? I am really talking about what the timeline is and how we can validate this, given that what NPHET has from HIQA is not exactly a tick box. This is accepting that PCR will remain the gold standard. Where flight testing is concerned, we do not want it to take capacity away from community testing, particularly given the problems we have at the moment.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The DAA has been doing a lot of work on testing and was before the committee in relation to identifying testing capacity that does not impact on the health system here, particularly where PCR testing is concerned. On other forms of testing, the National Virus Reference Laboratory, NVRL, is looking at LAMP testing and there is a validation process under way on that. There is antigen testing as well but again this has yet to be validated. This is our issue because if we recommend a particular----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I apologise for being a wee bit ignorant here but is the Minister of State aware of any of the pilot testing projects that the Minister, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, spoke about because I have not heard any other mention of them? I assume the pilots would be a means of validating those methods.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Is that in relation to antigen testing?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: Is it HIQA that is carrying this out?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: HIQA carried out a desk exercise but the Minister for Health then spoke about pilot projects being operated. I am wondering whether it was being carried out----

Chairman: Were they doing that in County Roscommon?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Was that not----

Chairman: Is the Minister of State aware of pilot projects?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I refer to projects being operated by the State. There was something in County Roscommon that was----

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am aware of the NVRL carrying out a validation process on LAMP testing, for example, to see if that can be validated. If it is then it will be approved by the Department of Health and we could incorporate it into our testing regimes. At the moment it is the PCR test but this is work that is ongoing. That is why, in our decision at Cabinet, we are leaving it somewhat open for new technologies and new testing to come on board. We are not being definitive that it is only PCR.

Chairman: Are there any more pilot tests?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I am not aware but that is not to say it is not happening. I am aware that there is a validation process happening with testing. We hope we can incorporate that as part of our own testing regime for aviation.

Chairman: I have a question of my own. I thank the Minister of State for her presentation. I have a couple of points about it and I will go over and back quickly. In her presentation she said, "With our partners in Transport Infrastructure Ireland and various local authorities, we are progressing a number of major Project Ireland 2040 projects". My colleague, Deputy Carey, made reference to the northern distributor road and the Minister of State said that was ongoing. I would like to hear about where the M20 is at. I know it is in the design stage with TII but I would like an update from the Minister of State on precisely where the M20 is at. She might reply to that because I am going to do a rolling series of questions over and back to use the time to maximum effect.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: It is in the early stages of development. Limerick City and County Council and Cork County Council have awarded the contract for technical advisers who are examining the route design and connection issues. The planning and design of the scheme is progressing with both road options, including a motorway option, and rail options currently being assessed. An online public consultation is expected to take place before the end of this year on the road and rail options under consideration. The options will be considered under the public spending code process prior to a Government decision on the next steps.

Chairman: Does the Minister of State's briefing note tell her whether the corridor for the road has already been selected? I am not asking about the precise route but seeking to clarify whether the corridor for the road has already been selected by TII, namely the corridor through Patrickswell, Charleville and Mallow to Cork.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: TII is examining the route design and selection issues. The planning and design of the scheme is progressing with both road options, including a motorway option. We can come back to the Chairman if he wants more specific information.

Chairman: Yes.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, will come back to the Chairman with more specific information. If he wants to put it to the Minister in writing as well-----

Chairman: We will it take it that the Minister of State can correspond with the Minister and he will communicate with the committee. I thank the Minister of State.

Secondly, on Shannon Airport, the Minister of State gave a commitment that the Department would do a review of the Shannon Group and its operations. Where does that currently stand?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: That assessment is currently taking place. I hope it will be going to the Government in the near future and I will be able prepare something. A review is currently under way and that will be going to the Government in the near future.

Chairman: When the Minister of State refers to the “near future”-----

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I would say it will be in the coming weeks.

Chairman: That is excellent.

HIQA brought out its report and provided it to us this morning. Others have made reference to this so I just want to follow up. In its press statements it says:

A cohesive national strategy is needed to ensure the right tests are undertaken in the right people at the right time for the right purpose. Planning now to support delivery of the strategy will facilitate rapid deployment of tests that meet the requisite standards once validated for use.

Can the Minister of State indicate where that strategy lies? Is the 8 November date she made reference to a universal, commonly agreed date among all the European countries that have signed up to the new traffic light system? She might guide us through the timeline. As today is 21 October, we are talking about roughly two weeks. It is a very short period of time. Shannon Airport is obviously beside me but Cork Airport is a huge factor as is Dublin Airport. We are holding a defined series of meetings next week around two key elements: the testing and the operation of the traffic lights system, both of which are interlinked. We will obviously be looking at the overall viability of the aviation sector as well. Everything now appears to be coming back to testing and how testing will work. The Minister of State might give us a step-by-step guide to the period between now and 8 November, looking at what HIQA will put in place and whether we will be ready by that date to have this pretesting in place, both here and in other European countries.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I will give the Chairman a kind of timeframe. The common European traffic light approach was agreed at a meeting of the European Council and now it is up to individual member states to work on their own testing regimes. That is why, following that decision and yesterday’s Cabinet meeting, we have agreed the policy approach. From midnight tonight, those coming from green list countries to Ireland do not have to restrict their movements. On the list of amber countries, we will be requiring a preflight test and that will commence from 8 November so people travelling to Ireland-----

Chairman: Is 8 November a date agreed with our European partners or is that-----

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: That is our national deadline for ourselves.

Chairman: Thus it is not a common deadline date with other European countries.

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: No.

Chairman: This leads on to the issue of HIQA saying the PCR is the gold standard. It is not ruling out the antigen testing but it is giving it a qualified view, a qualified recognition, while at the same time saying there may be cases where the PCR test may have to run alongside it. As such, the green list coming in tonight has no real impact for practical purposes. Orange and amber is where the action is. Given what HIQA has said about having a strategy in place and

the types of tests it has said will work, will the Minister of State explain to the committee how, by 8 November, we will have a system in place in Ireland whereby people coming here from other countries, particularly tourists, can come here if they get pretested in another jurisdiction in a safe way? If people who are departing get the test done in Ireland, will they be able to go to an amber country without having to be tested again? It would assist in making our aviation and business sectors more viable. Will the Minister of State give us more details?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The detail will come from the senior technical group, which will meet every two weeks on this matter.

Chairman: Who are its members?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Departments of Transport, Health and Foreign Affairs. Obviously, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation will be involved-----

Chairman: Has the group been established?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: -----given that this will affect foreign direct investment, FDI, and tourism.

Chairman: Has the group been established?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: I understand that it is in the process of being established.

Chairman: Who will chair it?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: This was agreed at the Cabinet meeting on Tuesday. All of this work is happening quickly.

The Chairman has outlined the situation regarding midnight tonight, green status and no restrictions. Currently, the test is validated in the member state. If someone is travelling from France, for example, its validated test is recognised by the health authorities in France. That will be deemed effective for people travelling to Ireland from midnight on Sunday, 8 November.

Regarding red status, the current position remains. People have to restrict their movements for 14 days.

The technical group will consider the situation every two weeks as testing comes on board. I would be as hopeful as the Chairman, but I cannot predict the future. I would love to be able to tell him that a certain test is going to be validated and that we will be ready to roll out more than just the PCR test, but I cannot do so today.

Chairman: Who will validate a test that our country recognises? Will it be HIQA or the Department of Health?

Deputy Hildegarde Naughton: The Department. The only validated test recognised in Ireland is the PCR test, unless something has happened since we came into this committee room. The PCR test is the gold standard.

My understanding is that if people travel from another EU member state to Ireland, they will have to take a test that is recognised within that member state and certified by a credible entity. Many member states will use the PCR test. Each member state is working on its own approach to this matter.

Chairman: Will this have to signed off on by NPHE? Is this something that-----

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: This will be a Government decision. Obviously, we will consult the Department of Health and our health officials and get the best health advice. None of us wants the virus being brought to Ireland and causing more issues. We must protect our testing regime. This is about instilling confidence in passengers who want to travel. No one will travel if he or she does not have faith in our testing regime. We must grapple with this situation. It will help tourism and FDI in time, but we will be a red zone country for the next six weeks. I hope that we will come out of that. Of those passengers who normally would fly to Ireland, 90% are from red zone countries. No one would want to come to Ireland while we are in level 5 anyway. Like our hotels and restaurants, we are not open. However, this is an important six-week window for us to prepare. We are reliant on the validation process outside the PCR testing system as well as on identifying capacity that will not impact on our health system. The DAA is working on that. There is a validation process in respect of other testing regimes. This is a fast-moving situation and will require an all-of-government approach that balances public health with keeping an open economy and connectivity, the importance of which we are acutely aware of. I assure the Chairman that everything is being done across the Government to ensure that happens more quickly.

Chairman: I will ask the Minister of State a direct question. Realistically, can that system be in place by 8 November in two weeks' time?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: Having everything rolled out will depend on testing capacity. Realistically, we will not have everything rolled out across Dublin Airport and the regional airports within two weeks, but we will have a-----

Chairman: I am not technically minded, but does the PCR test satisfy the requirements of rapid testing?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: My understanding is that no antigen test is rapid. I can understand-----

Chairman: I will set out the kernel of my question. Between now and 8 November, what work can be done to put in place rapid testing? According to HIQA, the PCR test is the gold standard. HIQA will not rule out antigen testing, but it wants a strategy put in place that might require a PCR test to be done every so often to validate the antigen system. Who will undertake that work over the next two weeks and bring the Government to a point where it will be able to sign off on a system? I welcome the establishment of the special group. Who will undertake the validation work that will recommend to the Cabinet sub-committee a functioning, safe and satisfactory rapid testing system?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I cannot give the Chairman a commitment that it will be done within two weeks. I do not know if a second type of test will be validated in that time. There is more than just the antigen test. Work on validating the LAMP test is happening, and other types of test that are under consideration could come on board.

All of these issues, including rolling out the infrastructure, are being dealt with and we are moving as quickly and safely as possible. Over the next few weeks, our restrictions mean that we cannot travel more than 5 km. There is no attraction in coming to a level 5 country when our restaurants, cafés and hotels are primarily closed. Work on validating tests and determining what can run alongside the PCR is happening. All of those tests are under consideration and

nothing has been ruled out yet. The DAA is doing a great deal of good work in terms of the infrastructure that will be required to roll out this system.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. In the three minutes left, would Deputy O'Rourke like to ask a quick question?

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I have a couple of quick questions. Some of them I will ask on behalf of Deputy Ó Murchú. The first is on cross-Border projects between the Minister, Deputy Eamon Ryan, and the Minister in the North, Ms Mallon, specifically the proposed Narrow Water bridge, the A5-N2 project and, in my part of the world, the Slane bypass. Are these projects on track? Is there still a commitment from the Northern Ireland Executive? What cross-Border negotiations are under way?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: This is the Minister's area, but the A5 project is within the programme for Government and is a definite commitment. There has been considerable North-South engagement on transport, for example, cross-Border rail and bus services, interbus agreements and the protocol around same, and ensuring we will not have a lack of connectivity post Brexit. After the end of the transition period, a UK driver licence will no longer be valid for people living in Ireland. Many people made the transition before the last cliff edge last year. Of the 70,000 people who needed to make that change to their licences, 55,000 did. We need to run another campaign.

Regarding the infrastructural projects that the Deputy raised, I will ask the Minister – his officials are listening – to revert to him in detail.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I commend the rapid engagement on airport testing and the work that has already been done by the DAA, which says it is ready to go with, I believe, a PCR test. Based on the information from HIQA, it might be the case following its assessment that we have to live with the PCR until such time as other technologies are proven to perform. I encourage the expedition of that process.

I echo Deputy O'Connor's point on funding for the roads programme. We have been hearing the same in County Meath. I welcome the increased overall funding for the Department.

Chairman: On that, has funding been given to local authorities for specific projects? If it arises that local authorities are not able to complete those projects by the end of the year, will the Minister of State be willing to make a concession and extend the time? This has arisen as an issue for Limerick City and County Council and Tipperary County Council. They have worthwhile projects.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: That is part of the July stimulus. This has come up when I met a lot of the county's executives. I would say: "Please roll them out fast." There are also many local authorities which are able to carry out these works by the end of November and there are calls asking if any funding is left over. I am speaking frankly. What I will say is there is legislative provision in place that would allow some projects to be carried forward. Once the projects are well under way and under construction, that is fantastic. They might not be completely completed.

Chairman: I understand.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: My officials might say that they are well under way and works are advanced.

Chairman: Deputy O'Rourke has one last question.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: No, that is fine.

Chairman: Is Deputy O'Connor okay?

Deputy James O'Connor: I have one more point. A highly important part of the programme for Government is coming up shortly. I am sure part of the 2020 budget was included in it. I refer to the national development plan. Throughout the course of Deputy Hildegard Naughton's ministerial career in this portfolio, I am sure it will probably be the largest policy document that will be impacted by the current Government. In relation to my own constituency, as the Chairman has said, in terms of the N20, that is a significant concern to people in Cork East. A lot of my family are from Mallow and that area at the north-western side of my constituency. It is crucial to that town that this motorway is built and there is proper access given to local residents onto and off that motorway when the time comes for construction.

There is one other project as well, on which I had extensive discussions with the Taoiseach, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, and the Minister for Transport, Deputy Eamon Ryan, already. I flag it with the Minister of State, Deputy Hildegard Naughton, as she has individual responsibility for the road network. I refer to the issues on the N25 around Castlemartyr. Castlemartyr is at the heart of the east Cork area. It is famous for the hotel and for other amenities and tourist destinations in close proximity to the area. I would be hopeful that could be included in the national development plan, NDP, which is coming up in the next number of weeks. There are 24,000 vehicles a day going up and down the main street of Castlemartyr and there is a desperate need to get funding to solve that for reasons of air pollution and connectivity and to reduce the 20-minute wait people are experiencing coming in and out of the village. It is bad for people in Youghal because it impacts on them in getting home from the city in the evening which is not fair.

Chairman: When is the review of the NDP formally getting under way?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: There is no date but it is happening within the next few months.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State for attending today's meeting and engaging with the committee. We have now completed our consideration of the Revised Estimate.

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the committee members for their time.

Message to Dáil

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

The Select Committee on Transport and Communications Networks has completed its consideration of the Revised Estimates for Public Services - Vote 31 (Transport).

The select committee adjourned at 1.33 p.m. *sine die*.