



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Audit Office Report —  
'DRD: the effectiveness of public transport in  
Northern Ireland': DFP; DRD; NIAO;  
Translink

29 April 2015

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Ms Michaela Boyle (Chairperson)  
Mr John Dallat (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Roy Beggs  
Mr Trevor Clarke  
Mr Paul Girvan  
Mr Daithí McKay  
Mr Seán Rogers

**Witnesses:**

Mr Peter May	Department for Regional Development
Mr John McGrath	Department for Regional Development
Mr Tom Reid	Department for Regional Development
Mrs Julie Sewell	Department of Finance and Personnel
Mr Kieran Donnelly	Northern Ireland Audit Office
Mr David Strahan	Translink

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** I welcome Mr Peter May, accounting officer for DRD; Mr John McGrath, deputy secretary of governance policy and resources for DRD; Mr Tom Reid, director of transport policy, strategy and legislation for DRD; Mr David Strahan, chief executive of Translink; and Mrs Julie Sewell, head of public audit and accountability branch for the Department of Finance and Personnel. Members, you will find biographies of our witnesses in your electronic packs.

You are all very welcome, and thank you for joining us today. I am going to open the session with some questions, if that is OK with you. My question is to you, Mr May. Obviously, public transport has played an essential role in the economy and for communities here. An effective public transport system can help grow the local economy by bringing workers to jobs around the region. It also improves the environment by promoting a more sustainable form of transport that can reduce pollution and congestion. It can increase the mobility of older people, rural dwellers and those with disabilities. Mr May, do you believe that the Department has been successful in improving and growing the public transport system here during the period from 2002 to 2014?

**Mr Peter May (Department for Regional Development):** Thank you very much for the question. The report fairly draws out that there is a range of areas in which public transport has moved on positively in the period since the regional transportation strategy was agreed in 2001. That is down not least to concerted political effort from a range of political parties during that period to make sure that the focus remained on achieving the key targets in the strategy.

If one looks at passenger journeys, which is a good metric on the use and success of public transport, one will see that, from 2002 until 2013-14, there was substantial growth of nearly 11%. Bus passenger numbers grew by 1.5%. By comparison, in GB, the numbers outside London fell by around 6% over the same period. Rail passenger numbers have increased very substantially. They have more than doubled in the period. These are all good grounds for believing that public transport has gone the right way in this period.

We, at this end of the table, are very conscious that it is not as if we can all declare success and go home. There are definitely many further steps to take in improving public transport. We are very much committed to trying to take those steps. We welcome the recommendations in the report, all of which we accept and will take forward in the period ahead. We think that they help us to set the direction of travel for the future. Doubtless, members will want to touch on some of those issues.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** OK, thank you. It is clear from the report that the performance of public transport here over the past decade has been a bit mixed. Passenger numbers on trains have increased significantly. However, that performance has not been repeated on our buses. Is there a particular problem with the buses? Is there any rationale for that?

**Mr May:** I highlighted that there has been a modest increase in bus passenger journeys over the period. There had been very marked declines in bus and rail usage in the five years prior to the regional transportation strategy being set in 2001. The two key focuses of the strategy were to address the weaknesses in our roads and in our public transport infrastructure. Over the period, there has been sustained investment in our public transport, both bus and rail, to try to reverse the trend that had seen quite a sharp decline in that five-year period.

As you look at the statistics and the graphs in the report, you will see that there was a dip in bus and rail usage in the middle of that period in around 2007-2010. This is replicated across these islands and is largely a recognition of the recession at that time. That is one of the key reasons. However, since then, there has been a growth in passenger journeys again. I take your point that there is still a lot more to do, and we certainly do not remove ourselves from that. However, I think that, even on the bus side, there are some modest grounds for encouragement.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** There has been a modest increase, but there has also been a population increase. It is about how that is addressed. Would you agree that, in this period, there has been no real modal shift from cars to public transport at all?

**Mr May:** Modal shift is an important issue. We are looking at setting a modal-shift target going forward. There was not a modal-shift target in the regional transportation strategy, but the Belfast metropolitan transportation plan did have a target to reduce the numbers of people crossing the Belfast city centre cordon from 60% to 54% by 2015. We are sitting at 48%, so we have more than achieved that level of shift.

The idea of a modal shift is complicated because we need to think about precisely what we are trying to measure. It is important that we do not seek to set car users against public transport users. There are a number of different aspects that are relevant to a modal-shift target. One of those is the wider active travel agenda around cycling and walking which the Minister is very keen on and is promoting actively and we are doing a lot of work on. The second is that areas such as car-sharing ought to count towards a modal-shift target as well as public transport, because it is the number of vehicles being used rather than the mode of transport which is critical. There has been only a modest modal shift. It has been within Belfast, which is the key area for any modal-shift target. It is much harder to see how a modal-shift target would work outside Belfast and there are questions about whether a target is really only appropriate during peak hours, which is the point of congestion for the city centre, largely. Those are areas that we will be looking at in the context of setting a future target for 2016 and beyond.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** In the report, there is the funding of public transport and the split between roads funding and public transport, and you touched a bit on that. What is the Department's commitment to public transport? I see that 35% has not been achieved. Only 23% has been achieved in relation to that, has it? What is the commitment to that?

**Mr May:** The average split over the last five years was 73% to roads and 26% to public transport. The proposition in the regional transportation strategy, which has driven the work of the Department, is that we needed to do two things. The first was to invest in our roads infrastructure, and the second was to

invest in our public transport infrastructure. The two are connected to some extent in that buses clearly use the infrastructure. There has been a very significant rise in the level of investment in public transport over the period of the regional transportation strategy. The rise is essentially an 85% increase over the base levels during the period before the regional transportation strategy started, and the increase in roads has been around 84% over the base. There was not a target to try to change that split. For that reason, it is perhaps unsurprising that the split has not particularly changed. The one area where investment did not happen in public transport where it was anticipated — and this is drawn out in the report — was in relation to Belfast rapid transit. There remains a programme to deliver Belfast rapid transit in the years ahead and it will be important that the Department finds the funding to ensure that that can proceed. That remains a priority for the Department as it goes forward.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Would you concede that that has had an adverse impact on public transport?

**Mr May:** Not having Belfast rapid transit?

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Yes.

**Mr May:** Ideally we would have Belfast rapid transit in place, I agree with that. That would be a means of growing public transport still further. Our projections in the business case are that over time we will see a significant rise in passenger journeys as a result of Belfast rapid transit. It will take some time to change behaviours, although we are putting the infrastructure in place. You have seen Belfast on the Move and there is further work on bus lanes across the key corridors that will be used for Belfast rapid transit. That is ongoing at the moment. Unfortunately it is causing some disruption as things stand, but in due course there will be a benefit, which will be important.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** The Department had planned to adopt a three-tier system to govern public transport, with the Department setting policy; the new independent agency planning for, regulating and funding Translink; and Translink delivering services. However, that did not happen. The new agency was not created. Instead, the Department set up a small division within Transport NI. Why was there a backtrack on that, Mr May?

**Mr May:** You are right that there was a proposition about three different layers. The middle layer, the agency, was always seen as being within the Department for Regional Development. In other words it would be reporting to the Minister for Regional Development. John may want to say some more about that in a moment. The key reason it did not happen was that, at the time when the decision was being taken, there was a wider look at how government was being structured and, as a result, there was a strong move away from the creation of new non-departmental public bodies and the use of next-steps agencies, towards having things more directly under the bailiwick of Ministers who are directly accountable to the Assembly. That was the key contributory factor to the change in approach that was taken at that time. Do you want to add to that, John?

**Mr John McGrath (Department for Regional Development):** The resource context means that the sort of model that might have been envisaged in previous times is no longer affordable. The key issue is whether there has been any detrimental effect because of that model not being put in place. You still have a system whereby your ministerial policy is set and delivery mechanisms responding to that. Policy increasingly changes. I am not sure I would describe it as backtracking. It evolves to take account of the political context, as Peter said, and the resource context. That will continue to happen in the future.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Just let me go back to my first question about passenger numbers increasing significantly on trains but that not being repeated on buses. Mr May, do you believe that bus fares have an impact on that? I said to Members earlier that I was picking that point up at some of the doors when we were out canvassing.

I am talking very parochially about my own area where there are issues mainly with students who are travelling up and down to Belfast — for some of the students who come home during the week — about some concessionary fares. I was made aware of one individual who, to use his concessionary fare on a two-day, 48-hour pass thing, he would have to travel from Strabane to Derry to avail of a specific concessionary fare to Belfast. The same bus actually passes Strabane, but he is not able to avail of that concessionary fare in Strabane. It is the one where you have to travel back within 48 hours. I do not know if you are aware of the disparities or discrepancies in those types of fares. If we

are looking to get more passengers on our buses, that is an issue in my area. If it applies in one place, it should apply all over.

**Mr May:** I am not aware of that specific incident, but thank you very much for raising it with me, and David may want to say some more about it. It may be useful to have a few more details.

More generically, we accept that public transport is, to some extent, sensitive to price change. The report fairly draws out that the pricing of public transport here is pretty much on a par with what one would expect. It is not seen as being particularly high. There are other factors that influence the use of public transport, such as the comfort, speed, accessibility and frequency of service, versus the ease of use of other means of transport as well. It is a multi-faceted picture of which price is one aspect. We are very conscious of that element. David, do you want to add to that?

**Mr David Strahan (Translink):** I do not have a lot to add, but I would note that, on the railway side of our organisation, we have seen significant growth in passenger numbers, as has been identified. In my view, that has not been driven primarily by the fares, but by what we offer our passengers in that service. We now have the new trains. The significant investment we have seen in new trains provides a completely new customer experience. We have free Wi-Fi and so on. I absolutely take your point that fares is one issue, and we are making efforts to ensure that our fares are maintained at as low a level as possible by driving overhead costs out of our organisation. However, the overall offering is something that passengers consider when they are making the choice of whether they are going to choose public transport. Punctuality and reliability are key.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** On that — Mr Clarke wants in here — if we are looking to put more people on our buses, surely we have to look at the flexibility of the policies and fares overall. If one individual has to travel to Derry to get a specific fare that allows him to go to Belfast, but cannot get that in his own home town, that is a bit —

**Mr May:** I agree that seems an odd issue, but —

**Mr Strahan:** I accept the point. It does not sound right. I will be happy to pick that up with you after the meeting and investigate that specific issue.

**Mr Clarke:** Peter, you referred to fares and the fare increase. You were talking about it being comparable with others. I am sure the Chair was probably indicating the most recent rise. I am not entirely convinced that everyone else in other sectors has equally as large an increase. Were you referring to the most recent rise, Peter, or were you just talking in general terms?

**Mr May:** I have been talking in general terms about price sensitivity. There was an increase in February this year, as you are well aware from discussions at the Committee. That has been after a period where there had not been a rise for some significant time. What one has seen elsewhere is that rises happened on an incremental basis. We have not had that. We had one bigger rise at the end of a period, rather than a lot of stepped rises during the period.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Members, we move on to our lines of questioning.

**Mr Dallat:** The area I am covering has already been pretty well covered; so, if you do not mind, I will deviate a little. We are talking about policies and strategies, and so on; and, Mr Reid, I understand that you are responsible for that. I am trying to get my head around who makes the ultimate decisions. I address the question maybe to Mr Strahan. You have a board. Is that right?

**Mr Strahan:** Yes.

**Mr Dallat:** You got a new chairman this week.

**Mr Strahan:** Yes, a new chair has been announced. He takes up position from 1 July this year.

**Mr Dallat:** He is a busy man. He is already involved in more ways than one with Big Lottery, the Strategic Investment Board and I do not know what else. Where do these people find the time to sit down and discuss the critical issues we are talking about today? Do they do that? Who is making the

policy? Is it the Department? Is it you as chief executive and your team of officials? What part do the directors who are drawn from NITHCo play in this?

**Mr Strahan:** Setting transport policy is a matter for the Minister and the Department. The running of Translink and ensuring that we deliver an effective public transport system is my responsibility, to which I am held accountable to my board.

**Mr Dallat:** You are held accountable to your board for what?

**Mr Strahan:** For the range of services and everything that Translink does on the ground.

**Mr Dallat:** Is this board nothing more than just a wee consumer committee, or, for their large salaries for their two or three days a month, do they actually contribute anything to policy, the type of thing that I accept that Tom does and does well?

**Mr Strahan:** Setting policy direction is a matter for the Department. It is up to Translink to deliver effective public transport on the ground, and, as an executive director of Translink and chief executive, that is what I am responsible for. The chairman is responsible for running the board and for making sure that I am held to account and that I deliver an effective organisation.

**Mr May:** I think it is also fair to say that, when the Minister is looking at policy issues, he will consult Translink and take the views of the board seriously in reaching his conclusions. As a result of setting that policy, he may well set objectives for Translink that the board would then be responsible for ensuring are delivered against.

**Mr Dallat:** I will put the question to you another way. Do you think that your organisation is badly in need of a board of directors that is there to transform and change the way that public transport work operates and to articulate the needs of the people?

**Mr Strahan:** I can speak for the period of time that I have been in Translink.

**Mr Dallat:** I am glad you mentioned that, Mr Strahan. I am more than impressed with the short time you have been here. We are just talking —

**Mr Strahan:** I will give an account of the direction I have been setting. We accept the recommendation in the report and the points noted in the report about our management overhead and the fact that the ratio of operational staff to management is not comparable with that in other organisations. However, there are things that our organisation does that other organisations do not. I have put in place a programme of driving efficiencies in our organisation, and our board is absolutely behind that move and is very supportive of what we are seeking to do. We are seeking to take out £3.1 million from the management overhead of our organisation to make it more effective and more efficient. I have had support, and nothing but support, from my board in respect of driving that change agenda, and that is something I am determined to continue to deliver.

**Mr Dallat:** I presume that the remarkable increase in rail passenger numbers is because the Assembly made many millions of pounds available to re-lay the tracks and buy the new trains. A lot of money was also made available to the buses. In relation to Ulsterbus, one observes that the buses driving around the country are top notch — you could not get better — but the numbers of passengers are not there. Is that not something that your board of directors is concerned about? I am still lost; I do not know what the board does.

**Mr Strahan:** It is something that we have been seeking to address. As you rightly identify, the decline of, I think, around 12% in respect of Ulsterbus is of concern. We have been working on a bus strategy, which is designed to deliver growth in passenger numbers from 67 million up to 80 million by 2025. Our objective is to increase our total passenger numbers from 80 million to 100 million by 2025, which, roughly, is 80 million bus passenger journeys and 20 million rail passenger journeys. We are seized with the fact that the growth in bus patronage has been lower than railways, albeit that bus passenger journeys overall have increased in comparison with GB, where they have declined over the same period. However, we are not complacent. The bus strategy is designed to specifically focus on Ulsterbus, turn the decline around and drive passenger numbers up.

**Mr Dallat:** In relation to Ulsterbus, which services large rural communities, is it likely to achieve that figure given that there has just been a massive reduction in the amount of money given to community transport operators, which, I presume, if we had some kind of integrated transport system, would link into your service? Is that not another obstacle in the way of your trying to achieve your targets?

**Mr Strahan:** What has happened in Ulsterbus over the years is that we have seen a network that has grown in a fragmented way; we have seen services added on here and there. In the bus strategy, we are seeking, essentially, to start with a clean piece of paper again and say, "Where is the highest demand in terms of moving rural passengers and making sure that we design our services around where we are going to drive passenger growth and where passengers actually want services to be?". I acknowledge that it is not easy in the current situation in respect of the current funding challenges, but that drives us to look very hard at the services we provide to make sure that we are providing them in the most effective places that drive passenger numbers and where passengers actually want them.

**Mr Dallat:** The issue you have just mentioned, Mr Strahan, is one that, if I had anything to do with Translink, would concern me a great deal.

Moving on to concessionary fares; it seems to me that concessionary cards are worthless if there is no integrated form of transport to make them work.

**Mr Strahan:** I accept that somebody who holds a concessionary pass needs a service in order to use it. The issue I face when running Translink is that we are seeing an almost 20% reduction in our funding this year in 2015-16, which is around £13 million. I have put in place a plan designed to meet that gap. The first thing I have identified is delivering £3.1 million out of the management overhead of our organisation. While the fare increase that we have seen recently is absolutely unwelcome — and no one wants to see higher fares — it is better, in my view, to have a slightly higher fare and have a service than not have a service and a lower fare.

The third element is about redesigning our bus services to meet that shortfall in funding. You are right: there is a wider public debate in terms of the extent of bus services and public transport services provided in Northern Ireland and the funding for such.

**Mr Dallat:** The concessionary fare thing is something that, I think, we all support. However, is that, in a sense, providing cover for a far worse crisis? I want to ask you in particular about people between 60 and 65 who may still be at work. Do you have any idea of how many people like that are now using concessionary fares?

**Mr Strahan:** I do not, but, anecdotally, I am well aware of people who are between 60 and 65 and still in work and, in fact, people who are over 65. Of course, there is now no, if you like, defined retirement age and, with the agreement of their employer, people can continue to work beyond 65. So, yes, without a shadow of doubt, there will be users of the concessionary scheme who have not retired or who are still in work. However, the issue of the criteria for the concessionary scheme is not really a Translink matter. That is a matter for the Minister and our politicians.

**Mr Dallat:** It is a Translink scheme, and I suspect that the introduction of the concessionary fare scheme has enabled you to attract fare-paying passengers in that you have been able to moderate your fares. How many million pounds extra do you get?

**Mr May:** The Department provided in the order of £41 million this year for the concessionary fare scheme.

**Mr Dallat:** Just for the record, that is £41 million.

**Mr May:** There is a very strong cross-party consensus for the use of concessionary fares —

**Mr Dallat:** I am not speaking against concessionary fares —

**Mr May:** — and extending it to —

**Mr Dallat:** — I am asking you to recognise that it is an important factor that is clouding the decline that would have taken place had the concessionary fares not been introduced.

**Mr May:** Of the 80 million passenger journeys, 13 million were the result of concessionary fares. Fare-paying passenger journeys rose overall by 8.8%. Those on Metro rose by 30% and those on rail by 60%. Clearly, there has been a decline in fare-paying passengers on Ulsterbus over the period.

**Mr Dallat:** I suppose that what we really want to hear today is what you are doing about that.

**Mr Strahan:** Do you mean what we are doing to drive fare-paying passenger numbers?

**Mr Dallat:** Yes.

**Mr Strahan:** At the start of the meeting, we discussed the offering that we provide to our passengers, and we are seeking to roll-out the wider use of Wi-Fi. That has been one of the key things that has driven passenger numbers on the railways and has proved to be very popular. We are seeking to expand that on the bus side of the business. It is available on our Goldline service, and we are seeking to expand it.

The other issues that we touched on at the start of the meeting were punctuality and reliability. Passengers really depend on their public transport system to be punctual and reliable, and we are putting a lot of effort into making sure that our services are punctual and reliable and to ensure the comfort of our buses. The bus strategy that we are seeking to roll-out over the coming period will seek to refocus our resources on the most popular routes and ensure that we drive up the frequency of the services that are most used by our passengers. That is how we will seek to increase the number of, in particular, bus passengers in the future.

**Mr Dallat:** Has the announcement that the subsidy will be further savaged caused you to have yet another rethink about what you are doing?

**Mr Strahan:** The funding cuts that we face this year total £13 million, and the financial viability strategy that I have put in place is designed to bridge that gap. It will take us two to three years to become profitable again or to break even as an organisation while we go through the change process. The plan that we have in place will meet the funding challenges that we currently face.

**Mr Dallat:** The quality bus corridors in Belfast were outlined in the regional transport strategy, but the downturn in bus speeds obviously puts people off. How do you address that?

**Mr Strahan:** I accept that. One of the things that has worked against us with bus speeds is that, with Metro, we have seen growth in passenger numbers of around 33% — a third — and buses are taking longer at each stop because there is a greater number of people.

There are a couple of ways that we can address that. The first is through the use of quality bus corridors and making sure that bus lanes are, in fact, bus lanes and that their illegal use is clamped down on. I know that the Department is taking measures in respect of the enforcement of the bus lanes.

Also — I think that this will be the most radical way — around 50% of our passengers pay by cash, which delays people getting on the bus. Through our fare structures, we are trying to encourage people to use non-cash methods of payment, which are cheaper. Our ticketing system needs to be updated, and our new ticket system — the next generation ticketing system — that we plan to roll-out from 2018 will encourage greater use of non-cash methods of payment. That will allow us to get people onto buses much quicker. BRT comes with a non-cash ticketing system that will allow for very rapid entry and exit to and from those buses. That will help with our bus speeds.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Deputy Chairperson, a number of members want to come in with supplementary questions.

**Mr Dallat:** Sure.

**Mr Girvan:** I want to ask about the fares, access and flexibility. I have travelled extensively in other areas, where you can buy one ticket that allows you to hop on to any form of public transport. You do not care whether it is Metro, Ulsterbus or Northern Ireland Railways. They are all part of the Translink group. When will a joined-up ticketing system be introduced, instead of looking at wee isolated areas,

protecting them and saying, "That is ours, and we do not want anybody to interfere with our wee area and our tickets for the trains"? We need one ticket that covers everything. If there was such flexibility, it would offer greater encouragement for fare-paying passengers to use the services. If they live in a rural area and had access to the railway and the bus, they would know that they could get the train to take them in and, if the flexibility allowed, they could use another service with their ticket. Could that be facilitated?

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Would that be like the Oyster ticket in London?

**Mr Girvan:** The very same thing, yes.

**Mr Clarke:** Do you go to London?

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** I know someone who works in London transport.

**Mr Clarke:** I am amazed at how much you go to London.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Go ahead, Mr Strahan. Sorry for the distraction.

**Mr Strahan:** I agree with the member's comments. Before I deal with that specific issue, I want to make one observation, if I may. It is clear to me that, within Translink, we essentially have two organisations: a railway organisation and a bus organisation. The management restructuring and the restructuring that I am carrying out at the moment will create an integrated organisation in which bus and rail are truly integrated. I would not overplay the point that they have been competing with each other, but they have not been managed as an integrated business.

**Mr Girvan:** They would complement one another if it was managed correctly.

**Mr Strahan:** They absolutely would. As I said, I would not overstate the fact that they have been competing with each other, but I want a single management structure that sits above a completely integrated bus and rail organisation. That is what my management restructuring will achieve.

That will then flow right down through the organisation to the very issue that you identified. You should be able to buy credit, a ticket or a card that allows you access to bus and rail. That is what the new integrated ticketing system will do. Our current systems cannot deliver that, but our new integrated ticket system, which will be somewhere between a £30 million and £40 million investment, will deliver that. That will allow greater ease of access, which is all designed to help to deliver an increase in patronage. If we make it easier for people to use public transport, I think that they will use it.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** OK. Thank you. A few members want to ask supplementary questions. Will you keep your supplementary questions brief?

**Mr Clarke:** My supplementary occurred to me about 10 minutes ago, but the Chair would not let me in at that time. I have taken encouragement from you, David. I have met you a number of times and told you that, given that what you will do is very important, I am disappointed that you are going. You have a vision that Translink has lacked for years and that the management within Translink has lacked for years. You have set them on a particular path, and I am fearful that your predecessor, whoever it is, will come in with their own vision and will not have that drive and enthusiasm.

**Mr McKay:** His successor.

**Mr Clarke:** Successor. Sorry.

**Mr McKay:** I will keep you right.

**Mr Clarke:** It was only water I was drinking. *[Laughter.]* Whoever that might be, I am concerned. You have turned that organisation around in a very short space of time and have identified savings. That leads to my main question later, but I want to take you back. I will criticise you at this point, David, after saying all those nice things.

**Mr Beggs:** Is this your brief intervention?

**Mr Clarke:** This is my brief intervention, Deputy Chair, when you are the Deputy Chair.

In response to John, you justified the fare increase. If we look at the tables in the report, we see that, with distance travelled per head of population, Northern Ireland is one of the worst. It is OK to have reliability and comfort on a bus, but one of the other things that is important to people is value for money or affordability. You said to John that you are better having a higher fare and continuing to have a service. That is not how Tesco and Asda work. They do not work on high-value items; they work on volume. Translink does not have the volume right. It is certainly doing the work in relation to comfort, but there is work to be done on reliability and timetables. If you start to dabble with the fares, it is going to make it a service that people cannot use. Instead of people being encouraged to use public transport, they are going to look at their own mode of transport. It is a disagreement. I am trying to get you to come round to our way of thinking.

**Mr Strahan:** I accept your point. I will touch on the first point of your comments. By the time I leave the organisation, the restructuring that I have put in place will be embedded. I do not believe that it will be possible to go back. The integrated nature and what we are seeking to drive in Translink will be embedded in the organisation.

I absolutely take the point that there is a tipping point that you reach where, if you put fares up, you lose passenger numbers. That is something that we look at every time we look at our fare increase to assess whether, if we put our fares up, we will lose more passengers than income we gain through a fare increase. We have not seen a lot of evidence of people moving away from public transport as a result of the fare increase that we had in February.

**Mr Clarke:** However, David, you came with two proposals, and you opted for half the proposal. Whilst you have not measured much, I suggest that, given that that was the direction of travel, the higher increase could have had the effect that many of us were worried about.

**Mr Strahan:** I accept that. Obviously, it is an unknown, and the Minister has made a decision in that respect.

The other point is that we are very mindful of needing to remain competitive in relation to not only other regions but car use. If my comment earlier about putting up fares was interpreted as blasé, that certainly was not my intention. I was making the comment in respect of the fare increase that we had. In my view, it was better having the fare increase and trying to plug part of the £13 million gap with an element of increase in fare income as opposed to trying to deliver it all through either service reductions or management restructuring costs.

The management overhead that we are taking out of the organisation is ambitious. I am not aware of any other public body that is taking as much out of its management overhead and administration costs as we are seeking to deliver. I take your point. There is certainly no complacency on my or Translink's part in respect of the answer to a funding reduction being a fare increase. That is not our approach. We have demonstrated that through the recent funding cut that we have had. It is a multifaceted way of trying to address what is a very challenging financial position for Translink. Translink will lose around £30 million between 2014-15 and 2015-16. If that continues, it is not sustainable. The financial viability strategy has to be about more than one thing.

**Mr McKay:** I echo what other members said: public transport has improved over the years. I fear that we are about to go backwards instead of forwards and continuing to progress. I use public transport regularly. There is a difference between the rail and the bus in terms of service. On the rail, you get consistent Wi-Fi, but, on the bus, it is very patchy. If I am making a choice when going into Ballymena station, I go for the train every time. It is quite clear that there is a big disparity there, and those who are trying to attract more passengers onto the buses are struggling because there are those gaps. The buses are advertised as having free Wi-Fi, and, obviously, money is being paid to a provider to provide that. If it is not working, what is the provider doing to address that? Are we getting value for money from the bus package?

**Mr Strahan:** As someone who lives in a rural community in north Antrim as well, I accept your point. Yes, it is patchy. It is dependent on picking up a signal because it works through a SIM card. In very rural parts, the signal struggles, as we know. In fact, in the area where I live, with some mobile providers, I do not have any signal. I have no service. The issue that we have identified is that, on

bus, it is only the Goldline fleet that has Wi-Fi. We are seeking to roll that out to more of the bus fleet. Yes, you are right, when we go out to tender on that service, we will be looking at the network coverage and the network provider that we go with to make sure that we maximise the greatest coverage. As you identified, there is a range of things that drives people onto public transport.

**Mr McKay:** Is that due to go out to tender again any time soon?

**Mr Strahan:** I do not have the specific detail on when that is due to go out, but, if you wish, I can confirm that for you.

**Mr McKay:** The other problem is infrastructure. Whereas you can invest a lot of money in the buses, if the stations are not of the appropriate quality, people will not want to wait about. For example, there might not be enough car parking spaces. Ballymena is the example in both those instances. It is a deterrent to people who will say that Belfast is only half an hour away anyway and will jump in the car. There is a need for greater capital investment. When can we see stations being brought up to the same standard as the service that you get on the trains?

**Mr Strahan:** Over the last two years, we have seen an increase of around 1,500 park-and-ride parking spaces, which brings the total number up to almost 8,000. In Ballymena, which is the area that I live in and where the services are that I use, we have seen around 50 or 60 new car parking spaces added to the park-and-ride facility. Particularly on the railway there, as you know, the parking facility is full before 8.00 am. We believe that there is latent demand there, so we are seeking opportunities to expand that facility as land becomes available. However, you know about the facilities in the centre of Ballymena, and getting access to additional land at an affordable price can be challenging. In respect of the railway facilities and the bus facilities, you are right. It is about the whole customer experience. We have seen investment in a number of stations over the last period of time, and we will see further investment in other facilities as capital budgets facilitate.

**Mr McKay:** Where is the business case for a new station in Ballymena?

**Mr Strahan:** If you wish, I will come and brief you on that after the meeting, or I will write to you about taking that forward.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** That is a couple of supplementary questions.

**Mr Beggs:** My questions were around the areas that Daithí was covering. My question is to Peter May. We have heard that there has been a decline in Ulsterbus passengers. Rural passengers have not been using Ulsterbus to the same extent. At the Millbrook park-and-ride facility, there used to be between 10 and 20 cars parked at the side of the road, and the park-and-ride facility of about 70 spaces is now full. Peter, we have not been meeting the targeted split between public transport and other forms of transport. We have not been spending enough on public transport. Will we be spending more in the future so that improved facilities will exist to encourage people to use park and ride and to improve this access where people can perhaps come in from a rural position and then use the benefits of public transport to save on a long-term journey?

**Mr May:** There are a number of different aspects to the question. As it happens, the way that we deliver them, the park-and-ride facilities come out of the roads budget. There has been no underinvestment in park-and-ride facilities. In fact, we have been actively pursuing their extension. David mentioned that we are coming towards 8,000 park-and-ride spaces across Northern Ireland. That is the first point.

**Mr Beggs:** Do you accept that, in many places, the spaces that you built are full and that more are needed?

**Mr May:** It may well be that there is a need to do more. We are looking all the time at opportunities to expand that.

The second point is that we have seen a very significant rise in real terms in investment in public transport. I said that it was 85% over the period of the RTS. Just comparing the amounts is not the trick. The fact is that both amounts grew over that period. There was such a substantial need because of the —

**Mr Beggs:** It might have been a significant increase, but do you accept that it was less than the target?

**Mr May:** I accept that the percentage is less than what was set out in the RTS. However, the point that I want to make is that I do not think that this is about setting car users against public transport users.

**Mr Beggs:** I was trying to support both.

**Mr May:** This is about trying to deliver a suitable service and suitable infrastructure for both. That was the purpose in the regional transportation strategy that Peter Robinson launched in 2001, and it remains an important driver. Where we have particular problems with congestion, particularly in Belfast city centre, there are issues about whether we can find ways of enhancing the use of public transport in those areas and making car use less attractive. Belfast on the Move was unpopular at the time, because those were essentially the steps that it was taking. Belfast rapid transit will see a further extension of that in the growth of bus lanes and, as David said, there are plans to try to enforce bus lanes more rigorously. All those things will all impact on those areas of greatest congestion, with an attempt being made to ensure that public transport is a viable alternative in terms of time, accessibility, comfort and cost, as has been covered.

**Mr Beggs:** Why are park-and-ride facilities in the roads budget if they are actually helping public transport? Is that not illogical?

**Mr May:** Park-and-ride works are just a function of a particular team within Transport NI. It is a seamless service in the sense that it is all joined up. It does not really matter where the money comes from. It just happens to be that that is where it sits.

**Mr Dallat:** This may have been covered, but my question is on the five-year delay in the rapid transport service. Who expresses concerns about these delays? Is this something, Mr Strahan, that your board of directors might be screaming from their rooftops about, or do they just doing the mundane things?

**Mr Strahan:** In respect of the delay, the Department is responsible for when the scheme goes live. We are the operator that will operate it once it goes live, so, if you do not mind, I will pass that question on.

**Mr May:** I think —

**Mr Dallat:** Sorry, before you answer, I want to say that, as I have sat here since 2.00 pm, I have got the distinct impression that nobody challenges anything, whether in the Department, Transport NI or this board of directors. Who actually asks you what you are doing or, more importantly, what you are not doing? Who scrutinises it?

**Mr May:** If you are asking about the scrutiny and governance of Translink, I think that David would say that there is a very rigorous set of governance arrangements in place that is driven by the Department from the Minister down. There is a sponsor division that has regular meetings. I go to triennial meetings with the board to hold it to account in terms of —

**Mr Dallat:** Peter, tell us more about this board, because I am at a loss. Does it challenge you?

**Mr May:** It will offer challenges. It has offered a series of challenges around the budget.

**Mr Dallat:** It has not published the minutes on the website for several months.

**Mr May:** I am not aware of that detail. Translink offered a series of challenges around the budget and the impact that that was going to have on its business. The board was instrumental in driving that forward, and conversations about finance will continue. Our governance regime is about ensuring that Translink delivers against the objectives that the Minister has set; that is our focus. We expect and work to ensure that the directors on the board of Translink are active in the role that they play and that they are over what is going on.

**Mr Dallat:** Do they get training and all that?

**Mr May:** All members of public bodies get training; they get induction in the business itself and training about their role as board members.

**Mr Rogers:** When I look at the regional transportation strategy, I see two or three issues. First, it is from 2002, which means that it is getting quite dated. Secondly, the design is based on a UK context. Daithí talks about the infrastructure. England is totally different from Northern Ireland in the roads and rail infrastructure. Thirdly, it did not contain a separate strategy for public transport; is that right?

**Mr May:** I have the regional transportation strategy here. Your first comment was that it is now some time since the RTS was set. Since then, a 'New Approach to Regional Transportation' document has set out an update. I will ask Tom, who has been sitting patiently, to say something more about that in a moment.

Your second point was that you think that the RTS was based on GB practice. I disagree. It was set under the then Minister, Peter Robinson, and was very much aimed at meeting Northern Ireland's needs. It has been carried forward by successive Ministers from different parties across the Executive. The focus on trying to get out from under the serious issue of the quality of the infrastructure of both roads and public transport was designed to meet Northern Ireland's needs and does meet Northern Ireland's needs.

In the RTS, there are core aspects relating to public transport; there is not a separate strategy for public transport in it. I will ask Tom to say something about 'New Approach' and the steps in the strategy.

**Mr Tom Reid (Department for Regional Development):** The important thing is to, first, go back to the RTS and why it is an integrated strategy. When the RTS was developed, it was very clear that the aim was to address what was then a significant infrastructure deficit that had resulted from years of underinvestment in roads and public transport. The success of the RTS has really been in enabling us to start to address that deficit. However, significant work still needs to be done, particularly in relation to the strategic road network in the west.

On the 'New Approach', we started to review the RTS in approximately 2007. At that stage, it became very clear that population and economic growth had been much faster than anyone had anticipated in 2001-02. What we set out in 'New Approach' is a reaffirmation of the direction that was set in the RTS but also a recognition that our ambitions have to be higher than they were when the RTS was set and, in particular, that there needs to be more of a focus on modal shift. As Peter highlighted, while the RTS promoted sustainable transport, it did not set a specific target for modal shift at that time. The focus was primarily on getting investment into the roads and public transport infrastructure.

What we set out in the RTS is a commitment to introducing a slightly different approach to how we prioritise transport interventions. Again, it is about trying to support an integrated approach so that we are not separating investment in roads and public transport. We are looking at what are the transport needs of Northern Ireland and how we best meet them. We do that by looking, first, at what are the main priorities and the main objectives that we are trying to achieve for transport and, then, the degree to which various transport interventions contribute to that, and how can we frame them in a way that we maximise our benefits.

One example is modal shift. If we assess various transport interventions and the degree to which they contribute to modal shift, we find that public transport scores quite well. However, if you start to look at roads-based schemes that are critical to regional connectivity, you see that there are opportunities to build in public transport access through the likes of park-and-ride. Those opportunities are enhanced by the fact that the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland travel on a strategic road network for commuting purposes. What we are looking to do is build park-and-ride into a lot of the major schemes and take forward the enhancement of public transport services on those key routes, where there is greatest opportunity to bring people onto public transport.

**Mr Rogers:** Where does the transport strategy come in? I drive on the Saintfield Road every day, and sometimes I go home by the M1 for a change of scenery. I am as guilty as the rest: I am sitting there with one person in my car. What is being done to incentivise car-sharing, which happens in other countries, particularly Canada? Where does that fit into the 'New Approach' and the new strategy?

**Mr Reid:** Single-occupancy car use is the critical area we want to target. What we saw in Northern Ireland, going back to 1990 but particularly evident from about 2000, was that the period of rapid economic growth here was associated with a huge increase in car ownership. The number of cars on the road more than doubled. If we look at the data in the travel survey of Northern Ireland, we tend to see that people are not making that many journeys by car, but they are making more of those journeys as a driver rather than a passenger, so we are seeing an increase in single-occupancy car use.

We have taken forward various initiatives over the years, one of which is the Northern Ireland car share scheme, which promotes car sharing. We promote that in the Department by reserving a certain amount of parking, in Clarence Court, for the car-share scheme. Other ways that we have tried to tackle this is through the introduction of the TaxSmart scheme, which significantly reduces the cost of public transport tickets for employees, and through the cycle to work scheme in the Department.

One of the big challenges that we have is that, if you are going to drive modal-shift and tackle single-occupancy car use, there is a need to address some of the demand-management measures, and particularly the availability and cost of parking. That was highlighted in the RTS; it was highlighted again in the strategic review of park and ride in the Department. Indeed, we have also highlighted 'New Approach'. The difficulty with that, as all three documents recognise, is that it is something that you can only take forward where there is the public or political will to do so. To date, for various reasons, the economic downturn being one, public and political support has not been there. That is something that we are looking to build.

**Mr Rogers:** Thank you. To move to one or two specific things from the report. In part —

**Mr Clarke:** Can I just supplement that before you continue? You talk about modal-shift and integrated transport. I think that you were at the Committee last week, Peter, or a couple of weeks ago, or Translink was there. One of the researchers for the Committee took his bicycle to Newry, tried to get onto the train and was refused. We have cycle-to-work schemes and people encouraging people to use their cycles, and he was told that he could not get on the train and would have to use the bus.

**Mr Strahan:** At peak hours there is a restriction on cycles on trains.

**Mr Clarke:** Right away there is a contradiction in that methodology. How do you call something a "cycle to work" scheme when somebody is going to cycle to work at peak time but cannot take public transport?

**Mr Strahan:** There is a restriction at peak hours. There is not a restriction on the number of folding cycles that can be used on trains. However, on the train from Newry, at peak hours, people are standing. If we have an unlimited number of cycles on the train, that takes up the room for two or three passengers. The balance that we achieve between the number of the cycles that are permitted on trains and the number of passengers that we allow on is an issue for us. Ultimately, if we have more cycles on trains, then we have fewer passengers. There is also —

**Mr Clarke:** Sorry to cut across you. Do you see the manager ratio that you have in your company? You are one of the highest. We talked, earlier, about the comfort on the trains and about their reliability. You are now saying that the Newry train has people standing on it. At what stage would you ever consider putting another carriage on so that everyone could have a seat and we could accommodate those who want to bring their bicycles?

**Mr Strahan:** With the resources we have we could not facilitate a seat for everyone at peak hours on our rail infrastructure. I do not know the number, but we would need to invest in a significant number of new carriages, which would bring with it a significant capital cost. The passenger numbers show the success of railway growth.

**Mr Clarke:** The cycle-to-work scheme is excellent, as the more we encourage people to get on to other forms of transport and leave their cars, the better. We cannot have the organisation responsible for public transport in Northern Ireland saying "No. Busy time of day; we do not want you today. You leave your cycle-to-work-scheme bicycle at home and take the car".

**Mr Strahan:** We provide facilities at our railway stations for people to park their bicycles, and we now know that there is access to bicycles in the city centre, since the cycle scheme was launched in Belfast with much fanfare. I accept that it is a challenge. It is something that we are grappling with

and which we have never ruled out reviewing in the future. However, if we allow a significant number of cycles on trains at peak hours, we would, without a doubt, be carrying significantly lower passenger numbers. The reality is that we do not have enough carriages in our railway rolling stock to provide everyone with a seat.

As someone who lived for two years in Britain, I was regularly on the train from Chester to Euston where there were people who did not have a seat and were standing for in excess of an hour. That is unheard of in Northern Ireland. People do not like having to stand, and rightly so. On public transport in other places, that is a common occurrence. It shows the success in the passenger numbers that we have seen on our railways that that is now a common occurrence in Northern Ireland. It is something we grapple with.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Sorry, Seán; Daithí just wants in there for a brief supplementary.

**Mr McKay:** The way I look at the issue of spaces for cyclists on trains is that, at peak time in the morning, NI Railways is willing to provide spaces for thousands of commuters but not willing to provide a single space for a cyclist. In other jurisdictions the design is different because if you park your bike on a train, the way you secure it is through five seats. The pedestrians come on and say "That bugger has taken five seats away where I have to stand". It is badly designed, and that automatically sets cyclists against pedestrians, especially if a couple comes on with a child or a buggy. I have seen conflict on the train because of that. There is a bad design there.

I have seen other trains where you can put bicycles up vertically; they can be secured and are not designed to be over the seats. You need to create a space on trains for cyclists that is not taken away from those who sit on the trains. I have been on the Derry railway many times and have never been refused, to be fair. I have had to stand with the bicycle at times, although I do not mind that, to be honest. It is a policy that really annoys cyclists and sends out a message that they are not welcome on trains. It deters cyclists and makes them seem second class. You need to provide space for cyclists on trains at all times, not just outside peak times.

**Mr Strahan:** There may be more that we can do about education because, on our trains, there is a designated area for cycles to be stored. I take the point that perhaps there is more that we can do about education and pointing cyclists to the correct way. Somebody parking their bicycle across a number of seats is not something that we wish to see. I recognise that it is a difficulty and there is absolutely no desire on our part to discourage cyclists from using the railways. The issue is space. If we are not pointing people to how best to store their cycle on a train, we should be doing so; we should look at what we can do to educate and work with cyclists.

**Mr McKay:** I have one small point about bus routes as well. Take Dungiven, the 212 from Derry to Belfast. Say that you wanted to take your bike from five miles down the road, making that rural trip; say that you do not have a car and that you want to take the bike for part of your journey and then use the bus. There is nowhere safe to secure your bike. On main bus routes, and some stations as well, there are no adequate cycle-parking facilities. There is certainly nothing secure. There is a huge gap that needs to be looked at. People will not even consider it as an option if there is nowhere to lock their bike.

**Mr Reid:** As one of the issues in relation to park and ride, we are looking at building safe and secure cycling provision into park and ride. As David pointed out, we recognised that trying to bring bikes onto trains is an issue of capacity. One of the ways of dealing with that is to build bike parking at some stations. A key benefit associated with the Belfast bike hire scheme is that people can use the bike to get to the train, travel to Belfast and use the bike hire scheme once they are in Belfast.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Apologies, Seán. Continue.

**Mr Rogers:** I have a few specifics. On page 34, paragraph 4.5 there are set targets for the increase in passenger numbers with the metro service and Northern Ireland Rail. Why were no targets set for Ulsterbus?

**Mr May:** There was too much uncertainty, at the time, about how rural bus services would be delivered for a target to be set; that is what is said in the regional transportation strategy. I think that, at the time, it was not clear how, for example, community transport providers would be integrated with the provision of Ulsterbus services and so on. That was the reason given. That was 2001, and I do

not have much detail behind the reasons given. What it says is that there was just too much uncertainty to set a sensible target.

**Mr Rogers:** Surely, the records were there for passenger numbers and buses. It should have been possible to set a target.

**Mr May:** The report draws out the clear decline in the use of buses in the five years running up to 2001. There was a clear statement about a desire to reverse the decline and increase passenger numbers. It was possible to set a target specifically for Metro. I think that Ulsterbus may have transferred some of its services into Metro. That might be a part of it. Tom, can you add to that?

**Mr Reid:** The RTS suggests that rural transport services will be taken forward through accommodation with conventional Ulsterbus-type services, the development of community transport services, and of more innovative flexible-demand responsive services. At the time, it was felt that it would be impractical to make an assessment of what growth in passenger numbers you could achieve in those circumstances. Instead, in the RTS, we went back to the objective of the policy: safeguarding services in those areas. The target therefore focused on bus age to try to improve the infrastructure. The target also committed to the introduction of additional services to improve access during the day.

**Mr Rogers:** When the Northern Ireland Audit Office decided to use the 2000-01 figures, you said that that was inappropriate. Is that the reason why?

**Mr Reid:** Yes.

**Mr Rogers:** Paragraph 4.29 and figure 15 show that, over the decade, other countries, such as England and Wales, have managed a more significant movement towards public transport and away from the car. What can we learn from their experiences?

**Mr May:** We look to do benchmarking against providers elsewhere in these islands in a range of ways and to learn lessons from that. Tom hit the nail on the head earlier. In other parts, there has been a willingness to be more brutal, if I can put it that way, about the approach taken to car users by significantly reducing the amount of car parking available in city centres and taking other steps designed specifically to make it more attractive to use public transport. In any society, we can only go as fast as there is a will to do so, and I think that, at this stage, we are still building the will to take those further steps. Is there something that you want to add, Tom?

**Mr Reid:** Yes. There is the issue of will. A big challenge is population density in Northern Ireland; the Audit Office report highlights it as a key determinant of the ability to deliver public transport. It is worth putting in context that research suggests that you need a population density of between 50 to 80 people per hectare to make public transport financially viable. Anything below 30 people per hectare almost rules out viable commercial public transport. The most densely populated part of Northern Ireland is Belfast, where there are 25 people per hectare.

Outside Belfast, there are very low levels of population density, which makes it difficult to deliver a public transport system to meet needs. To address that, we have tried to focus on where we can get the concentrations of population. Those are points where people in rural areas, for example, will access the strategic network, which is the build-up of park-and-ride Goldliner services to try to address that. However, population density creates difficulties. You cannot compare us with England, Wales or Scotland. The key thing in Scotland is that the majority of the population lives in a major urban belt between Glasgow and Edinburgh, so there is the opportunity to deliver public transport in a way that we simply cannot in Northern Ireland. In England itself, you are dealing with a largely urban-based society.

**Mr Rogers:** Do you get my difficulty? When you have no targets, it is very hard to monitor. How can we measure this if there are no targets?

**Mr Reid:** We have set the commitment and the new approach that we will set modal shift targets at Northern Ireland and Belfast level.

**Mr Rogers:** When you talk about modal shift and car-parking spaces, and so on, are you sending out mixed messages in that we are creating park-and-ride sites and bus lanes, but at the same time, increasing the number of car-parking spaces in the city centre?

**Mr May:** There is no increase in the number of car-parking spaces, other than through private providers. There is no public increase. Off-street car parks have just been transferred to councils as they are, but, when councils decide what they will do with them, we will, obviously, seek to influence that in respect of the wider transportation policy. It is not that there has been an increase; there has not been an attempt to deliberately reduce the number of car-parking spaces in Belfast, for example.

**Mr Rogers:** I am sure that you are aware of major developments in Belfast, such as Victoria Square.

**Mr May:** If private providers seek to provide car parks, there is a limit to what government can or should aim to do about that.

**Mr Rogers:** If they want to incentivise the use of park and ride, the number of public car-parking spaces should be reduced.

**Mr May:** There is a case for that. It goes to what is seen as acceptable to the community. In fact, as has been highlighted, park and ride is heavily subscribed. It is not that there is a problem in getting people to use park and ride; we are already finding a number of sites at which there is greater demand than supply. Mr Beggs highlighted one in particular. So, I do not think that the proportion of people willing to use park and ride will be directly affected if private-sector providers seek to bring a car park into being.

**Mr Rogers:** How many car-parking spaces are there for public servants in Belfast? Has that number increased?

**Mr May:** There is a significant number, although I do not think that there has been an increase. DFP is about to have a review of the number of car-parking spaces. As Tom highlighted, DRD has sought to take actions specifically in the active travel area. We have 50 bike spaces in Clarence Court and are looking to extend that to as many as 150, potentially. We have some car-share spaces. We are doing a workplace travel plan at the moment, a likely result of which is that that number will be increased and the number available to single-use drivers will decrease. We take our responsibility seriously and want to take a lead in how all of that works.

**Mr Rogers:** Does the Northern Ireland Holding Company still own car parks in Belfast city centre?

**Mr Strahan:** Yes.

**Mr Rogers:** Is that consistent with the public transport objectives?

**Mr Strahan:** Personally, I do not see a conflict. If we look at an integrated public transport system, we will see that there is a necessity to provide parking spaces, particularly around the Enterprise, and so on, for people who are travelling to Dublin. The income that we get from those car parks is used to subsidise the public transport system. That money does not disappear; all of it is ploughed back into the public transport system. So, the provision of those car-parking spaces subsidises public transport.

**Mr Beggs:** You indicated that the Department of Finance and Personnel will review the publicly funded car-parking spaces for civil servants in the middle of Belfast. How many staff in the Department for Regional Development utilise publicly funded car-parking spaces in the middle of Belfast when they do not use their car as part of their normal duties? For many, it is a perk rather than an essential requirement.

**Mr May:** Clarence Court has a car park, which is the main site that DRD uses in Belfast. It is a car park with, I think, 260 spaces. We share that building with colleagues from the Department of the Environment and the Department for Employment and Learning. I do not have the specific breakdown, but there are, possibly, about 200 spaces available. The basis on which people receive spaces is that they are designated as essential users; in other words, they can demonstrate that they have an ongoing need for the regular use of a car outside Belfast. As I said, we are looking at all that and at how the distribution of car parking spaces works going forward.

**Mr Beggs:** In the review of the number of civil servants, are you revising carefully how many essentially need those car parking spaces, which are paid for from limited public funds?

**Mr May:** This car park is attached to the building, and DFP owns it, but there is no charge other than an opportunity cost for what the car park would otherwise be used for.

**Mr Beggs:** Could it be rented out to the private sector for its use as well?

**Mr May:** In theory, yes. I am saying that there is an opportunity cost, rather than a direct charge.

**Mr McGrath:** It is worth noting as well that we make the e-car available, which we sponsor, for those staff who have to travel around Belfast or beyond during the day. People can come in by public transport, and if they have a meeting during the day in here, for example, they can use the e-car, bring it back to the building and go home by public transport again. That is one of the measures that we are taking to change the balance.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** I want to ask about reviews. I know that some people talked about the efficiency of the Belfast to Dublin line, especially the first train in the morning. It would be beneficial for many people who travel to Dublin from Belfast for early morning meetings to have that service a bit earlier, Mr Strahan. Is there any way that that will be reviewed in the long term?

**Mr Strahan:** In the very long term, we ideally want to get to the electrification of that line and to a truly hourly service. You will be aware that, in the shorter term, we are seeking to develop the Great Victoria Street site into an integrated transport facility and to move the Enterprise service to commence from that site, which will make it slightly more central than Central Station. I am not aware of any plans at the moment to put an earlier service on the Dublin line, but it is something that we can certainly consider. I will come back to you on that.

**Mr Dallat:** On the same subject, the Belfast to Dublin service is supposed to be a high-speed, intercity service between two capital cities, but it is not. Increasingly, people are choosing buses between Belfast and Dublin because they are faster. When is somebody going to recognise that massive investment is needed, as well as a proper, dedicated line that is not competing with the DART service in the suburbs of Dublin? Why do we have to go abroad to some of the poorest countries in the world to see good transport systems?

**Mr Strahan:** You are right; the speed of the Belfast to Dublin service is determined by the condition of the track. If you look at our entire network in Northern Ireland, you see that the top speed that we reach is somewhere between 70 mph and 90 mph. In Britain, you will see speeds in excess of 100 mph. You are right to identify that it will require massive investment in the future, and where we want to get to with the electrification of the line will require massive investment. In the straitened times that we are in, there are obviously very hard decisions to be made about investment priorities.

**Mr Dallat:** I come here by car. I could go to Ballymoney and catch the train, and I could go to Central Station and get a bus up here. I do that occasionally, but not often. Every morning, I have an opportunity, usually outside Belfast City Airport or thereabouts, to see thousands of cars heading into Belfast with only one person in them. Then I realise that I am hypocritical about this. I imagine that if I were to ask you how many of you came here by public transport this afternoon, I would find that not one of you did.

**Mr Reid:** I did.

**Mr Dallat:** Tom, I am going to give you 10 out of 10 for that, because you clearly demonstrated that you absolutely and fundamentally believe in the job that you are doing. However, there are not enough of you, and that is the problem. There is no point in us sitting here wringing our hands and saying how wonderful it would be if everybody except us used public transport. How do we do it?

I imagine, Tom, you did not come here because you knew Dallat would ask you how you got here. Tell the world why you did it.

**Mr Reid:** Why did I come here by public transport?

**Mr Dallat:** Yes.

**Mr Reid:** John, you know I travel quite a distance on a normal day, and I car share when doing so. I think that the more you travel, the less you want to drive. On public transport, you can relax and read your papers. It is a much more relaxing way to travel than driving.

**Mr Dallat:** Can we hear that message far more often?

**Mr Reid:** It is one of the things that should not be missed in the investment that is being taken forward in the RTS. The public transport network has been transformed. I think we can all recall being students travelling home on buses and how uncomfortable and cold it was. The experience is wonderful now compared with that.

**Mr Dallat:** Tom, you are right, because outside the George Best Belfast City Airport, I am sitting beside one of the most modern railway links. This Assembly put £40 million into it. Right enough, it should have been only £13 million, and the rest was overspend. We then put the new trains on it, yet thousands of cars are going past with one person in each as the train goes past at 70mph. Is that not failure?

**Mr Reid:** That takes us right back to the point that was made in the RTS, which was that investment in public transport infrastructure itself is not enough to drive a modal shift. You need the demand management measures, but those can be taken forward only where there is public or political support.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** I do not like to burst your bubble, Tom, but I am going to. I believe there is an inequality, particularly in the rural areas, and I represent a rural area. You have that pleasure of using public transport, but someone coming from a rural area does not.

**Mr Reid:** Can I point out, I actually am coming from a rural area, but it is where park-and-ride —

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** West of the Bann?

**Mr Reid:** West of the Bann, yes. OK? *[Laughter.]*

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** OK, you are very lucky.

**Mr Reid:** The only reason I can use that service is because of the fantastic investment in park-and-ride and in the Goldliner service, which has made public transport as quick and attractive as taking a car, and, in fact, cheaper.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** If you do not mind me asking, what part of the west do you come from? We have to highlight the good where there is good.

**Mr Reid:** A tiny place high up in the mountains — Swatragh.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Not exactly Strabane, but —

**Mr Reid:** No, equally remote, of course.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Equally remote.

**Mr Clarke:** Tom, just while we are on that subject, do you enjoy free public transport, like all the employees and families of Translink?

**Mr Reid:** No.

**Mr Clarke:** That is OK. I just wanted to clear that up. *[Laughter.]* He has slapped us both down today.

I looked at your profile, and I saw that you are not employed by Translink. Translink employees have an advantage. I think that all its staff and their families get free public transport. That is why I asked the question. I will not embarrass you, David, because you did not confess to coming by public transport today. However, I know where you live, and I do not think there are many trains or buses where you live.

**Mr Strahan:** He knows where I live. Sounds ominous. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Clarke:** I applaud you for the work that you have done at Translink since November. I will always applaud you, until you go down in my estimation, which you have not done yet.

If we go back to one of the benchmarking graphs, where the ratio between management and staff is relatively high, why did it take you to come in last November to change that? Why did some of your predecessors not recognise that? According to the graph I am looking at, that has been going on since 2006.

Sorry, that is unfair. Why, John, when someone in your Department should have been watching how Translink was spending the pennies when you were subsidising it, was it not challenged about its over-bureaucratic organisation in the ratio that compares it with other people delivering a similar service?

**Mr McGrath:** That is a fair question. That was highlighted in the TAS report, and we have been pressing Translink in recent years. It is fair to say it has taken the energy in the organisation that David has brought to make significant progress. Those are fair questions. The Department probably should have taken a more robust approach in the past in the face of that. That is particularly the case when times are tight. Sometimes when resources are plentiful, organisations get a bit complacent.

**Mr Clarke:** Complacent, yes, but just because our pockets are full, that does not necessarily mean that we should be extravagant in the wrong areas.

**Mr McGrath:** No, you are absolutely right.

**Mr Clarke:** You have been about since 2010, so I can pick on you.

**Mr McGrath:** No, you cannot. I have not been around since 2010, no.

**Mr Clarke:** I can; definitely. I feel you have got it reasonably easy today.

**Mr McGrath:** I know, but I have not been here since 2010.

**Mr Clarke:** Have you not? Sorry. When did you come?

**Mr McGrath:** January last year.

**Mr Clarke:** Right, sorry. So, I cannot pick on you, John.

All joking aside, the organisation came from a position in 2006, and the scope of this report goes to 2011. It has taken a change of the leadership in the organisation, the chief executive, to look at that efficiency. That change came only because he had a challenging financial position that was passed down. I know you are doing that, David, but the timing of your coming into post focuses minds. What is very clear is that, whoever did the job prior to you, did not do it. They did not recognise where efficiencies in the organisation could have been found. If you look at some of the partners doing this in other areas, you will find that the ratio is there to be seen. We are operating at a level that is five times worse than some of the best.

**Mr May:** I think that some of those ratios are a bit misleading, because the providers supply services to more than one area, and they will have their head office somewhere that may not be in that area. They may also have quite limited management of costs. We accept, and I think Translink accepts, that more can be done, and that is why it is taking the action that it is on management costs. Some of the graphs in the report can be misleading, in that they do not represent true like-for-like comparisons.

**Mr Clarke:** I will give you that one, Peter. However, seeing as we are on the public record, Northern Ireland is the worst, compared with all those other ones. We are still probably sitting at double the average of all those other ones.

**Mr May:** I am not hiding the fact that there is work to be done. That is why a TAS report was done in 2013, identifying the need to meet management savings. David was already working up a plan to deliver significant savings in-year. It is true that the plan has been extended and expanded to meet some of the financial pressures in-year and to go beyond where we had originally planned to go. Action was already being taken before the financial downturn hit.

**Mr Strahan:** That was the point. The change in management structure was already gathering pace prior to the financial cuts. It is made all the more important by the financial pressures we are facing, and it is timely, now that we are doing it. It may be worth highlighting that we are seeking to take out up to 60 individuals from the organisation's management and administration overhead. We have launched a voluntary exit scheme. The expression of interest for that closed roughly, I think, two to three weeks ago, and we have around 210 expressions of interest. I am reasonably confident that we will achieve the £3.1 million that we have set out to achieve.

**Mr Clarke:** I think it is important to get that on the public record, because the media is very quick to say that, whilst you or others will identify that you can streamline organisations, the key in all this is, as you said, that you are in a situation where you have had 210 applications. How many do you need?

**Mr Strahan:** We are seeking up to 60.

**Mr Clarke:** So, you are at almost four times your initial requirement. The point I am trying to make, David, and why it is important to get it on public record, is that while the media likes to twist this to say that Translink is axing some of their workers, this is a voluntary scheme.

**Mr Strahan:** Yes.

**Mr Clarke:** It is a restructuring of an organisation that will bring about efficiencies that should have been there previously. However, we are where we are. Many out there like to scaremonger about how you and other organisations will arrive at that point. That has to be applauded, but those 210 applications say to me that 210 people are actively interested in the scheme, not that they will necessarily follow through, but there is a genuine interest in it.

**Mr Strahan:** Yes. Since we are on public record, and because I like to be really clear, as everyone knows, I will say that we are seeking up to 60, and there have been 210 expressions of interest. Those individuals are now receiving their statements, which will indicate what it would mean for them if they were to go. Once they receive that, they will put up their hand and say, "Yes, I want to go", or, "No, I do not". So, there are 210 expressions of interest, but I am encouraged by the fact that it is well oversubscribed, and I am very optimistic and positive that we will achieve the savings that we want to achieve. I am determined to achieve them.

**Mr Clarke:** Another point to make is that local government should be applauded, because it saw what was coming in the review of public administration. I know that there was what was nearly an embargo on filling some senior management positions, so, again, efficiencies were made in the local government sector by not filling places. What is your position on that where Translink is concerned?

**Mr Strahan:** We have had a recruitment freeze. I cannot tell you the exact date, but it was imposed within days or a couple of weeks of my joining the organisation, so it would have been around November or December last year. We are seeking to reduce our workforce in the least costly way possible. So, a recruitment freeze has been in place, albeit that, where a role is essential, there is an approval process to go through to make sure that the position is filled.

**Mr Beggs:** I am not really satisfied with your answers to Trevor. He asked why you were so slow to change this. John McGrath said that the question was reasonable, but I did not hear an answer. I did not hear why. Many well-paid senior staff in the Department for Regional Development ought to have been aware that Translink has been paid twice as much as its comparators for managing its bus services.

Similarly, why did the NITHCo board not bring about efficiencies? Ultimately, permanent secretary, you are responsible for this. We are not talking about going back just a year or two since the cuts came in. If you look at the figures going back to 2006 and compare Ulsterbus with Stagecoach Devon, Stagecoach Scotland and Arriva in Cumbria, you see that Ulsterbus is operating at almost

twice the management costs of those similar bodies. I will ask the permanent secretary this: what responsibility do you and your Department hold for that?

**Mr May:** I already explained that there are some differences in the figures. The other key difference —

**Mr Beggs:** Are there any differences in Stagecoach Scotland? Is its headquarters outside Scotland?

**Mr May:** Stagecoach Scotland —

**Mr Beggs:** We have been given —

**Mr May:** I do not know where the headquarters are of Stagecoach in Devon or Stagecoach in Lincolnshire. I would need to explore that.

**Mr Beggs:** We have been given comparator groups to consider. From what I can see, we are the worst. Not only that, but we are well below the average, so we are not picking out individual areas. Do you accept those as reasonable comparators?

**Mr May:** I explained why I think they offer a distorted picture, but I also said that —

**Mr Beggs:** All of them, or just First Devon and Cornwall?

**Mr May:** Some of them, at least. I have not gone into the detail of each of them.

**Mr Beggs:** So, you do not know. You are telling us the headquarter costs for elsewhere but that now you do not know.

**Mr May:** I am very happy to answer the question.

**Mr Beggs:** Can you tell me which of these have headquarters costs outside the region?

**Mr May:** First Devon and Cornwall do. I am not clear how the Stagecoach management structure works, but the fact that there are three Stagecoach areas suggests that there will be a head office for Stagecoach somewhere else, in addition to management costs on the ground. I am happy to explore that in greater detail in due course and to come back to you to explain how it all works.

The report that the Department commissioned in 2013 shone a light on this, and action has been taken since then. I am not in a position to explain what knowledge there was about relative management costs prior to that. I think that there was not visibility before then, otherwise action would have been taken at that point.

**Mr Beggs:** Do you accept that that is a failure by senior civil servants and the NITHCo board? Look at the figures going back to 2006.

**Mr McGrath:** It depends where those data were available. These data are from a report commissioned by us in —

**Mr Beggs:** Should you not have been asking for data to be available —

**Mr McGrath:** — in 2013.

**Mr Beggs:** Should you not have been asking? Would seeing how our management costs compare with comparative areas not have been a reasonable job to do? Would doing that not have been reasonable?

**Mr McGrath:** Some of us were not there at the time. I agree that it is a not unreasonable question to ask.

**Mr Beggs:** What is the answer?

**Mr May:** I suspect that the question was being asked and that there were difficulties comparing like with like. Therefore, there was a bit of smoke and mirrors, and it was quite hard to identify what the position was until this report was undertaken. There was then greater clarity.

**Mr Beggs:** Will you assure us that, in future, you will be comparing yourselves with comparable bodies and will not use that as a smokescreen to not say how you can improve efficiency and provide a better service at better value for Ulsterbus users in Northern Ireland?

**Mr May:** One of the recommendations in this report is about benchmarking. I said that we are accepting all the recommendations, so I am very happy to offer that commitment.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Roy, do you want to ask your question?

**Mr Beggs:** Looking at benchmarking through figures 27 and 34 at paragraphs 5.32 and 5.48 respectively and at the performance of Ulsterbus and Northern Ireland Railways, we see that the differences are again quite striking.

**Mr May:** They show quite different levels of satisfaction for Metro bus and Northern Ireland Railways against comparators.

**Mr Beggs:** I am trying to understand why one section of the organisation that provides public transport — I am talking about Northern Ireland Railways — is showing very good results for its customer quality of service parameters, including punctuality, cleanliness and comfort and other practical measures, such as helpfulness of staff and value for money. Northern Ireland Railways comes out in the upper echelons against comparable organisations that provide rail services in the United Kingdom. That is a very good result for Northern Ireland Railways. However, when we look at Metro services, we see that the converse is the case. I am trying to understand why there is such a difference between the two organisations.

**Mr May:** We covered some of the reasons already. I will ask David to say a bit more about that in detail.

**Mr Strahan:** We do not believe that it is normal practice to compare bus and rail services. Generally, you benchmark bus with bus and rail with rail. However, notwithstanding that, it is a very helpful comparison. There are factors in Northern Ireland Railways that are entirely under our control. For example, we have much greater control over the punctuality of our rail services than we do over buses, where there are many more external factors, if you like, that can affect the punctuality of bus services.

Notwithstanding that, we believe that, in our organisation, there are learnings from the railways for our bus business. That is what the new integrated management is designed to achieve. The internal workings of Translink in the past have comprised a bus division and a rail division, which have been managed separately. In the restructuring of our organisation, I am seeking to make sure that we have an integrated management and that the learnings for the bus business are brought across from the rail side of the business. I hope that, in future, internally in Translink, we will not refer to a bus business and a rail business but to a Translink business and that we achieve greater integration.

I accept that there are things that we can learn in the bus side of the business. However, it is a very different business not only because of external influences but because our bus drivers work on their own for long periods, which creates its own customer service challenges. I accept that there are learnings.

**Mr Beggs:** You indicated that some punctuality issues are outside your control because of traffic flow, etc. A cashless payment system was mentioned. That is clearly within your control, and it could improve punctuality without impinging on other road users. Why has it taken so long to move towards a cashless system?

**Mr Strahan:** We have been seeking to sweat the asset that we have in place. A new ticketing system is a very significant investment that will be somewhere in the order of £30 million to £40 million. We now recognise that, number one, the world has moved on, and, number two, that, although our system is not outdated, it is reaching the end of its useful life. We are seeking to procure a new system that

will make boarding times much faster and move people away from cash. The percentage of our passengers who pay by cash is too high, and we want to encourage people off cash because it is cheaper to pay using a card. We seek to do that not only through our fare structure but through an education programme. A new integrated ticketing system will make it much easier to use cards.

**Mr Beggs:** To justify a new system, does Translink have to build that into its capital programme, or does the Department build it into its programme?

**Mr May:** Translink is facing quite significant financial pressures. In the past, it has been able to self-fund quite significant amounts of its own capital but not for big projects. A project of this scale will cost between £30 million and £40 million, and it will be looking for some input from the Department, given where Translink is now, not least because we reduced the level of grant last year and have reduced it further this year. Translink will be pretty much entirely dependent on departmental funding for major capital events, of which integrated ticketing is one. Translink will be looking to the Department for funding for a means to run Belfast rapid transit and its consequences, the whole back-office piece for Translink and the Belfast transport hub.

**Mr Beggs:** Can one ticketless system provide the technology for both Translink and the new high-speed travel systems in Belfast?

**Mr Strahan:** Yes.

**Mr Beggs:** Does the Department recognise that, whilst it may cost tens of millions of pounds, there is potential in punctuality and ultimate passenger experience, and the cost may show value for money. The cost of making physical improvements to the roads to achieve that may cost even more.

**Mr May:** We are already investing in the routes, of course, and putting money into them. We see these areas as priorities. We do not get to control the level of budget that we are set by the Executive, so I cannot give a guarantee that we will find the funding, but I can say that these are priority areas. Our Minister is keen to find the money to support these initiatives.

**Mr Beggs:** I have one further question. The Metro bus service came seventh out of, I think, eight comparable regions for cleanliness, yet Northern Ireland Railways scored very highly and came second among its comparable areas. What lessons can be learned from that? Essentially, both services have Translink staff. How will you ensure that customer satisfaction is greatly improved so that people are encouraged to continue to use bus and rail services?

**Mr Strahan:** The presentation and cleanliness of our bus fleet is very important. I absolutely recognise that, based on these rankings, it is not acceptable, and we will take forward measures to address that. I do not mean to hark back to our restructuring, but it is designed to make sure that there is a very clear line of responsibility in our organisation for the presentation of our fleet. I am hopeful that that will show a much better cleanliness ranking.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Before I move on to Mr McKay, I want to ask a question of David and the Department. The report does not cover this issue, but it does cover customer satisfaction. How many of the buses have voice automation for people who are blind or have sight impairment? Do any of our buses have that in place?

**Mr Strahan:** Yes, they do. I cannot give you the numbers off the top of my head. I do not wish to do that and mislead you. If you wish, I can confirm the numbers after the meeting. We have invested in that.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** What investment has there been in the structure of our buses for people with disabilities?

**Mr Strahan:** There has been a significant investment. In our new bus fleet, the buses are wheelchair accessible and all have a specific area for wheelchair users. They are also kneeling buses, which makes entry much easier. It is now part of our DNA to make sure that our services are accessible.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Thank you. Perhaps you could provide me with the figures for those buses.

**Mr McKay:** I want to ask about the breakdown between public transport and roads funding. The RTS's planned expenditure was 62% for roads and 35% for public transport. However, roads came in at 70% and public transport at 28%, which, in my view, was hugely disappointing. We then go on to 2013-14, which showed a divide of 85% for roads and 15% for public transport. Given what happened with the A5 road scheme, it came in more favourably at 77% for roads and 23% for public transport. The situation does not appear to me to be improving. Certainly, if you look at the figures for public transport expenditure per head, we are at the bottom of the pile, whereas Scotland is soaring ahead. Do we have any figures for 2014-15 or any estimates for what the percentage breakdown might be for that year?

**Mr May:** I will write to you. The figures are readily available, but I do not have them with me today.

**Mr McKay:** Are they any better?

**Mr May:** I do not think that they show a significant difference. As I said, part of the purpose of the RTS was to increase investment against both areas, because there was a problem with the infrastructure in roads and public transport. In part, at least, we respond to priorities that are set, some of which are Executive priorities about major road schemes. At the moment, there is a particular focus on ensuring connectivity between our major towns and cities, which is why the main focus has been on the A8, A5 and A6 road schemes and so on, and there has been a significant investment in the A1 during the period of the regional transportation strategy. All those have some benefit for buses in particular because buses use those routes. There has also been massive investment in public transport over the period. Could more be done? The answer is always yes, and we have highlighted that there are two or three major public transport initiatives coming forward that are likely to require a shift in the overall distribution if they are to be delivered. We will have to see what priorities Ministers and the Executive set going forward.

**Mr McKay:** Do you accept that, in terms of investment in public transport and putting it first, we are the worst of any jurisdiction in both these islands? We clearly put public transport in second place compared with the single car users to whom John referred.

**Mr May:** I accept the findings in figure 4. I am not arguing that that is an inaccurate reflection of the per head expenditure in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McKay:** How are we supposed to improve public transport if the funding is going in the wrong direction?

**Mr May:** It might have gone in the wrong direction in the very last year of that graph, but it does show that, by and large, the gap has been closing since 2004. Although a gap remains, some of it is down to the nature of the existing public transport systems. At the moment, we do not have a rapid transit system, an underground system, trams or anything like that. Other big cities have different sorts of transport infrastructure, and that tends to make a difference. However, I recognise your point that, even after you take that into account, there still remains a gap.

**Mr McGrath:** As people expect, Scotland essentially comes out top. There is a general perception that Scotland does better out of Barnett. Tom made a point about the scale for public transport systems. To take advantage of it, you need to invest, and that is what is happening.

**Mr Reid:** On the issue of scale, as Peter says, we do not have underground or rapid transit systems. I think that our rail network — David can correct me if I am wrong — is about 300 kilometres or 300 miles in comparison with 24,000 kilometres in GB. It costs about £60 million a year to maintain the rail network in Northern Ireland. If we try to factor that up, it will distort the figures on the need for investment in public transport to maintain the basic asset.

**Mr McKay:** I accept that we are starting from a low base, and the decision many years ago to do away with much of the railway network still haunts us all. That is why it is more frustrating that the figures on public transport investment are so low: 85% to 15%. Given that we are starting from a low scale, it is totally the wrong priority. I accept that much of this is down to politicians like us prioritising roads over public transport. Take the example of the York Street interchange, which I am not entirely familiar with. The members who are on the Committee for Regional Development will be more familiar with that. People have said to me: what if the money that has been invested in that to address congestion

were instead to go into public transport or greenway proposals such as the one in east Belfast? Would you not address the same congestion through other measures?

**Mr May:** I do not think that you would. The greenway in itself will not significantly reduce congestion.

**Mr McKay:** I mean a combination of public transport and cycling being encouraged.

**Mr May:** The biggest bottleneck, as everybody knows, is around York Street. The driver there is not merely for car users; there is a significant economic driver in the passage of freight, lorries and so on. There are wider economic benefits at play than purely travel-to-work times and congestion. You are right to say that a decision could be taken to spend all that money on something else, and that would make a radical difference to the something else that the money is spent on. At the moment, the priorities that we are following, which are set by Ministers, are to proceed with the York Street interchange. It will not start for some years. It is subject to change, obviously, but that is the prioritisation that we are working under.

**Mr McKay:** How much of this is down to cultural change? I have heard some issues being raised about the design of the York Street interchange and that cycling seemed to be an afterthought. Changes are needed to ensure that cyclists are accommodated and are treated as a priority or at least equal to other road users.

**Mr May:** I have heard similar things and took a specific briefing from the officials responsible for the York Street interchange in order to understand the provision of cycling. There is a multi-carriageway on the Westlink running up to the M2, but it would not be normal to make significant cycling provision on a road of that nature. Very clear cycling arrangements are being set up, and there are enhanced measures, which, I hope, will come forward in due course. We understand that a public inquiry still has to be gone through, and representations have to be made. I think that there is still scope to secure a greater input for cyclists as a result of that.

**Mr McKay:** I have a quick supplementary question. How much would the electrification of the Belfast-Dublin line cost, and how much of an economic driver would that be in the same way as the York Street interchange would be?

**Mr May:** I do not think that there are any detailed costed plans. I certainly have not seen any. I will ask David whether he has an estimate. David was right to say that this is a long-term proposition. It is not currently on any of our planning horizons. At this stage, I am not aware of any prototype for what that might look like, what it might cost or when it might be delivered.

**Mr Strahan:** It is aspirational at this point. There is no detailed capital plan, but you can be sure that it is hundreds of millions of pounds. Through the Belfast hub, we are trying to make the Belfast-Dublin and the Derry-Belfast-Dublin route, with the Derry-Coleraine line upgrade, a more integrated line and create a greater facility at Great Victoria Street for the Belfast-Dublin service. In fact, lots of people whom I meet say, "Why is this service leaving from Central? It should go from Belfast city centre". We agree with that, and the Belfast hub project will deliver it. I think that that will help to improve the service.

**Mr McKay:** With long-term aspirations, other than electrification, will that extend to Derry, or will it just be Belfast-Dublin?

**Mr Strahan:** Again, it will depend on the availability of capital. At the moment, our focus is on delivering the upgrade to the Derry-Coleraine line, which has been subject to much debate. Improving that service and, ultimately, delivering the hourly service to Derry is what we all want to see.

**Mr Girvan:** Thank you for coming along this afternoon. I will focus on skills, as covered in paragraphs 3.21 to 3.25, and the recommendation. There seems to be a skills shortage. Even though we mention having a large proportion of management, there still appears to be a major skills gap in the organisation to deal with one of the Department's main functions. How does the Department propose to carry that forward and deal with it in the short term?

**Mr May:** Thank you for that question. It is an important area. To differentiate, we have been talking a lot about management costs in Translink. This is about skills in the Department. We accept that we need more skills and have taken the first steps down that path. Currently, there are two transport planners in post in the Department who are working to develop a new transport model. Once that model is in place, we will be looking to staff up a transport planning team. In the current context, that is subject to budget availability, but we estimate that we would need a total of six to 10 professionally qualified staff. As a further step, we are bringing in a managed service framework contract that will allow us to draw on specialist skills as we need them. This is not the only approach to employ people. We may look to bring in some specialist skills. We have specialist skills in the Department outside of those two transport planners. A number of people came into the organisation as transport planners and have moved into the broader administrative grades, but they are still working in this area and have the expertise that they can bring to bear. We have to accept that you tend to go into cycles of transport planning and that the level of resource you need will wax and wane through different stages of that cycle. The report helpfully highlights that we are at the point at which the need for those skills is about to grow. Arguably, we are behind where we need to be in securing those skills.

**Mr Girvan:** Thank you for your answer, but I find it difficult to comprehend. As an organisation, the Department for Regional Development has a key responsibility to ensure that our transport areas are dealt with and that our public transport is delivered properly. It has been doing that for many years, so there is a legacy. Why are you only now waking up to that fact? All that I hear about now are additional costs. Why were those people not key staff in the existing function? It is a key function that the Department should be, and should have been, undertaking. We then hear that there will be an opportunity to call on experts. I am extremely reluctant to call on consultants as experts, because many consultants whom I know are experts on whatever they are being paid to do, no matter what it is. They will develop something or get you somebody who is a so-called expert, whether that person is an academic or someone who has real practical experience of delivering. I am not totally sold on the idea of getting value for money from consultants. How can the Department adequately ensure that it is managing those consultants right if they do not have adequate experience in the organisation to do so?

**Mr May:** The point that I was trying to make was that, during the last cycle, we had a number of transport planners in the organisation. They are still there, but they are not working in their professional specialism; they are working in general administrative grades. We will look at how we enhance that level of expertise.

Let me be clear: we are not going to use management consultants. We are talking about professional qualifications that we may need for such a short time that it would not make sense to recruit someone into a full-time role. Tom, would you like to say something more about how it will work?

**Mr Reid:** It is important to highlight that, until quite recently, transport planning was not a distinct professional qualification. Transport planners tended to be chartered engineers or chartered town planners. Figure 8 highlights the number of engineers in the Department, and quite a few have transport planning experience, but transport planning is not the main element of their job at the minute. However, they can draw on that experience, because they will be taking forward projects on the development of public transport or roads infrastructure.

**Mr Girvan:** I have heard of many organisations, mainly in the private sector, that bring somebody in to help them through a process. Those organisations learn through that process so that, if they ever had to revisit such a matter, they have already built up the skills to be able to do what they paid somebody else for previously.

**Mr Reid:** The important point in this, as Peter said, is that we are planning to establish a fully resourced transport planning team. However, there will be various stages in that project. Detailed assessments are required, for which you have to bring in specialist expertise, and the managed services framework allows us to do that.

**Mr Girvan:** Will there be a learning process from that to ensure that you take that knowledge on board? I appreciate that many bad things happened during the Second World War, but certain cities in Germany — I am sure that many of you have had the opportunity to visit some of them — were virtually obliterated by carpet bombing. British and American engineers used that opportunity to redesign those cities, their transport hubs and everything else around them. It was not really rocket science.

I have been to cities in Germany that you would not dream of taking your car into because the public transport system is so efficient. It probably took a lot of initial investment, but it is so efficient that you would not want to use your car. It is cheaper to get on and off public transport, and you are sure that, within seven minutes at any point, you will get on some form of public transport. Such efficiency has driven up the popularity of public transport, and so many people now use it that there is no point in trying to bring your car into a city centre. I am thinking of Hamburg in particular.

**Mr May:** We will definitely seek to learn from the specialists whom we need to use. It is not realistic to think that all skills will be available in the Department at all times to the level needed. In any system, particularly in major engineering and transport planning organisations, you need a mixed economy to make things work effectively.

**Mr Girvan:** You said that a number of individuals were recruited with skills in certain areas who are not now making use of those skills. I take it that they will be put into positions in which they will deal with that. That is proper workforce planning. It is like a hospital saying, "We have a brain surgeon, but we don't have many jobs for brain surgeons, so he is brushing the corridors, but we will bring him back in when we need him".

**Mr May:** I can certainly be clear that people are doing skilled jobs. They may not be doing jobs in which they need to use their professional qualifications in the way that they would have, but we make good use of people. We will be looking at how we use the skills that we have. Equally, some people may have decided to change their career path, and we need to recognise and respect individual choice as well as organisational need and get the right balance.

**Mr Girvan:** I believe that the Department needs to ensure that it has adequate skills and abilities to be able to challenge Translink to ensure that it is meeting its targets and key objectives.

**Mr May:** That takes us largely into a different space around governance and the way in which Translink conducts its financial business, achieves its objectives and adheres to the management statement and financial memorandum. We have a sponsor division in which, I believe, we have the appropriate skills required to provide that challenge function. Clearly, John and I are part of that function as well. We have a key role to play and we seek to exercise that in a proper fashion.

**Mr Dallat:** I am sorry that I was absent for a wee while. Mr Strahan, others have already complimented you on your performance in such a short time and I just want to add my good wishes to you for the future. I think the best man has won, and I wish you all the best. I take comfort from the fact that you will be here until September and that much of what you plan to change will change. If I were to add anything to that, it would be that we cannot have an organisation that runs itself. Somebody needs to scrutinise it and ask what is going on, even with the best will in the world and the best staff.

On the subject of staff, this is an opportunity for me to pay tribute to the staff who work on the trains and the buses. The one that gets singled out to me frequently is the 212 service. The women and men on that bus are outstanding. Their customers are their personal friends and they take an interest in them. That is, perhaps, one key way in which public transport can become more attractive. I wrote to you in the recent past to pass comment on the staff of the Belfast to Derry train, where the same thing happens. It would sadden me if one of the economic measures that you were to take would be to start making redundancies among the very people who are the backbone of the organisation that you have had the privilege of heading up for a short time. I hope that the emphasis is on getting more passengers rather than culling the whole heart of the organisation.

I do not want to go on too long, but I was a teacher for 30 years and I know that your drivers saved children's lives day and daily by stopping them crossing the road, helping them through their adolescence and keeping them right. I know that they have been honoured for that time and again but it never got into the news, so I just wanted to mention it.

The whole idea of an agency that maybe would have, to some extent, satisfied my concerns that things could be improved did not happen. Why was the agency idea knocked on the head?

**Mr May:** When the proposal came forward, there were two main factors that meant that it was not proceeded with. The first was that, across the Executive, and, indeed, in the Assembly I believe, there was a drive not to increase and, indeed, to seek to reduce the number of non-departmental bodies and Executive agencies and to move to have more direct accountability of the key elements of

organisations to Ministers and the Assembly. The second factor, as John outlined earlier, was essentially about finance and the different financial environment. John may want to expand on that point.

**Mr McGrath:** As I said earlier, the passage of time meant that, when the agency was being considered, it was in a context where the entire drift of the public sector was going in the other direction to reduce the number of arm's-length bodies and, particularly, under a devolved Administration, to get more direct accountability to the Executive and the Assembly. Given the incoming cost pressures around setting up a public body for, as we discussed earlier, a small population — a body that might not deliver any economies of scale — the judgement was made that that was not a priority. It is still not clear whether any evidence has been brought forward to suggest that that has been to the detriment of any aspect of the oversight or delivery of the public transport system.

**Mr Dallat:** John, as an experienced civil servant — if we are allowed to use that term — do you not feel that there is a need for change? It does not matter how good the chief executive is; a sea change is needed. We have seen that in the past year. We will discuss this separately, but we saw the fiasco of the Belfast to Derry upgrade. We have seen how the Committee for Regional Development and the Consumer Council were treated, not being consulted about fare increases. Surely there is something badly missing. We have a board, which I mentioned at the beginning, and you, with multiple appointments, appointed to it as chairman. What hope is there for people like me and Tom Reid, who absolutely live public transport, when you carry on with an outdated, clapped-out set-up like that, where nobody challenges anybody?

**Mr McGrath:** We do not accept that nobody challenges anybody. There is rigorous governance —

**Mr Dallat:** Sorry, John. I do not want to talk over you, because that is rude, but I serve on the Regional Development Committee, and we sat for six months without knowing that the whole procurement contract was up the left.

**Mr McGrath:** We have discussed that in another place and shared as much as we can about what is still a live procurement issue that the Minister is doing his level best to bring to a conclusion. When that process is concluded, I have little doubt that the Committee will get the fullest information that can be made available. I have no doubt that we will rehearse and revisit those issues in this or other settings. That is not, however, a symptom of a wider malaise. As the Minister indicated, we have just concluded a review of the overall governance of all our capital projects and the arrangement for oversight of those across the entire DRD family. A report on that will go to the Minister very shortly, and I am sure that that will make its way to the Committee for Regional Development. I think that it is important not to take individual issues and then assume a wider malaise in an organisation or system. Translink has a fairly impressive record of delivery of major capital projects and a fairly sophisticated system of project management and oversight. Some lessons have been taken out of the Coleraine-Londonderry experience about the oversight of Translink projects in general and the role of the board. David might want to say something about that.

**Mr Dallat:** Chairperson, I know that we are coming to the end and that you will probably adequately sum up what we are discussing, which is the effectiveness of public transport in Northern Ireland. I will not take away from anything positive that Translink has done, and it has done a lot, but there are new challenges now that were not there before and, unless there is radical change, we are going to lose out totally.

**Mr Beggs:** I want to go back to the issue of the range of specialist and skilled staff that was discussed earlier. Paragraph 3.22 states that the Audit Office had been in discussions with Transport Scotland and the National Transport Authority (NTA) in the Republic, which highlighted the importance of having a range of specialists available and stressed the need for in-house expertise. I fully accept that there will be a pool of specialists for times when there is a particular demand, but they stressed the need to have some of that expertise in-house so that the Department can understand and fully appreciate the expertise that may be brought in. You have indicated that you are going from one transport planner to two. What is the optimum number of transport planners for Northern Ireland?

**Mr May:** In the cycle that we are going through, we expect that we will need to move to a total of somewhere between six and 10. That is our current thinking. We will need to test that. As I said, the ability to go down that path will need to be tested against the availability of resource.

**Mr Beggs:** The table at figure 8 compares the numbers of road engineers across the three organisations. NTA has 12, Transport Scotland has 87, and we have 138. I declare an interest in that my son is a student engineer and is involved in this area. Can you explain to me what is happening and why there is such diversity in those figures?

**Mr May:** Essentially, there are different remits. DRD is the roads authority for all of Northern Ireland. Transport Scotland deals with the trunk road network, but the local roads are dealt with by councils and, therefore, its engineers are not counted. NTA has an even more restricted role in respect of the road network, as nearly all of that responsibility is devolved to councils. There are different models, and that is why it is not straightforward to compare the functions that DRD performs vis-à-vis Transport Scotland and the Southern authority.

**Mr Beggs:** In an earlier answer, you indicated that some of the roads engineers have a degree of planning expertise. Are you able to quantify that? How many full-time equivalent experts do we have?

**Mr May:** I think that Tom said that some civil engineers have transport planning expertise. They may have picked that up through Roads Service. I do not think that we have a number, and I am not sure that it would be easy to put —

**Mr Reid:** It is difficult. The issue is that, before 2005, we did not have a separate transport planning professional qualification, so our transport planners tended to be chartered engineers and chartered town planners. Two or three senior transport planners were involved in the development of the RTS, and they were supported by a team of, I think, up to half a dozen junior transport planners. Some of them left the Department after that, but a number of them are still in the Department. It would be very difficult to quantify just how many of the engineers have transport planning experience. The point being made was that a number of those engineers have transport planning experience.

**Mr Beggs:** When you look to the future and the difficult financial decisions that will have to be made, do you accept that it is important to have adequate transport planning expertise so that there is adequate consideration of all aspects of transport; not just roads but buses, trains, cycling and pedestrians? If you do not invest in transport planning, there is a danger that those aspects will be missed.

**Mr May:** I accept absolutely, not just in the context of transport planners but more generally, that we need to have the right expertise in the organisation to deliver going forward.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Before I conclude, perhaps you will allow me to stray from the report slightly and into some concerns that have been raised with me that are outside the remit of anyone here.

What measures are applied to driver training to address the behaviour of some adults on our buses? Some lewd and disgusting behaviour of some adults travelling on our buses has recently been brought to my attention. I am aware that, for passenger safety, our drivers have to keep their eyes on the road etc, but what training has there been for drivers for instances when they are alerted to the behaviour of individuals on our buses?

**Mr Strahan:** All our drivers undergo a comprehensive training programme encompassing not only the technical requirements of the job but the customer service side of it. If it is drawn to our attention that there is illegal or inappropriate behaviour on our buses or trains, we will take action in conjunction with the appropriate authority, including the police, to investigate whether criminal activity has taken place. All our buses are fitted with CCTV, and we make that available to allow prosecutions to take place. That has happened in the past and I am sure that it will happen in the future.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** Rather than waiting until a bus reaches its destination and then going back to the CCTV, is there any immediate action that bus drivers can take if a complaint is made to them about an apparent issue on a bus?

**Mr Strahan:** It is difficult to answer that hypothetically without being aware of the specific issue. It would very much depend on what has taken place.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** I ask the question because bus travellers include those who may feel vulnerable. I am not saying that that is the case all the time. If an incident arises, an individual or individuals may want the driver to stop the bus and maybe contact the PSNI or whatever right away. Does that happen?

**Mr May:** If an individual has an issue, they should draw it to the attention of the driver in the first instance. The driver ought then to be able to seek any assistance needed for that individual. The situation is much harder if a bus driver is trying to work out whether there is inappropriate behaviour than if somebody draws attention to such behaviour.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** OK. Thank you.

**Mr Rogers:** Chair, I want to go back to a point that you made earlier. I declare an interest in that I have two daughters who use this service. It concerns the Belfast to Dublin service, particularly the Newry part early in the morning. Newry has become a commuter town for Dublin. We have to highlight the things that work well in Northern Ireland Railways, and this is certainly one of them. Could the 7.45 am train service, which takes you into Connolly at around 9.00 am, be moved to an earlier point in the morning? From Connolly, there is a good DART, Luas and taxi network. The point is that many more people would use that train if they could be at their desk in Dublin at 9.00 am, rather than at Connolly at 9.00 am. What possibility is there of looking at that train leaving Belfast Central earlier and getting to Newry sooner? I know that you work with CIÉ in Dublin and that it has a 7.30 am service from Dundalk, but that does not really benefit people around Newry, south Armagh and south Down who use the Belfast to Dublin service. I think that it is worth considering. It is a great service but it just needs to get into Connolly a bit earlier.

**Mr Strahan:** I confess that I do not have the timetable for that service. I thought that there was an earlier service, but I do not know the detail of the schedule. If you wish, I will pick it up with the member afterwards but, yes, you are right. One of the things that we are taking forward at the moment is the refurbishment of Enterprise trains. The roll-out of that refurbished stock later this year will mean a much better service experience for our passengers. It is a service that we are really interested and investing in. I am happy to pick up the specific timetabling issue with you later, if you do not mind.

**Mr McGrath:** For clarity, Seán, are you talking about when the train leaves Newry?

**Mr Rogers:** I am talking about the train that comes from Belfast Central. Give or take five minutes, I think that it arrives in Newry at 7.45 am.

**Mr McGrath:** So it leaves Belfast at 6.50 am?

**Mr Strahan:** Yes.

**Mr Rogers:** That is the one, yes. Thank you.

**Mr Dallat:** On the back of that, is this not precisely the sort of thing that a board of directors might be interested in? Am I right in saying that the board of directors responsible for Translink has never met its Dublin counterpart to discuss the kind of issue that Seán mentioned?

**Mr Strahan:** The board may not have met them, but certainly I met the chief executive of Irish Rail a couple of weeks ago.

**Mr Dallat:** David, I know that there is an election on and that people will not answer questions properly, but the answer is that they have not met.

**Mr Strahan:** However, I have met Irish Rail, and there are meetings at operational levels. I met the chief executive of Irish Rail no more than a couple of weeks ago to discuss a wide range of areas of mutual interest, and the Belfast-Dublin route was one of those. So, meetings take place. You made the point about the board meeting the board of Irish Rail. You are aware of the —

**Mr Reid:** It is also worth pointing out that the senior team in Northern Ireland Railways, ourselves, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, and Irish Rail meet on a regular basis to discuss issues around the Enterprise service.

**Mr Dallat:** I accept what Tom says but you are all intelligent people and I do not think that you are missing the point that I am trying to make. Boring, laborious and repetitive as it has been, I hope that I am getting the message through to someone that, if there were a board with the kind of enthusiasm that I have seen among you today, perhaps the challenge of the report could be a lot easier met. I am saying no more. But I will be saying more.

**Mr May:** We have heard you loud and clear.

**The Chairperson (Ms Boyle):** We have to compliment the service where it needs to be complimented. From my point of view, it is great that I can now get on a Translink bus in Strabane, Derry or wherever, travel to Dublin, and come home on that same ticket on a Bus Éierann bus. That is good for people from my area and it is an excellent service.

To conclude, on the basis of the Audit Office report and from what we have heard today, it is clear to me and members of my Committee that much more needs to be done by the Department and Translink to improve our public transport. Despite recent cuts, it is important that the appropriate proportion of funding is allocated to public transport and that it is utilised effectively on the basis of effective regulatory and governance arrangements. I have heard today that that is the way you are moving forward. In your opening speech, you mentioned the recommendations in the report and it is good to hear that you are taking them forward.

Members, we have all had the opportunity to ask our questions to the witnesses. As there are no other final issues, I would like to conclude by saying thank you to our witnesses for attending and to wish you, David, all the best in your new career when you leave Translink. I would also like to thank Ms Sewell from the Department of Finance and Personnel and Kieran Donnelly from the Audit Office for attending, as well as Hansard for its coverage of this session.