



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Transport Policy and Public Transport:
Department for Infrastructure

12 February 2020

up to about 2035. The four of them are the Belfast metropolitan area plan, the north-west transport plan, the subregional transport plan and the regional strategic transport network plan. Of those, the first one for completion will be the regional strategic plan. We are at the stage with that where we are having discussions with the Minister about what her priorities are and what direction she wants to go on that. The other three plans have a two-stage approach. This is the first time we have done transport planning in light of the new local development planning system, so, as we now have the two-stage local development plan, equally, we have a two-stage transport plan to go with and align with that. The first stage, the one we are working on at the moment for those three plans, is really just the evidence base. That is what we will provide to the councils so that they can work through it for their plan strategy stage. Once that is done and they start to move into the detailed local policies planning stage, we will look at a detailed transport plan to sort that. It is an iterative process and something we have not worked through before, so it is very much a case of feeling our way through that at the moment.

In the third part of the division, I am climate change coordinator for the Department. This is very much a new role. I am now acting as convener for all the activity across the Department, although I have a particular focus on the transport side. It is really about trying to bring together our mitigation and adaptation work, particularly looking for further mitigation opportunities. The Department had done a lot of work on adaptation; for example, looking at how we make our bridges and our roads better as the climate changes and how we make things more resilient. Given that transport is such a contributor to greenhouse gases, we are looking to see what more we can do on the mitigation side and are putting a lot more focus on that. Clearly, we work very closely with DAERA both on climate change and on the air quality issues related to transport. Recently, we have also been working with DFE on the energy strategy. They have just gone out with a call for evidence to underpin the new energy strategy. There will be transport workshops as part of that that we will lead.

That is a brief overview on my side. I will hand over to Tom.

Mr Tom Reid (Department for Infrastructure): Thanks, Liz. Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to provide an overview of work in the Department's public transport division. The division plays a key role in the oversight and development of public transport in Northern Ireland. That is very much in line with the Minister's priorities. The Minister has wider priorities for regional connectivity, growth and connecting people that focus very much on place and people. We work very closely with Liz's team and with other teams across the Department, because the issues that we deal with are not just about investment in public transport: they are much wider than that. We can come back to that.

As the briefing paper sets out, we are responsible for sponsorship of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company. That includes the Department's public service agreement (PSA) with Translink and the provision of capital and revenue grants to Translink. The Minister previously highlighted the challenges that the reductions in the Department's budgets in 2015 have presented in that regard. You will be familiar with those issues through the first-day brief material.

While we work closely with Translink, our role in the division is much wider than a sponsorship function; it is about the development of the wider public transport network with Translink at its core. It is about supporting delivery of the Minister's ambitions and Programme for Government outcomes, which Liz has set out. That is not restricted to the Programme for Government outcome on connectivity; it cuts across the entire range of outcomes. It is very difficult to see one in which public transport does not have a role to play.

Reflecting that, we are also responsible for the administration of the commercial bus permit system. That aims to enable commercial operators to offer services distinct from those provided by Translink. That includes tours and sightseeing operations, but it also allows private operators to offer services where there are gaps in the network or which could complement the network operated by Translink. In addition, the division leads on strategy and policy on inclusive or accessible transport and community transport. That includes our sponsorship role of the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), management of the concessionary fares scheme, and delivery of grant funding for specialist transport through the Disability Action transport scheme (DATS) and community transport partnerships. Finally, we also manage the Rathlin Island ferry contract under that team.

As the briefing paper sets out, we take that work forward through four branches in the division. The Translink sponsorship unit is the sponsor branch for Translink and provides resource and capital funding annually of approximately £180 million to support and improve public transport. As part of that, the unit works very closely with Translink on the delivery of capital projects, including the north-west multimodal hub and the Belfast transport hub flagship project. The unit is also responsible for

monitoring Translink's performance against key indicators in line with the public service agreement. The public service agreement with Translink came into effect in March 2016, I think, following commencement of the Public Passenger Transport (Service Agreements and Service Permits) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015, which aimed to address the requirements of EU regulation 1370/2007, and the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which, critically, requires that Translink deliver the majority of public transport services in Northern Ireland.

The current PSA is for five years, with an option to extend by one year. That option was taken up, so it has been extended to 31 March 2022 to allow for negotiation of a new service agreement and return of Ministers. That work is being led by the public service agreement and the EU exit branch in the division. Work on developing a new public service agreement, at this stage, provides an invaluable opportunity to look at how the PSA can better reflect the Minister's ambitions for public transport, setting out the role of Translink and how we can support full delivery of PFG commitments and outcomes.

As the name suggests, the PSA and EU exit branch also leads on Brexit issues in the division. However, addressing Brexit issues in public transport cuts across a wide range of areas in the Department. There are regulatory and policy leads elsewhere, legislation teams, and, obviously, the central Brexit team. Over the past three years, there have been close working relationships between those teams to coordinate, very much with the focus on ensuring that, in the post-Brexit scenario and following the end of the transition period, there is very little difference, from the passenger perspective, in the ability of public transport to operate across the border. That has been a complex piece of work but one that has put the Department in a good position.

The division's public transport regulation branch has responsibility for managing service permits for commercial operators. The branch was set up in 2017, since when it has focused heavily on redeveloping the process for bus service permits, working closely with a range of stakeholders, including the Consumer Council; Bus and Coach NI, which was previously the Federation of Passenger Transport Northern Ireland; Translink; and local government. It is all about improving the application process and addressing some of the issues identified.

We have seen quite a lot of progress in the past three months in starting to clear applications for permits. Approximately eight permits have been provided, and 25 should be dealt with in the coming weeks.

Finally, we have the accessible and community transport branch, which leads on concessionary fares, accessible transport and community transport. It includes the delivery of grant funding for community transport. The Minister has highlighted the key role that community transport plays in supporting some of the most vulnerable people to access basic opportunities. The significant challenge is determining the effects that constraints on the Department's budget since 2015 have had on the funding of community transport. That is at a time when demand for services has increased, particularly for health-related journeys, which now account for 25% of all community transport trips. That team is also responsible for managing the Rathlin Island ferry contract.

That is a broad overview of the work of the division and some of the key issues that we are addressing.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you very much. You addressed some of the question that I was going to ask about the five-year public service agreement with Translink, which was in the briefing papers. You said that it is being extended and will differ to a degree — the fact that we will be working outside European regulations. Is that correct?

Mr Reid: Yes. There is an issue about making sure that the legislation in place for EU regulation 1370 still has effect post-Brexit, and that work is in hand.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): How we operate in the transition period may differ, then, from what the new agreement will be after that period.

Mr Reid: It would be a decision for Ministers to take. In the transition period, domestic legislation would be amended to allow for 1370 to apply post-Brexit.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): During this current public service agreement period, Translink has not received the budget that it requires. We need to be cognisant of that and mindful that there will be a Budget announcement in the next couple of weeks. We are hopeful that that may address some of the issues. What is your analysis of the situation for Translink?

Mr Reid: The Minister has highlighted the issues. The fact is that, since 2015, we have had a removal of £13 million to £15 million in Translink's budget through the removal of, I think, a fuel duty rebate for buses. That was never restored to Translink's budget, so that has been a year-on-year underfunding of the PSA with Translink.

In addition, we have had growing pressure on concessionary fares. It has, clearly, been a very successful policy, but the bill for concessionary fares is increasing year on year. We are now at a stage that they are, in effect, underfunded for Translink to the tune of £8 million this year.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Sorry, could you repeat that?

Mr Reid: Yes. I think that they are underfunded this year to the tune of £8 million, potentially rising to £10 million by the end of this year, so it is the removal of the fuel duty rebate for buses and the growing concessionary fares pressure.

Drawing on Translink's reserves since 2015 has enabled the protection of the public transport network in Northern Ireland. We are now at a stage when that is not really an option unless additional funding is secured. How we respond to that is one of the key issues that the Minister is exploring with her Executive colleagues.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): The first-day brief referred to the application by Hannon Coach for the link between Belfast and Londonderry. The paper stated that that would add an additional pressure of £2.2 million on Translink. Are you in a position to comment on that?

Mr Reid: Unfortunately, because the Hannon application is a matter of ongoing consideration in the Department, it is not something that I can comment on today.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): OK. I do not know whether you have any further information on concessionary fares with you. I am guessing that Committee members would be quite interested to know. As you said, it has been a successful scheme and has added pressure to Translink. Do you have the costing and breakdown of that?

Mr Reid: I could provide more details. I could give you a high-level figure, but I would not be absolutely 100% certain that that is the figure. So, if you are content, I will forward the information.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): No, I would be content, actually, if we got accurate information on that.

Finally from me, can you give us a progress report on the Belfast and Londonderry transport hubs?

Mr Reid: There was a soft opening of the north-west transport hub in Londonderry — effectively, the station building — in October last year. Work is advancing pretty well on the external site, and I think that we are on track for the full opening of the site this autumn. A key focus in advance of that is looking at the public transport connections into the hub, including cross-border bus connections, and the active travel centre within the hub.

I understand that enabling works on the Belfast hub have commenced or are due to commence very shortly. It is anticipated that the opening of the site of the hub itself will be in 2024-25. The project is not just the hub building but the wider regeneration of the site through Weaver's Cross. Work is at an early stage of development, but it is a critical part of the hub's success.

Both the north-west transport hub and the Belfast hub represent a different approach to taking forward major public transport facilities, where you look at the wider benefits in terms of the ability to drive regeneration in an area and become a focal point that allows you to be much more ambitious in a shift to public transport. It goes back to the point at the start that is not just about investment in transport and the key relationship with the transport plans. You need to understand why people move in certain ways. If we design environments that, in effect, require people to travel by car, that is what will

happen. If we want people to move to public transport and active travel, the environments have to be designed in a way that supports that. That is about not just the street infrastructure but the type of facilities that you have; the residential versus business and leisure opportunities etc. It is a very different approach.

Ms Loughran: The Minister has been very clear that she wants us to think about things more holistically, particularly transport schemes and how they create places. She wants us to focus on place-making rather than just on, say, providing a bus station or train station.

Mr Boylan: Thanks very much for the update. Tom, I know that you cannot speak for the Minister, but I just want to go back to the issue of commercial bus permits. Can you give some numbers in relation to the overall assessment? Do you feel any threat? I know that there is a demand and that there is a need at times. What is your assessment of the applications?

Mr Reid: In terms of specific applications?

Mr Boylan: In terms of the numbers itself, yes. Even the Minister, if you are —.

Mr Reid: I am sorry; I did not catch that. I am slightly hard of hearing.

Mr Boylan: The overall number, yes.

Mr Reid: We have a number of applications, which we are working through. I am happy to forward the details after this. I think, off hand, approximately five to eight determinations have gone out in recent weeks. Twenty-five are in the final stages, which involves us going back to operators for further information; for example, on the accessibility of the vehicles that they are planning to use. We expect those to be processed very shortly. We have the Hannon application, which I cannot talk about because it is still going through the process.

Mr Boylan: I asked that in the context of Translink operating viable routes. I am more concerned about the impact that that would have on rural areas. I have no objections to anybody applying for a bus operator's licence, but it is the overall impact of that.

Mr Reid: The key thing is that the PSA covers a range of services, including those that are not profit making, such as a lot of the rural routes, and, obviously, profit-making services, so it is part of a package of routes.

The purpose of the bus service permit was to allow private operators to address gaps in the market or complement Translink services and potentially link into them. At this stage, that is really all that we can say.

Mr Boylan: I appreciate that. I am not disputing that at any point; I am just asking for some facts. Liz, you mentioned the PFG. The New Decade, New Approach deal (NDNA) envisages multi-year budgets. Down through the years, we have been operating on an annual basis with public transport and our roads system and trying to recover some roads and do different programmes. That is what it says in the New Decade, New Approach document. That is how we will tackle it in future, and the Programme for Government will clearly outline that. What is your view on it now?

Ms Loughran: Well, the Budget process is ongoing. Obviously, we are all aware that annual budgets create big problems. If you are looking at creating a strategic infrastructure, it is very difficult to plan purely on an annual basis. It is a matter for the Executive to make sure that the commitments in NDNA are brought forward and that we move towards multi-annual budgets. It is helpful for infrastructure planning.

Mr Boylan: In respect of delivering the programmes, we can see that from a Committee point of view. I just wanted your views. I will leave it to others for now.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you. I think that the heating in here is making it difficult to hear; I am certainly having trouble. But, anyway. Thank you very much for your presentation. I do not know whether I am directing my question on community transport to Tom or Liz, but where does that sit financially? What is the sum of money?

Mr Reid: The sum of money is approximately £4.5 million between community transport and the Disability Action transport scheme and, I think, £2.4 million for community transport. The Minister previously set out that if we look at the funding since 2015, there has been, in effect, a 20% reduction, which we have tried to mitigate year on year through in-year monitoring rounds.

Mr K Buchanan: Did you say £2.5 million or £4.5 million?

Mr Reid: It is £2.5 million specifically for community transport for Dial-a-Lift and — sorry, it is £2.4 million for Dial-a-Lift — and £2.1 million for the Disability Action transport scheme, which is also delivered outside Belfast through the community transport partnerships.

Mr K Buchanan: I have another question on the economic corridor. You referred to no change. I am looking at a little graph on page 75. How often is that done? Is it done every two years regarding the economic corridor and the travel times?

Mr Reid: This is the indicator.

Ms Loughran: This is the PFG indicator. We normally update the data every two years.

Mr K Buchanan: What do you define, Liz, as the "economic corridor"? How far does it reach?

Ms Loughran: Bear in mind that this is the draft PFG, so things could change with the discussions at the Executive at the moment. The corridors were defined in the original programme by economists. They looked specifically at strategic routes from the edge of towns to the edge of new towns. It is really just looking at that corridor from edge to edge. I think that they used the strategic —.

Mr Reid: They did. They used the strategic road network. That is the likes of the A5, A6, motorways and connecting corridors. The rationale behind that was to start to look at road networks differently. They are not just about moving traffic; they are the networks that allow economic growth, particularly in the context of Ministers' ambitions on regional growth. You need to start looking at the impact that those corridors have in facilitating that.

Mr K Buchanan: The first section of the A6 opened recently. Do you think that you will see a reflection on the figures based on that?

Ms Loughran: If the indicator is showing movement in the correct direction towards the outcome — the opening of the A6 was one of the things that was intended to cause a shift in that indicator —, yes, you should see that feeding through.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. My final question, which Mr Boylan touched on, is about public transport. Tom, you referred to enabling private operators to identify gaps.

Mr Reid: Yes.

Mr K Buchanan: If Translink has a gap, for example between Cookstown to Magherafelt, can you get a private operator to do the same run? Is that a gap? What is the definition of a gap?

Mr Reid: When an application comes in, there is a range of criteria that we work through, including the operator applying for a permit to demonstrate a need or demand in a corridor. We take into account the impact that the application will have on existing services in the corridor, not just those operated by Translink but those run by other operators that have permits for that corridor as well.

It is one of those areas in which we are continuing to engage with private operators. We recently established a forum with Bus and Coach NI, previously the Federation of Passenger Transport, to explore issues, including where the potential gaps in the network are and the possible role of private operators in the context of the Minister's direction of ambition for public transport in Northern Ireland.

Mr K Buchanan: What is the make-up of the panel? I do not need to know names.

Mr Reid: The decision-making panel is chaired by myself and two other individuals who are at grade 5 or grade 6 in the Department. They will not necessarily be the same individuals from one assessment to another.

Mr K Buchanan: But they are all from the Department.

Mr Reid: They are. The team in the division prepares the evidence base and assessment, and then it is for the panel to robustly test that in making a determination.

Mr Hilditch: Can you run me through the process for the extension of the PSA with Translink and the forthcoming negotiation of a new agreement? Is that an agreement that others can bid for? Is it straightforward? Can you give us a wee indication of how it works?

Mr Reid: There is a requirement in the legislation for Translink to provide the majority of public transport services, and we do that through a PSA. It is possible for the Department to enter into PSAs with other operators, which would be different from a bus service permit, as it would apply to a range of services. The Department has a PSA only with Translink.

Mr Hilditch: So, no other company could come in under that agreement?

Mr Reid: They could come in under a separate PSA.

Mr Hilditch: Separate but not to the endangerment of Translink.

Mr Reid: Yes. At this stage, there is no other PSA; it would be a matter for the Minister's consideration.

Mr Hilditch: With so much going on over the next two to three years, there will be a lot of work. There needs to be a firm relationship among everybody to get that work over the line.

Mr Reid: There is an awful lot of work, and there has been a strong recognition from the Department, the Minister and Translink, who have consistently highlighted the fact that to achieve that ambition for public transport there is a clear role for private operators. The issue is understanding how that role might sit with the new PSA. That is where there is an opportunity to take forward the PSA and the continuing engagement with private operators to explore that further.

Mr Hilditch: On the rural and disability transport providers, are you aware of how many volunteer drivers are engaged in those networks?

Mr Reid: That is a figure that I could have given you previously, but, at this stage, I cannot. I am happy to follow that up in the Department.

Mr Hilditch: I appreciate the work of volunteers, but I do not like to see them being abused either. A lot of work goes on — I saw advertisements for volunteers recently — so I just want to make sure that people are recognised for the voluntary work that they do.

Mr Reid: Yes, of course.

Ms Kimmins: Thank you for the update. I have a couple of questions. The briefing paper, in the section on the Translink sponsor unit, mentions that Translink gets £180 million in funding. We mentioned the transport hub in Belfast, but I would like to get a wee bit more detail on what that funding goes towards.

Mr Reid: Funding covers the full range of capital projects, including bus procurement, new rail carriages et cetera, the Belfast hub and other such big projects. I am happy to provide a more detailed breakdown of what the funding goes towards.

Ms Kimmins: That would be useful.

Mr Reid: There is also the revenue funding that will cover, I think, the public service obligation (PSO) on rail, for example. Concessionary fares are part of that, too. As I said, I am happy to provide a detailed breakdown.

Ms Kimmins: That would be useful. You mention the PSO for rail. Is there any reason that the PSO is not for buses as well?

Mr Reid: The fuel duty rebate for buses was removed as a result of the cuts to the Department's budget in 2015. That is the only reason.

Mr Muir: Thanks to the officials for coming along. I again declare an interest as a former employee of Translink.

The section of your briefing paper that deals with transport plans states that the regional strategic transport network transport plan (RSTNTP) will:

"consider resource costs for improved bus and rail services."

Northern Ireland is growing. More housing is being built. The way in which we move people has to change. The old approach when we were building new houses was to build them and then put in the road network. People drove to work, and that was the job done. That cannot continue. One issue with providing the necessary bus and rail services for new developments is the associated costs, because we are living in very constrained financial times. What consideration will be given to developer contributions as part of the transport plans?

Ms Loughran: Transport plans are developed in conjunction with councils, which are working on their local development plans. Theoretically, the system should work. We provide the evidence base to the councils. The councils use the evidence base to establish, for example, whether it makes sense to zone an area for housing. If there is a transport need, councils should be thinking about developer contributions. We will also flag, through the transport planning process, that there are issues in a particular area. We will ask whether councils are absolutely sure about zoning in the area and whether they would be better zoning in another area owing to its transport provision.

It is a bit of an iterative process. If I am honest, I am not sure exactly how it is going to work yet, because this is the first time that we have been through it. We are working through this with each of the councils to try to work out exactly how the process will work. Each council is doing things slightly differently, so transport plans may work better in some places than in others. The Minister has been very clear about what she wants to get out of the process. She wants a more integrated, sustainable transport network. We come back to the idea that this has to be about making places liveable. The way in which we would achieve that developer contribution is through the interface between us and the councils. Exactly how that will work will, I think, become clearer over the next few years, as we work through the process.

Mr Muir: That is useful. It is a new process for a lot of people, but it is important that we are doing it and that we are taking the right approach.

My other question around sustainable travel relates to the transport hub in Derry/Londonderry. The active travel centre is meant to be part of that. It is great that the centre will be part of the hub and will link with the greenway etc. Can I have an update on the establishment of the active travel centre?

Mr Reid: Work is ongoing, very much with the aim of having the centre up and running by the time that the site fully opens in the autumn. A few teams in the Department are involved in taking the work forward. Among the key objectives of the active travel centre is to provide information and promote active travel, but another is to animate the building itself. A key objective is to create the sense that it is a community facility. When we look at the design of the building, for example, we see that it is entirely open to the public. The only part that is restricted to those who are using train services is access on to the platform. Translink has done an awful lot of work in drawing activities into the area. While we wait for the active travel centre to open, activities have included country markets, tea dances and, for those so inclined, yoga classes.

Mr Boylan: You can have a hoedown. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Reid: It is not just about the active travel centre but about trying to draw people and activity into the building itself.

Mr Muir: There is a commitment, alongside many other commitments, in New Decade, New Approach to a feasibility study and suchlike for our cross-border rail link. A refresh was done of the sets, but they will need to be replaced. On occasions, the journey from Belfast to Dublin can be done quicker by car or coach than by train. There are also issues around competition and around having a more frequent service by making it hourly. Can you give us an update on any progress made?

Mr Reid: The Minister has said that she will be engaging with her counterpart in Dublin, through the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), to look at how we take forward the feasibility study.

You raise an interesting point about the journey time by car. Some of the key issues that need to be considered are frequency of service and the length of the journey, but it is fair to say, Liz, that an underlying message has come through from the work on the transport plans, and that message is that investment in public transport infrastructure is in itself not enough to drive modal shift. Wider issues have to be addressed, such as the priority that is attached to buses in urban areas, because, if we travel by train between Belfast and Dublin, it is highly unlikely, for the majority of those making the journey, that the journey will stop or start at Connolly station or Great Victoria Street. It is about the connections outwards.

Parking is and always has been a key issue. If the relative cost and ease of making the journey by car compared with rail, including the cost and availability of parking, is fairly attractive, it will be very difficult to move people away from their car and on to public transport. As the Minister has set out, unless we do so, it will be very difficult to realise the wider ambitions of economic growth for Belfast and across Northern Ireland.

Mr Muir: That relates to the transport plans in Belfast. You can have all the ambition that you want, but, if you cannot get people in and out of the city in a sustainable fashion, the plans will not work.

Ms Loughran: With the transport plans, particularly the Belfast transport plan, we are looking at how we make travelling by sustainable means more attractive than travelling by other means. How do you provide journey speed and journey reliability? How do you make sustainable travel become the natural choice? How do you make it easier to travel by sustainable means than be one person driving into Belfast in a car?

All the work that we are doing on the transport plans is reflected in the evidence base. It will now be for the Minister to take what is in the evidence base and decide how she prioritises. She has already said that she believes that sustainable travel is the way forward. We will therefore be talking to her about ways in which to achieve that and about ways in which to achieve demand management and restraint for other road users.

Mr Muir: I have one quick question on concessionary fares. Officials were in to discuss constraints and demand, but I do not know whether officials' view is that, if you reduce or curtail concessionary fares, you reduce funding to Translink and exacerbate its financial position. In London and in other parts, concessionary fares have been used to encourage more young people to use public transport. My concern is that, as a result of the half fare concession ceasing at 16, the incentive to continue to use public transport is sometimes lost. Furthermore, people with a disability here are largely offered half fare; in other parts of the UK, they get full fare concession. What is your view on that?

Mr Reid: Any change to concessionary fare schemes is a matter for the Minister, and the Minister will consider that in the context of the wider priorities and the budget available to the Department. You have highlighted the fact that the benefits of concessionary fares go far beyond transport and the Department. Among the over-60s, which was previously the over-65s, we certainly see an uptake of public transport. My memory of my grandparents' time is very different from what we see today. A much greater number of older people today are out and about, engaging more fully in society. The concessionary fare scheme is a much wider benefit contributor across the Programme for Government. It is not just a matter for the Department.

Mrs D Kelly: I heard what you said about Hannon Coach. The company is a neighbour of mine, so it will be no surprise to you to learn that I have written to the Department and facilitated meetings in the past. I do not want to ask about the specific issue, but I do want to ask about commercial bus service permits. How long do those take to process through the Department?

Mr Reid: There was a delay following the Hannon judicial review (JR), where it was necessary to go back, review the process and put a new one in place. In the past three months, since the process has been in place, we have started to see the clearance of bus service permits. There have been a few learning points from the consultation to do with the time that it took with a number of groups. However, we are working through the permits now. A lot of them have been or are about to be cleared. Part of the engagement with private operators through the forum that we have established is to look at the experience and, where possible, at how we can improve it.

Mrs D Kelly: It has been a bitter experience for many, I have to say.

I want to ask you about the Belfast transport hub flagship project and the Programme for Government commitments about transport playing its part in tourism and the wider economy. Are there opportunities for commercial and tour bus companies to use the stands in the hub? Presumably, there ought not to be a bus parked in there 24/7. Otherwise, there would be something seriously wrong.

Mr Reid: Access to bus stations is something that is actively being considered. We will discuss it with the Minister as we work through the process for the hub.

Mrs D Kelly: Is it actively being considered with the Minister? I am sorry: I cannot hear you terribly well from up here.

Mr Reid: I am sorry. Access to stations for private operators is a matter that we will discuss with the Minister as we move forward.

Mrs D Kelly: Will it be something into which the Minister will have input?

Mr Reid: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: Have there been any discussions about the proposed Belfast and Derry city deals? Are there any exciting prospects on the horizon? Will your Department be contributing to them? Are there any opportunities for the Department to exploit?

Mr Reid: There are certainly opportunities to exploit. I have looked at both city deals and at the vision and ambition that they set out. I recognise that the Belfast city deal, although it specifically relates to the Belfast area, goes well beyond Belfast. Both city deals have at their heart a vision of a transport network in a city that is driven by active travel and public transport. For example, although the Derry city deal does not specifically have a transport infrastructure dimension to it, there is a recognition that the realisation of that ambition will require a significant modal shift to public transport and active travel in the city.

Mrs D Kelly: Are there any ongoing discussions on what the Prime Minister's commitment to infrastructure might mean for the Barnett consequential here?

Mr Reid: Discussions on the Barnett consequentials that will come across as part of the Northern Ireland block will be between the Department of Finance and Treasury colleagues.

Mrs D Kelly: Is there no indication of any discussions?

Mr Reid: At this stage, I am not familiar with any.

Mrs D Kelly: From your perspective, that makes planning very difficult.

I also want to ask about the £180 million for Translink, which, I presume, is in addition to the money that comes from the Department of Education for school transport.

Mr Reid: I will have to check that, Dolores, but I will be happy to confirm it afterwards.

Mrs D Kelly: It would be useful to know the total moneys that are going to Translink. You said that it is having to dip into its reserves, but I understand that Translink, the holding company, also has a substantial property portfolio.

Mr Reid: Yes.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We will have a briefing from Translink in a few weeks' time, so no doubt we will receive more information at that meeting.

Mrs D Kelly: I will look forward to that, Chair.

Mr Beggs: You mentioned that you are liaising with local councils before they finalise their area transport plan. A key aspect of that is new spine road development that will facilitate both private and public transport. My question is this: how will you ensure that past failings are corrected? There is an area of Carrickfergus where literally thousands of houses have been built, but the key bit of the spine road is in an area that is not even set for development as yet. It will therefore not be a development-led road. There is a bottleneck on other routes. I am thinking of a section of Larne West, where a section of property has been orphaned, and there is no development land connected to it to encourage the developer to develop it in some way. How will we ensure that public transport routes can be developed along spine roads that serve the community?

Mr Reid: That goes back to Liz's point. The difference this time in the approach is that it is very much intended, I think it is fair to say, to be a partnership with councils.

Ms Loughran: It is very collaborative.

Mr Reid: Yes. As we work through the stages, the intention is that we do not have a situation in which land-use planning and transport planning are taken forward almost separately. The need to integrate them reflects the fact that, if it is of the wrong type or in the wrong place, development will create a certain demand for a type of transport, and that will lead to the type of congestion that we have seen in the past and to communities and housing developments not being connected. We see that a lot in urban areas, even where developments are around spine roads, where hundreds, if not thousands, of houses have no social amenities, requiring them to become almost like dormitory areas, to where people travel to eat and sleep. They then work and socialise outside the area.

The process itself is very much about trying to ensure that, when the plans are being taken forward, the focus on prioritising access by public transport and active travel is at their heart.

Ms Loughran: The point to make is that, although the local development plans, from a council point of view, are from this time moving forward, the transport plans have the opportunity to look not just at future development going forward but at the way in which we serve existing development.

There are two sides. Although the councils' vision is "as it moves forward", the Department and the Minister have the opportunity to pick up things "as is", as well as to move forward. The transport plan will have a dual purpose. It will guide all transport investment, so it will need to look both at what exists and at what is likely to be built.

Mr Beggs: How do the public engage with the area transport plan if they are not satisfied with the draft area plan process?

Ms Loughran: There is a whole new process, so we are still feeling our way through it. There is a whole statutory process that will involve consultation by us and consultation by councils on the area plans. It will also involve the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) and independent examinations of local development plans and transport. First, the local development plans' strategies and the transport evidence taken into account will be examined. The second stage involves the plan policies. There is therefore a lot of framework around the process, and it gives people the opportunity not only to comment but to challenge.

Mr Beggs: That is helpful. In many areas of my constituency, the new area plan will not be of much value, because the sewerage system is at full capacity. New development will not be allowed unless a private sewerage system is provided, which is relatively expensive. However, the briefing paper states that Northern Ireland Water (NIW):

"outperformed its OPA score in 2018/19 and is on course to achieve the 2019/20 target."

How can we say that Northern Ireland Water is outperforming its overall performance assessment (OPA) score when in much of Northern Ireland — some 100 locations — there can be no development because the sewerage system is at maximum capacity? Are we measuring the right things?

Ms Loughran: I am not an NIW expert. The Utility Regulator sets the targets in that Programme for Government section, and I am not entirely certain what it did and how it took that into account.

The short answer to the question is that the Minister has made it clear that she believes that there has been substantial underinvestment in our water infrastructure over decades. She said that one of the things that she will be talking to Minister Murphy about in her Budget bilateral meeting is investment in the water system. Northern Ireland Water has made it clear that the only way in which it can unlock development opportunities is by upgrading sewerage systems, and that will take significant investment.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): If it is helpful, Mr Beggs, I can tell you that we will receive a briefing from the Department on water and drainage next week.

Mr Beggs: OK. Let me return to Translink and public transport. Public transport is an important aspect of improving our environment and minimising our footprint. Translink has indicated that it has been running at a deficit for the past few years. In the next financial year, the situation will get critical, and it will be unable to sustain the current situation.

What does the resource funding for Translink go to specifically? We have heard about capital expenditure, which can bring about more efficient and cleaner buses and trains etc. That is one side. How does funding help the resource side? How is Translink subsidised? Is it given a lump sum and that is it? I am trying to see what the likely impact will be if Translink is forced to make cuts. As a company, it will be unable to operate under the current funding regime, so how will it determine how it brings about savings?

Mr Reid: I am reluctant to get into details, because that is a matter that will require discussion with the Minister on the options available and on how we might address the situation. It is safe to say that the scale of challenge this year — it has been set out in previous papers — will require savings of approximately £20 million. Those savings cannot be delivered through piecemeal cuts here and there to services. The situation is at a critical stage.

Mr Beggs: Will it be the rural population who will suffer or will it be little-used town services?

Mr Reid: I cannot get into the detail of that.

Ms Loughran: It will be very much a ministerial decision.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): We will probably get more clarity on that next week when the Department is here to give us a briefing on the Budget. The issues with Translink are at the forefront of many folks' minds.

No other members have indicated that they want to ask a question, so I thank you very much for your time this morning, for your briefing and for your responses to questions. No doubt, we will meet again. Thank you very much.

Mr Reid: Thank you very much.

Ms Loughran: Thank you.