



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Community Transport Association

25 November 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Infrastructure

### Community Transport Association

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

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)  
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Martina Anderson  
Mr Roy Beggs  
Mr Cathal Boylan  
Mr Keith Buchanan  
Mrs Dolores Kelly  
Ms Liz Kimmins  
Mr Andrew Muir

**Witnesses:**

Mr Tim Cairns	Community Transport Association
Mr Paddy McEldowney	Easilink Community Transport
Mrs Ashley Keane	Out and About Community Transport

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** We welcome Tim Cairns, director of policy and public affairs at the Community Transport Association (CTA); Paddy McEldowney, chief executive of Easilink Community Transport; and Ashley Keane, chief executive of Out and About Community Transport. You are all very welcome. I am not sure who will give the presentation.

**Mr Tim Cairns (Community Transport Association):** I will kick off, Chair, if that is OK.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Yes. Of course.

**Mr Cairns:** I have a bit of a cold sweat from being back in this room.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Indeed.

**Mr Cairns:** I am glad that I am sitting in this seat and that Sam McBride is not sitting behind me.

Committee, thank you very much for giving us the time to share with you what community transport has done throughout the pandemic and to highlight some of the issues that we have as community transport providers in Northern Ireland. I will share, very quickly, what community transport is. I will then hand over to Paddy and Ashley, who will go through some of our issues and explain some of the stuff that we have done and some of the services that are offered by community transport throughout Northern Ireland.

Community transport is a group of charities — not-for-profit organisations — that offer solutions to people across Northern Ireland. It is not just the primary purpose transport providers such as those that Paddy and Ashley represent; churches, sports clubs and youth clubs also offer community transport in their area. Community transport typically operates under what is called a 10B permit. The Community Transport Association is the membership body for community transport and issues 10B permits on behalf of the Department to all its members: to the primary purpose operators that Paddy and Ashley represent and to the churches, schools and various charities that offer community transport solutions in their area.

The Community Transport Association has about 155 members. Non-CTA members also offer community transport in various parts of Northern Ireland. Community transport provides an accessible solution to transport that is inclusive for everybody. Our goal is to provide accessible, inclusive transport that everybody can be part of so that everybody can get to where they need to go, whether it be a health appointment, recreation, shopping or visiting their social networks. Throughout the pandemic, we have discovered that community transport was vital and essential in helping communities to function and to survive and to help people who were faced with loneliness and isolation.

I will hand over to Ashley, who will say a bit more about that. The Community Transport Association produced a report, which, I think, is in your Committee packs, that lays out what we did during the pandemic. Ashley will highlight just a few of the things that we did and give some further explanation of our services. Thank you.

**Mrs Ashley Keane (Out and About Community Transport):** Hi, everybody. Thank you very much for your time today. I have the illustrious title of chief executive officer on the agenda, but, most days, I feel like chief cook and bottle-washer when it comes down to it, especially throughout the pandemic and this time of challenge.

I want to tell you a wee bit about Out and About Community Transport. We cover the old Magherafelt District Council area. Whilst we are an individual community transport partnership and organisation, we work in close partnership with Cookstown CDM Community Transport. It covers Cookstown and Dungannon districts, so we cover all of the services across the district. Under our partnership agreement, we offer each other support and share resources so that, if we have problems with a bus, we can share or lend each other vehicles to help each other out. We are always looking at ways to enhance the transport options throughout the mid-Ulster area.

If I may, I will try to paint a picture for you of what community transport looked like throughout the Province before the pandemic struck. Collectively, the Northern Ireland partnerships provided 250,000 passenger trips last year under our Dial a Lift service, which, as I am sure you know, provides local members who live in isolated rural areas, and who are mainly elderly or have a disability, with demand-responsive door-to-door services so that they can access — this is key — their local services. Dial a Lift deals purely with the local area. It is local members of our own organisations accessing local services.

The reason for the huge success of community transport is its delivery model under the 10B permit, as Tim said. Our model is that we use paid drivers, who drive fully accessible minibuses under the section 10B permit. We also use volunteer car drivers, who use their own vehicles to help us out. That gives us so much more flexibility when it comes to being able to offer our members the transport options that they need. Most of our members use us for shopping, personal business, health appointments, going to visit friends or getting their hair cut — all those types of services that keep everybody well and happy.

Last year, over 35% of all our Dial a Lift trips were completed by our volunteers. As a matter of interest, if we had to pay wages for all of the hours that they had given up freely, it would cost in excess of £230,000 for their time alone, not to mention diesel and all the other expenses that would be added to the pot. Our volunteers are invaluable to the service, and we need to ensure that we continue to use this model to sustain community transport services. We would not, because of the operator licence, be able to use volunteers if we went to a commercial model. The permit is key to keeping down the costs, keeping the efficiency and effectiveness of community transport and giving us the flexibility to be able to deliver as much as we do.

Another big beneficiary of community transport is our Health Department, and I think that Paddy will add something about that. Over the last year, we have had 25,000 direct trips to hospital appointments

across the Province. There has been no support from the health sector for that. As I said, Paddy will probably finish off on that or give more detail on it when he speaks.

Folks, as we entered into the last quarter of 2019-2020, we could see a big decline in demand for our services. Our services had naturally begun to wind down due to the profile of our member base, which is made up of elderly people, vulnerable people and people with disabilities. When Boris Johnson made his announcement on 23 March, a date that, I am sure, none of us will ever forget, all our requests for transport ceased right across the board. We were all in that position where we were ready to do something but had no people to transport and no work to do. It was then that the partnerships quickly sprang into action and we changed our tactics. We got some guidance from the Department saying that we could deliver alternative services, so all the partnerships started offering services like delivering groceries and prescriptions. Department for Communities food parcels were delivered through a lot of the partnerships, as were food bank parcels. All those additional things were going on. In addition, there was a relaxation of the permit. The permit allows us to do stuff only for members. That was relaxed, so we could service non-members. It allowed us to meet the needs in our local communities.

I would also like to talk about some of the main runners for Out and About. We partnered with the local shops and offered to help out with the staggering demand for groceries. We made about 1,300 individual grocery deliveries with Crawford's and with Kelly's Eurospar, both in Maghera. We partnered with the local council, and we made about 1,000 deliveries of the Department for Communities food parcels. We did some work with a cross-community food bank in Maghera, helping it to get the vital food parcels out to where they needed to go.

Our most successful alternative service was our meals within wheels project, and I would like to talk about that. We worked with George Shiels from the Mid Ulster Volunteer Centre, and we combined our databases. We did a scoping exercise to find out whether that would be a worthwhile project and whether there was a need for it in the community. We found that the demand was there, so, in our first week, just after Easter, we started delivering food. In our first week, we delivered 40 meals on the Wednesday and 50 on the Saturday, and that continued to rise. At the height of the pandemic, we were delivering over 100 meals every Saturday and Wednesday. As time went on, we introduced a wee pudding because everybody was looking for a wee sweet thing as well. That went down an absolute treat.

What I really want to say is that it was not just about getting a meal and getting something delivered to your door; the service provided so much more. Our staff were on the phone twice a week with all those people. First off, they were asking them what they wanted from the menu, but they were also asking them how they were and were taking the chance to check in and chat and see that everybody was OK. As we all know about folk in Northern Ireland, they say that everything is grand, they are always all right and there is never anything wrong, especially with the older generation. Some of them are not quick to tell you that they need some help. When our drivers went out to deliver the meals, they were face to face with those people and could see and could tell what was happening, because these are people whom they have transported for many years. With that face-to-face contact, they could look and see if the face was showing the same picture that was being described at the end of a phone line. If any of our drivers had any concerns, those were flagged up back in the office and we increased the contact with those people or tried to signpost them to other organisations that were offering help or assistance. At the risk of sounding like an M&S ad, I keep saying that this is no ordinary meal delivery project. It continues today: we had 62 meals and 14 puddings going out this morning.

**Mr Hilditch:** What is the pudding today?

**Mrs Keane:** The pudding today is jam sponge with coconut and custard [*Laughter.*] On a final note, I think about the importance of the phone calls to the daily life of all those people who we have tried to help. I can still hear the girls in the office making those phone calls. At the start, it was like, "What are you ringing me for? Why are you ringing me?". The phone calls were very short and sweet to start off with. They got longer and longer as time went on. They have become a real lifeline. We have continued those calls because, obviously, our services have not resumed to the full level of what we were doing. People are still behind closed doors. A lot of our members have not been outside the door since March. I worry about loneliness and all that if we are not there going forward to pick up those pieces and to try to offer encouragement. It is a vital service that we offer. We have been very quick to adapt to these new challenges. I hope that we will be able to continue all the good stuff that we are doing. Thank you very much. I will pass over to Paddy.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** It is most reassuring that, throughout all this and the challenge that you face, you are still smiling.

**Mrs Keane:** There are days. I think that it is just nerves *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Paddy McEldowney (Easilink Community Transport):** Thank you, Ashley, and thanks, Chair and Committee, for allowing us a chance to speak to you today. I manage Easilink Community Transport. We provide services across the rural parts of the Derry City and Strabane District Council area and the Omagh half of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. We deliver the same Dial a Lift service across those areas and have done for many years. We also provide the Disability Action Transport Scheme service in Strabane town and Omagh town on behalf of Disability Action. The other core service that we provide is our group hire service for the community groups and small charities that use our vehicles for their activities.

To give people a flavour of the range of services that Easilink provides, we were very heavily involved in the DFC food parcel deliveries. Derry and Strabane and Fermanagh and Omagh councils approached us directly to see if we could look after it all. Other councils tried to mix some of their resources with community resources, so it is about whatever works in areas. We delivered all the food parcels into the rural areas of Derry and Strabane, so they were not just for Derry city and Strabane town. The DFC-funded neighbourhood renewal partnerships and groups were involved in the urban areas, and we delivered all the parcels in the rural parts of the district. In Fermanagh and Omagh, we delivered all the parcels in Omagh, and Fermanagh Community Transport delivered them at the Fermanagh end. Across the two councils, in my area alone we delivered over 14,000 food parcels during that 16- or 17-week period. On a number of occasions, both councils publicly not only thanked us for it but declared that they just could not have done it without an organisation like ours that had the network of not only resource in the drivers and vehicles that were suitable to transport these big, heavy boxes but of drivers who know the local areas and every wee lane and country road. That really helped us to do it efficiently. Very early on, when we shut down, we were saying, "What do we do now?" We were all working from home, and I was having conversations with staff on Zoom. I was saying, "What do we do with our clients?". All the office staff were naming clients, saying, "Well, Maggie is on her own. She has no family. Her daughter is in England". Our staff know the clients really well, and they were concerned, saying, "This is going to go on for weeks. What are we going to do?". They said, "We need to ring them every week". We took the list of all the regular users and divided it up in a spreadsheet. Every staff member took home a list of 50, 60 or 70 names and just started ringing the members on a weekly basis. As Ashley said, in the first few calls, people were saying, "Are you going to ring me? Are you going to ring me next week too? Oh, it was good to hear from you. Thanks for ringing. I am glad that you thought about me". However, as the weeks went on, those conversations became really important. We were ringing up not only to say, "Hello. Hope you're well. We're just checking up" but to try to suss out the situation by asking, "And are you getting a bit of food? Are you getting your groceries? How are you feeling?" It developed into being more than just a chat; it became about double-checking that they were not in trouble and did not have a particular need.

A lot of those clients are not on social media. As you all know, every group in the country, especially the churches, GAA clubs and other sporting groups in rural areas, was saying, "We will lift prescriptions for you. We will get your shopping from the shop". They were offering all that help on social media, but a lot of our clients were not seeing it, so we made that connection. Rather than us, for example, running a bus from Strabane to the far side of Plumbridge to lift a prescription a mile, we were saying, "Look, the GAA club up there is doing that. We will get you on to them. We will get you the number. They will lift it and get it over to you", or, "Such-and-such a shop is doing home deliveries. We will get you connected to them". We were making those connections for the individuals whom we identified as being isolated and maybe not having much family support. The befriending support calls were not seen, and it is hard for us to publicise them. However, they were probably the most important thing that we did.

There is another thing. It is a wee silly one and very small numbers-wise. We had a hook-up with TinyLife, the premature baby charity. It operates out of neonatal units and has a unit in Altnagelvin. The TinyLife support worker is normally based in the neonatal unit, but, with lockdown, if you were not a doctor or a nurse, you could not be there. The support workers had to remove themselves from the neonatal unit. TinyLife has a breast pump loan scheme. When mum goes home, she can take the breast pump with her and use it for a few months, and then it goes back to the neonatal unit and is recycled back out again. TinyLife had no way of getting those pumps collected. An email came out through Disability Action asking, "Can anybody help in the north-west area?". We signed up. It happens only once a fortnight, and we are still doing it now. We were just given a number of

addresses and names to do the pickups. We did it in Strabane and Omagh. We went as far as Magherafelt, Limavady and Coleraine to collect these breast pumps to bring them to the TinyLife support worker, who was then cleaning them up and recycling them. That is just another wee example of the ways that we found that we could help anybody and everybody. I am very proud of our sector's response, not just Easilink's. The report shines a light on how we were very responsive, agile and quick to find ways to help out in our local areas. That is the bit that we did.

I want to talk about the financial side of where we are at the minute and looking forward. As outlined in the report that Tim pulled together and shared, we had a significant cut in our funding back in 2014. The Department was the Department for Regional Development (DRD) at that time, and the cut that we had was nearly 40%. Pre-COVID, we were getting it very tight. We were all under a lot of pressure and were all operating probably at full capacity or very close to it. In some cases, we were not able to meet all the demand in our area and had restrictions on our service. For example, for two or three years, we operated a system where we could offer only two trips a week because the demand was more than we could provide. It is really difficult to decide who should go and who should not. We debated it for ages at board level. The only way that we could try to be fair to everybody was to allow a certain number of trips per week. That does not suit everybody who attends a centre that operates three or four days. It does not suit the day opportunities. It does not suit the adults with learning disabilities who need to get to their tech classes three or four days a week. However, that was all that we could do.

So, we went into COVID at full capacity and under quite a bit of financial pressure to meet the demand in our areas. With COVID, we panicked. We thought, "How is this going to add up? We are not lifting any passengers, so we are getting no SmartPass money in through the DAERA arrangement or the arts scheme". Our funding is usually associated with activities. If we were in big demand with a lot of activities, there was more money. In that first week, when we were doing very little, we panicked and thought that our funders would say, "Well, if you are not out delivering, we do not need to fund you so much." We were really concerned. To be fair to all the key funders — DFI is our core funder, DAERA funds the assisted rural travel scheme (ARTS) money, and Disability Action is a funder — over three, four or five weeks, they all committed to last year's funding levels. I am of the opinion that they held back for a week or two, but when they saw all the activity that we were delivering, which we just described, that reassured them into saying, "Let this money go, because they are out there doing something with it, and it looks like they are being very effective." That was great.

Looking ahead, we are very concerned. It looks like there is a light at the end of the tunnel with COVID and with vaccines, and, hopefully, in spring, we will move out of that. It is something that we are really looking forward to. As Ashley said, we care about our clients. We know the nine months that they have had and that it will be a year before they get back out again. We are really keen to get our older and vulnerable clients back out again. We know how important their wee clubs and groups and their social life and friends are to them. We have a couple of big concerns. We expect a significant increase in demand for our services when we get back up and running, especially with health and hospital appointments. There will be an avalanche of demand. We are very concerned that we will not be in a position to deliver those appointments because of a lack of resource; not for any other reason.

We are also a wee bit concerned that, as those activities get back up and running, there still may be some social-distancing requirements. At the minute, with the 2-metre rule and social distancing, we are operating with a maximum of five passengers in a 16-seater minibus. If services open up again and hospital appointments start coming out, if we cannot get more than five people into a vehicle, that would really restrict our capacity.

Another issue is the volunteer car scheme, which is absolutely priceless. Ashley touched on it and described how well it complements the paid drivers in the minibus fleet. The car scheme fits around that and can do individual appointments. With social distancing, a number of partnerships have done risk assessments and deemed the scheme to be a bit too risky, particularly for our volunteers, as people are at quite close quarters. A lot of the car schemes are on hold at the minute. Depending on the social-distancing advice and as the services open up again, we could be hit with a big increase in demand and a reduction in our capacity, which is the physical capacity of vehicles, whether the car scheme is being used. We are very concerned and are trying to flag it up now rather than wait until May to come here, bang the table and shout and cry poverty. We are asking the Department whether there is any way that it can help us. We are not pointing the finger or asking only the Department for Infrastructure, but if it can find a few more pounds, it would make a huge difference. It is not big money. Our total budget is about £2.2 million across all the partnerships. The Department is getting very good value for money for that. Additional money of around £400,000, £500,000 or £600,000 to keep us up and running and ready to meet that demand would make a huge difference. We are not

asking for tens of millions of pounds. In the bigger scheme of things, it is a modest ask, but it would make such an impact to what we do and to what we would be in a position to do come the spring.

A big chunk of our activity involves health-related transport. If it is not for direct health appointments, it is for health-related activities or services. You could maybe label up to 40% of our activity as health transport, and there is no support from that Department. We know that, for a number of years now, DFI officials have tried, made the call and asked the question, but, unfortunately, it has never progressed. We suspect that there is also, potentially, COVID recovery moneys. I know that money was divvied out earlier this week, and that may happen again in the next financial year. There is a very strong case for DFI to make the case for the like of community transport about how we are responding to COVID and helping people get back from lockdown and being isolated. That might come from central money that is sitting in the Department of Finance for COVID recovery or from a bid to money that is funnelled through the Department for Communities. The issue that we have with the Department for Communities — this is not its problem — is that a lot of its money seems to end up in urban and neighbourhood renewal areas. Department for Communities money rarely finds its way into the rural areas. That would be a good way for the Department for Communities to show its support for rural communities. It would be an opportunity to see a bit of money flowing into rural areas, as opposed to the suggestion that all of it goes into deprivation and urban areas.

That is all that I wanted to say. I really appreciate the chance to speak today. I will hand back to Tim, because he has one more point that he wants to discuss.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Does he want to raise it now, or does he want to wait until questions?

**Mr Cairns:** I was just about to say that it would be better if we moved to questions. There is some stuff on section 22 services to, but I know that you will probably want to ask questions on that, so I am happy for us to take some questions.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** I am pleased to see you here today. We have been trying to organise a session since we came back in January. I understand the valuable service that community transport provides right across rural Northern Ireland. I have spoken to Timothy a number of times about the challenges that you had pre-COVID, never mind the challenges that you have now during this period. The paper that has been provided is excellent. You should put out more widely the profile piece on the work that you have been doing throughout COVID, because, in some ways, you are unsung heroes. Your work is done very quietly. It is time that you blew your own trumpet a bit more so that people understand the work that you do. It goes beyond picking up passengers. The key line in the presentation is:

*"Community Transport is at the frontline in helping tackle loneliness and isolation."*

That is exactly what you do.

Your challenges with funding, in particular, concern and worry me. I know that the CTA has called for a review, which will include funding, particularly on section 22. I am interested to hear from you, Timothy, on both those aspects, the conversations that you have had and the obstacles with section 22. In some ways, that would be a lifesaver for the community transport service and those for whom it provides a service. Will you expand on that?

**Mr Cairns:** Thank you, Chair and members, for your support and the time that you have provided for us. We know that we have an open door and that members, in particular, are prepared to discuss our issues with us and to take them up on our behalf. We really appreciate that.

It is important to say that section 22 services are not about taking stuff from the commercial sector; they are about complementing Translink. As we move out of the pandemic, Translink is in a very precarious financial position. Section 22 relates to section 22 of the Transport Act 1985, which covers England, Scotland and Wales. Section 22 permits are issued in England, Scotland and Wales in places where the market cannot provide a service any longer. Typically, the public bus company abandons a route because it is not profitable, and the local community bands together and puts the service on — that is common, with about 40% of section 22 services provided that way — or, there is a top-down approach, where the public bus company comes to the local community or local community transport provider and says, "Could you provide this in partnership with us?" You could get a situation where a rural bus service is profitable from 8.00 am to 9.30 am and from 4.00 pm to 6.00

pm but is not profitable from 9.30 am to 4.00 pm. The public bus company runs it at the time that it is profitable, and the community transport provider or the community partners run it at the time when you can break even. It is not, therefore, about the commercial sector not being able to operate and community transport taking it over on the cheap; it is about complementing the services that are there. Translink is already saying that unprofitable rural routes need to be addressed and looked at. A section 22 permit is a way that not only community transport but communities can partner with Translink in order to provide different solutions to the way that it operates.

Furthermore, community transport providers could adapt their service so that something that they currently offer under a 10B permit could be widened out. Ashley said that, under a 10B permit, you can offer a service only to those who become members of your organisation. A section 22 permit allows you to offer services to the general public. Let us say that we are not in COVID times and six or seven people are going to a day centre. That service could be adapted and five or six extra seats offered to members of the public travelling along the same rural routes to the same towns, so that additional capacity could then be utilised.

A section 22 permit is not a solution but a way of complementing what Translink provides, allowing Translink to work with communities in order to provide bottom-up solutions to transport. It would be just another tool in the arsenal.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Why is there, then, a reluctance to explore that, if you are saying that it is about complementing what is in place as opposed to being a competitor?

**Mr Cairns:** That is a great question. If you go back to 1985, you see that there was a lot of reluctance and nervousness from commercial operators in England, Scotland and Wales. They thought probably what Translink and other commercial operators here think, which is that community transport is just coming in to provide the service on the cheap. That is not what happened. Commercial operators, communities and local authorities in England see it as a way of providing transport where those routes cannot be provided.

I will give you an example. A little village outside Oxford used to have a bus service to the city of Oxford. That service was not commercially viable, and it ended. The community banded together and, with the help of the local authority and the CTA, now run a bus route from the village to the main bus centre in Oxford, which opens up a myriad of travel possibilities across England for that community of about 3,000 people.

Those were volunteers who undertook that. The bus company abandoned the route about 10 years ago, because it is not commercially viable to run a bus from a village of 3,000 to a city. However, the bus company was supportive of the scheme, as you are running a bus to its hub, and the bus company was able to provide some funding for the service because it was a valuable asset to it even though it had not been profitable.

A section 22 permit provides innovative and imaginative solutions. People need to look at places like Strathclyde, where there is innovative work going on with the public bus company and community transport, to see how it is not competition and is actually a way to solve some of Translink's problems.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** The first question was about your budget and discussions that you have had with the Department about that. Obviously, it is cross-departmental but is primarily with DFI.

**Mr Cairns:** The budgets flatlined for the past couple of years, and the budget was cut severely in 2013-14. From where we are sitting right now, I do not know whether there is a prospect of our budget being increased next year, and that will cause real difficulties for us across the piece in 2021.

The budget has to increase next year because capacity is going to be lower, as demand will be higher when the health service begins to open up and all those things that Paddy outlined. In discussions with the Department, we are making representations that the budget has to go up. It has not increased in actual terms, let alone in real terms, in two years following the severe cuts.

If the service is going to stay on the road and we are going to be able to meet the demands that people have, there will have to be an increase, albeit a modest increase. As Paddy said, £200,000, £300,000, £400,000 goes a long way, because the big costs are in putting the bus on the road and the driver in the bus. To then increase service and demand in order to provide more trips each week is a

marginal gain for the money that can be invested. For a small amount of money, there are a lot of extra trips, because the big-ticket items, if you like, are already there and paid for.

Small amounts of money can make a big difference, and it is about trying to get that message across to the Department.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Thank you Timothy, Paddy and Ashley. Ashley, you did a great job in selling it to us; I have to hand it to you. The pudding definitely pushed David over the edge. He was very cross about that.

**Mrs Keane:** Thank you, Keith.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I can hear the passion that you both have for it.

What is your funding model? You talked about the £2.2 million from DFI and your other income from DAERA. What is the rest of it? Ashley briefly touched on the fees for members. Let us say that 100% is everything. Can you give me a rough breakdown of the funding model based on DFI, DAERA and membership income? Presumably, you have other funding.

**Mr McEldowney:** The DAERA money varies. It is paid out on actual usage through showing SmartPasses, but it has tended to be in and around £600,000 or £700,000. So, if we get £2.2 million from DFI for the core service, DAERA tops that up with another £600,000 or £700,000; it has done that for eight to 10 years now. Most of the partnerships have money through the Disability Action transport scheme. I am not sure of the total figure collectively for rural areas, but we get £60,000 or £70,000 for delivering in Strabane and Omagh, so £400,000 or £500,000 comes through Disability Action.

The other big service is group hire, which is self-financing. We charge a full-cost recovery fee to the group for the time and miles, so there is an hourly rate for the driver's time and a mileage rate. That is on a full-cost recovery basis. So, you could do £100,000 or you could do nothing, but, as long as you have it priced right, it is fine. We panicked about that at the start of the year, but, as it has turned out, if we do not do those trips, it does not cost us any money. We are not losing because that money is not there. However, it is bad for the community, as it is losing out because we are not providing those connections for it.

So, you are looking at £2.2 million from DFI; £600,000 or £700,000 from DAERA; and £400,000 or £500,000 from the Disability Action transport scheme (DATS). That is collectively across Northern Ireland shared out among 11 organisations.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Was the DAERA money based on trips? Did it maintain that £600,000 or did it take it away from you completely?

**Mr McEldowney:** That is the one that we panicked about. If it had taken that money away because we were not doing passenger trips and nobody was showing a SmartPass, we would have been out of business. To be fair to DAERA, it said that, as long as we were helping rural communities, it would commit to it. It did that for the first three months — April, May and June — and then, before the end of June, it said that it would honour it for the rest of the year. I think that that was entirely because of the work that we did and it could see that clearly, as we reported back to the Department weekly. So, in April 2020, it gave us what we got in April 2019. It matched the activity from the previous year.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Is that money secure until the end of March?

**Mr McEldowney:** Yes.

**Mr K Buchanan:** Is that a yearly figure?

**Mrs Keane:** Yes.

**Mr K Buchanan:** That is secured every year. What is the outlook for getting that next year? I do not mean this disrespectfully, but what is it saying about next year, based on very few trips?

**Mrs Keane:** We do not know yet, but we hope that those discussions will take place between DFI and DAERA in the coming months and that that will be in the workings of what happens as we go forward. We are really not sure. The DAERA money and the furlough money were two of the things that kept us afloat because our activity has not been as great and our expenses have not been as high as they normally would be. However, from April onwards, we will be staring into the unknown, so we are not sure. If it is reflective of activity, it will be a big loss.

**Mr K Buchanan:** What will your costs be like from April, based on the fact that there will be an explosion of people, we hope, looking for your services, but you will have a reduction in the capacity of your buses? Do you see that going up by 20%? Do you have any idea what your costs will rise by? I know that it is not a direct comparison because you have the buses and the drivers, but what figure do you see that going up by? I do not want to put you on the spot.

**Mr McEldowney:** The way that we have operated for a number of years is that we have an idea of our income for the year, and we provide as many trips as we can accordingly. We have been turning away clients and refusing trips. We are not going to lift another 20,000 people and bust the organisation because we have done that. We are under pressure to make sure that we only spend what we have. That restricts our travel, especially with the capacity on the vehicles that we talked about. If that is still reduced and the demand is higher, we are very concerned that people who will need lifts will not be able to get them, and that might have knock-on health effects. Our reputation has been enhanced for nine months, and within three months it could be in the gutter. MLAs will get phone calls saying, "That crowd will not give me a lift, and the Out and About service is a disaster". Due to our resource and capacity, we are going to have to turn away a lot of people, and that will be very difficult to manage. You guys will hear about it, I am sure.

**Mr K Buchanan:** I have a final question about the health work that you do. I know of a case just outside Cookstown where a lady was lifted by the "ambulance bus", as I call it. Now you are doing that. They are not doing it for whatever reason, but you can. The health service is not paying that cost, so have you knocked the door of the health service?

**Mrs Keane:** Sorry, can you say that again?

**Mr K Buchanan:** Have you knocked the health service's door to ask for support for your work? It has stopped doing the minibus work because of COVID-19, but the Community Transport Association is doing that work.

**Mrs Keane:** The non-emergency ambulance service has basically ground to a halt as well. We provide a service to anyone who has an out-of-area hospital appointment at full-cost recovery. Whatever it costs to do the run, and if we can get a volunteer to make the trip, it is more cost-effective for the member. We get the cost back from the member, and the member may claim that as a travel expense and get some of the cost back. Generally, the member foots the bill for out-of-area appointments that would normally be provided by the Ambulance Service.

**Mr K Buchanan:** OK. Thank you.

**Ms Kimmins:** Thank you for the presentation. I have a particular interest in community transport. First, the community transport service has been invaluable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the day centres and facilities accessed by older people, particularly in rural areas, ground to a halt. For older people to have contact with the outside world and someone different is crucial. I commend the work that you have done and the repurposing that has happened in difficult times.

I will go back to Keith's point about the non-emergency ambulance, and I had mentioned this before in discussions with Tim. I worked in the trust before I worked in older people's services, and one of our biggest difficulties was trying to arrange transport for appointments and nursing homes. The onus is generally put on family members or friends, and that is not always feasible. On occasions, the emergency ambulance has had to be taken out of action to fill the gaps. Even before COVID-19, transport was a massive issue. In your presentation, you said that the bulk of your work is health-related transport. The fact that it is such a cross-cutting service means that there really should be discussions with the Department of Health about how it can help.

Coming out of COVID-19, we have all realised the impact of voluntary services and community groups on filling the voids where there is no statutory provision. The pandemic has exposed that void in a very

different setting. Have there been any discussions in the past with the Department of Health or can we look at that?

**Mr McEldowney:** We have engaged with the Department of Health individually, as have departmental officials and the previous Minister. We spoke to the Minister a couple of months ago via Zoom, and that was one of the points that we raised. The Minister said that she would try to revisit that. The problem is that we have spent a lot of time in those discussions outlining what we can and cannot do, and, over time, it can drift, and nothing happens. It is not that the question has not been asked, even at ministerial level, and the DFI Minister has approached the Health Minister.

The frustration for us is that we know that we can do that work very well. There is a statutory obligation for some of the transport. For example, transport to day care is a health trust obligation, but other transport is harder to determine: is that for them to do or for us? With the non-emergency ambulance service, a GP surgery can make an appointment only to get a call the day before the appointment from the transport service to say, "We are too busy; we can't do that tomorrow". The result is that people are being let down at a very late stage. When they ring us, we need them to be signed up as a member and we need three or four days' notice. Had we known a week before, we could have done it, but when they ring us on the day to say, "The Ambulance Service rang me and said that it cannot take me tomorrow", it is too late for us, and we are letting them down, too.

There could be better working together. Transport in the Ambulance Service regionally, as well as in the trusts locally, is under serious pressure. Again, with a bit of additional resource, we could do a lot of that work for them, but we are banging our heads against a brick wall for that request. We end up doing some of it anyway, mainly because we care about people and want to help them out. However, it is unfair on our sector that we are picking up the slack and getting no recompense for it from the Department. It has been a problem for 10 years. We discuss it at community planning level in councils, and it is raised when we meet the trusts and the PHA. It has been washing about for years, but nothing is done.

**Ms Kimmins:** Yes, I know. That is exactly the point. There needs to be better coordination, because you can complement existing services, and that would be a huge help. As you said, the non-emergency ambulance is under serious pressure, so it makes perfect sense. It just needs a bit of tweaking so that it runs smoothly, but it should certainly be explored. I do not know whether we can look into that further from an Infrastructure point of view, but, as MLAs, we can raise it with the Department of Health.

I have another question. You talked about how the levels of activity will affect funding, but there had been some discussion about multi-year funding. What would it mean for community transport — the likes of yourselves — if you could avail of that?

**Mr Cairns:** Multi-year funding is very important. It is very difficult to plan year to year, and it is also very difficult to plan, from a capital basis, year to year, because a minibus typically has about a six-year lifespan. You do not want to go beyond that, although, right now, many of the rural community transport partnerships (RCTPs) are being forced to go beyond that time frame for the capital expenditure because they do not have the funding or the ability to plan over a two- or three-year period. It would be better if the Department could make a commitment to a three-year funding model, as that would allow RCTPs to plan and be able to adapt services more effectively and to utilise them where they are most needed.

On the health point, we are not unique in that. There are examples across Europe, including the United Kingdom and Ireland, of innovative ways of tackling transport to health. We need to look at those innovative models, but, at the moment, we are not. We seem to be closed to the idea of looking at innovative ways of getting passengers to and from hospital, even in and around issues of delayed discharge and that sort of thing. Community transport can play a role in that, but we are not there. There is innovation, if we are prepared to look at it.

**Ms Kimmins:** I agree, and we tend to work in silos, particularly across Departments. If we think outside the box a wee bit more and work more cross-departmentally, we might be able to solve a lot of the problems.

This is my last question. You have repurposed a lot of your work due to COVID-19, and none of us really knows how things will look in six months' or 12 months' time. Will the things that you are doing now with deliveries have a lasting impact as part of your service or is it predominantly for this period?

**Mr McEldowney:** The main reason that we are doing it is because we did not have the passenger transport to do and so we had the free resource. As the clients have come back on board from the summer, with the restrictions we talked about on the vehicles and the no-car scheme, we are probably not far off full capacity. We are delivering about a third of the trips that we delivered last September, October and November, but we had the space and the resource to do it back then. We are doing a bit of it now, as and when we can. However, our priority is passenger transport, and, when we are up to full capacity with passenger transport, it really limits what we can do for the wider community.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** I have four members to ask questions and 10 minutes to get through them.

**Mr Hilditch:** Thanks, Chair. I will try to be brief. I know that you are under pressure.

I congratulate you and all your volunteers on the outstanding work that you have been doing.

In your report, you mentioned regulatory divergence between NI and the UK. Is that about section 22, or are there other issues?

**Mr Cairns:** It is difficult to compare us with GB. It fully deregulated its bus market, although it has now partially regulated it again. We have a very different regulatory regime. Differences have also emerged between here and there, not because we have different regulation or legislation — the legislation and regulation are identical — but, when devolution was suspended, our civil servants took decisions that were probably to the detriment of community transport. When Ministers and politicians made those decisions in England, Scotland, they were different and were more to the benefit of the bus market being more liberally regulated or the regulations being more freely interpreted. If anyone were to do a dissertation on why politicians are needed, they could look at Northern Ireland and GB and the difference in approaches by civil servants and those of Ministers and politicians to regulation. You can clearly see that, when Ministers and politicians are in place, there are better outcomes than when civil servants are left to make decisions. Obviously, civil servants are great *[Laughter.]* There are many legacy issues here with how regulations have been interpreted. We also have issues because our bus market is highly regulated. We need a different approach. We should not look at deregulating the bus market — that would be wrong — but we need to look at innovative solutions and ways of regulating.

**Mr Hilditch:** OK. Your work in communities and local government focuses on community planning. I know that we have spoken a great deal about central government today, but have any help or resources been offered at council level?

**Mrs Keane:** We have engaged with Mid Ulster District Council. Bridget and I from the CDM sit on an integrated transport forum, which came about because there was no provision for transport in the mid-Ulster community plan. It referred to an integrated transport pilot, but that has since disappeared. We have been talking to the council, but we have not met since the start of the year.

**Mr Hilditch:** That may be something that you could follow up.

**Mrs Keane:** Yes. That is something that we could follow up.

**Mr McEldowney:** Rural transport is referenced somewhere in all the community plans either in passing or as a significant issue. In Fermanagh and Omagh, for example, it is a really big element. However, there is no formal agreement or sense that the councils will fork out big money for it. They have raised it as an issue, but they ask DFI what it is doing about it through the community planning structures.

**Mr Hilditch:** It has lots of money. Do not worry about that. *[Laughter.]* I will stop there.

**Mr Beggs:** Paddy and Ashley, I thank you and your members for what you have done during the pandemic when many people have been isolated. You mentioned that your buses can pick up members but not non-members. How complicated is it to become a member? Is it just filling in a form? What needs to be done?

**Mrs Keane:** It is filling in an application form and having it rubber-stamped. That is it. As long as you tick the box, that is fine. Our membership comes from right across the community; you do not have to

be a particular age. If you do not have access to transport, and, say, you have to walk a mile or two miles to the nearest bus stop, you are eligible to join our membership scheme.

**Mr Beggs:** Do you develop regular routes, whereby everybody from an area goes to a day centre on a certain day, for example?

**Mrs Keane:** We have shopping routes. They are not regular because the permit does not allow us to do that, but we may have 10 people in one area, and Maggie might go this week and Jinny the next. We snake round, for example, the Bellaghy area and bring them into Magherafelt to do their shopping or to Curran or Maghera because Tuesday or Friday may be their shopping day. Those are the types of things that we do. We have other runs, but they are not timetabled, publicised or widely —.

**Mr Beggs:** However, you do not make random pickups.

**Mrs Keane:** No, people ring in to say that they need transport.

**Mr Beggs:** How do your charges compare to the local bus service? If there was one.

**Mrs Keane:** Most of our people get free travel. Ninety per cent of our Out and About members have a DAERA SmartPass, so they either get free or half-fare travel. From that point of view, it is very affordable, and they get picked up at their front door; they do not have to walk to the end of a lane or road. If a passenger was paying, if they travelled between nought and five miles, it would cost £3.50 for a single journey. A return journey is £7 within a five-mile radius of their home.

**Mr McEldowney:** It then tapers up by £1 for every five miles. From five to 10 miles, 10 to 15 miles. The further you travel, the more you pay, but it is heavily subsidised. They pay £3, £4 or £5 each way into the local town.

**Mr Beggs:** Finally, as others may want in, are your volunteers still coming forward? That must be a difficult issue, as it is essential that people come forward to help.

**Mrs Keane:** We had 18 volunteers before the pandemic. Currently, we have six who provide a service for us. The others, because of family and health or other issues, have said that they are not comfortable volunteering for now. We have lost a lot of our volunteer base, but, at the same time, there are still the demands of our passengers. We have our paid drivers and our minibuses, and those are costs that we meet every month. We try to get as many people in the buses as we can and utilise the buses fully over the week.

**Mr Beggs:** Thank you.

**Mr Muir:** I will be brief, as I am conscious of the time. I would like to thank you for all the work of Community Transport in Northern Ireland, particularly during the pandemic. The information that you provided today was very valuable. I also declare that I was previously an employee of Translink.

DVA centres and their facilities have been curtailed, if not stopped, as a result of the pandemic. What impact has that had on community transport in Northern Ireland?

**Mr McEldowney:** For vehicle testing, as for all vehicles, including commercial ones, we get letters to say that there is a six-month extension. There might have been a second letter. Our vehicles are no different from the rest in that we are being given extensions on MOT or PSV checks. I can assure you that our vehicles are the best maintained vehicles in the country. We voluntarily do 10-week inspections and meet the highest criteria for commercial vehicles, big buses and lorries. I would be content to say that our vehicle checking and our maintenance regime is absolutely top drawer. There is no issue with vehicle safety, but, as with every other vehicle, there is a backlog on testing.

**Mr Muir:** Have the practical and theory tests and other elements of DVA services had an impact?

**Mr McEldowney:** We reviewed our drivers' licences. There is a five-year cycle for the certificate of professional competence (CPC) and drivers need to have completed the courses. We have looked and do not have any drivers who need a test or need to be licensed again soon. We hope that, come spring time, we can get caught up, as we have missed a year of CPC courses. It will not be difficult for

us to get up to speed. Anyone whose licence has expired in the past six months, or whose licence is due to expire, will get temporary extensions. We are keeping abreast of that, but we do not think that it will cause us any major concerns.

**Mr Muir:** Thank you very much. Chair, I have another question on section 22, but I will engage with them directly on that.

**Mr Boylan:** Thank you very much. That was enlightening. You brought the local stuff right into the Committee. I have done a wee bit of voluntary stuff, so I know that the people whom you helped out appreciate it. We will be able to reflect on this in 12 months' time.

I have a wee question about section 22. You mentioned relaxation of the permit. Can you outline that?

**Mrs Keane:** That was for a non-member. Anyone we transport in our vehicles must be a member of our organisation. The relaxation was for, say, people who still had to get to hospital or medical appointments, even though there was a shortage of doctors seeing people. If they still needed to go and were not a member of Out and About Community Transport, we could take them under the relaxation.

**Mr Boylan:** The only reason that I ask is because we have to learn from that example about what we can do and what is out there —

**Mrs Keane:** Absolutely.

**Mr Boylan:** — with regard to the model and everything. I will leave it there. You got the furlough issue sorted out.

**Mr McEldowney:** That was brilliant; it was a lifesaver. We panicked about the assisted rural travel scheme money from DAERA. Then there was a question mark, as we were getting directions from the Department very early on that we could not avail of the furlough scheme. However, I think that there was an assumption by officials that we were getting 100% of our funding from the Department, and they did not understand the model of three or four pots making up the big pot. I want to be very clear that no organisation was taking advantage of that. We had a couple of older drivers who were shielding and for whom, therefore, the furlough scheme was absolutely ideal, and a couple of others whose partners were shielding. Of 15 drivers, four were furloughed. We did not take the hand or overcook it. Those four wages were covered for the nine months. It is running into £30,000-odd. That is a big reason why we are saying that, this year, we are OK but that next year will be the problem.

**Mr Boylan:** I have a quick question on section 22. Surely, we have learnt from COVID-19, and it reinforces that there is an opportunity here. Can you outline some of the challenges that we would have if we were to go down that route?

**Mr Cairns:** Section 22 is not a panacea; it will not solve all our problems. The challenge is how we can develop the bus market innovatively in order to meet as much need as possible. It is not about community transport versus Translink versus commercial operators; there is space for everybody to operate.

The challenge, and I think that Liz mentioned it earlier, is the silo mentality that seems to pervade every sector of public service in this part of the world. We need to get out of the silo mentality that Translink provides one type of service, commercial operators provide another, and community transport provides yet another. There are some great examples in other places of using the public transport network innovatively along with community transport and commercial operators to build and utilise capacity.

The challenge is that we have to start thinking differently. Everywhere else is thinking differently about how passenger transport and demand-responsive transport are delivered and how those two transport types marry together. We are not thinking innovatively about that here. We still have the idea that Translink is the first port of call for the public to be transported for a fare. Across Europe, GB and down south, that is not how they think. They are coming up with different, demand-responsive, door-to-door solutions that fit in with the public transport network. Until we start to look at that, we will always face challenges.

We would like to see silos being broken down so that we can all work together. There is room for commercial operators to work with Translink, and for Translink to take the lead on that. There is room for community transport as well to do what we all do best.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Thank you all for your presentation. You have highlighted a number of issues that we are happy to take forward and explore and to support you on. Hopefully, we will see you at the end of all this. At some stage, perhaps, we might get the opportunity to visit.

**Mr Cairns:** Thank you, Chair and Committee members. We feel very supported by all of you, particularly with regard to the time that you have taken on the furlough issue. Many of you wrote to the Department on our behalf; that was valuable and vital for us. Thank you very much for your support.

**The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):** Thank you very much. All the best.