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Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Decarbonisation of Road Transport in
Northern Ireland: Department for
Infrastructure

19 May 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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:

Mrs Claire Cockerill	Department for Infrastructure
Ms Liz Loughran	Department for Infrastructure
Mr Chris McLean	Department for Infrastructure
Ms Jackie Robinson	Department for Infrastructure

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I welcome, attending via StarLeaf, Liz Loughran, the director of transport policy; Jackie Robinson, director of the public transport division; Claire Cockerill, the head of transport policy and climate change; and Chris McLean, head of the Translink sponsor unit. You are all very welcome this morning. Who is leading off? Is it Jackie or Liz?

Ms Liz Loughran (Department for Infrastructure): Chair, I will start, if that is OK.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): That is great. Thank you very much.

Ms Loughran: Thanks, Chair, and thanks for the invitation to brief Committee members on decarbonising road transport and, in particular, the opportunity to respond to your inquiry. If it is OK with you, Chair, I will make a few opening remarks, and I will then hand over to Jackie, who will do the same. We will then answer members' questions.

As you said, I am the director of DFI's transport policy division. I am also the Department's walking and cycling champion. Jackie Robinson is the director of DFI's public transport division. We are also joined by Claire, who is the head of transport policy and climate change branch, and Chris McLean, who is the head of the Translink sponsor unit.

We have been doing a lot of work on decarbonisation since the return of the Assembly and since Ministers took up post, and the Minister is strongly supportive of being ambitious in any actions that we take to address the climate change emergency. She strongly supports a green recovery, and she

is also committed to working in partnership with Executive colleagues to help deliver the necessary changes. You have the briefing paper that we sent, so I will quickly outline some of the key areas of policy development that the Department is taking forward. You will get more detail in that briefing paper; this will be a quick sprint through. Transport is the second-highest producer of greenhouse gas emissions here. It accounts for about 23% of emissions and about 33% of energy consumed. If we are to be successful on decarbonisation, we will have to achieve efficient, cleaner energy, and we will have to think very carefully about how we use that energy and look at some of our wider policies and at how we travel and why we travel.

The Minister has had us working on the development of policy options to decarbonise the transport sector, and our main work on that to date has been on the transport theme in development of the new energy strategy for Northern Ireland, which is, obviously, led by the Department for the Economy. The strategy addresses the strategic energy issues, including the response to climate change and the UK Government's 2050 net zero carbon target. To help with that, we have set up a working group that brings all the key stakeholders in, including a range of government, non-government and industry reps.

Last year, we completed the analysis of the transport responses to the energy strategy call for evidence. The call for evidence showed pretty clear support for a travel hierarchy approach, which means, first, focusing on measures to reduce travel, then promoting active travel and public transport, and, finally, switching to low- and zero-emission vehicles. The responses also highlighted the need to promote the use of low-emission public transport; the need to invest in walking and cycling infrastructure; the need to incentivise uptake of electric vehicles (EV); and the need to upgrade and expand the EV charge point infrastructure. They also pointed out that more work was required to incentivise the use of green hydrogen, biofuels and alternative fuels for heavy vehicles.

We took all the information that had been provided by the public and stakeholders during the call for evidence and used it to develop proposals, which are set out in the energy strategy options paper that was published for public consultation at the very end of March. That identifies all the measures and options that we think are required to help achieve zero carbon emissions and reduce energy use across a number of sectors.

Specifically on the transport side that includes measures to promote modal shift, focusing on the need to reduce vehicle miles, encouraging active travel and use of public transport, and also exploring more place-based solutions to change the distances that people actually need to travel. We have also looked at measures to support the transition from fossil fuels to zero-emission vehicles, focusing on the next steps that will be required to achieve decarbonisation through electrification of vehicles and the use of alternative fuels.

That consultation will close on 30 June. We are hoping to get more feedback from the public on, first, whether we have picked up all the key issues from the call for evidence and, secondly, whether it looks like a logical strategy and way forward as we develop the Department's response. We are also conscious that, on many of those issues, the Department does not have expertise. We have, therefore, commissioned four research pieces, which, we hope, will provide us with more information and more of an expert view. Those four research pieces are about active travel and modal shift; electrification of transport; greening of the public-sector fleet; and, finally, alternative fuels in the transport sector. We expect the output from those research pieces in the next few weeks. We will feed that in, together with the information that we have from the options consultations, and that will allow Minister Mallon to finalise the policy options that are included in the final strategy.

Outside of the strategy, we are working with colleagues across the NICS to develop work on climate change. That includes, as you will know, the development of a multi-decade green growth strategy. There is a lot of work in that area at the moment. We are trying really hard to ensure that we make the connections, and that the work that we do in one area feeds into the others. Therefore, for example, the energy strategy work on decarbonisation has clear read across to the climate change work. Obviously, we will bring the feedback on climate change and green growth into our work on the energy strategy.

Transport is a devolved matter, and we are taking a lot of the policy work forward. However, there are a number of areas where policy and legislation that have been developed at Westminster will extend to Northern Ireland with regard to vehicle transport and policy work that will also have an effect on decarbonisation. Some of it is headline material. The Prime Minister's plan is to bring forward the ban on the sale of diesel and petrol vehicles from 2035 to 2030. We are, therefore, working with officials in the Department for Transport (DfT) and the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) to understand

the work that they are doing and to help them to understand what that means for Northern Ireland. In addition to that, Minister Mallon is seeking clarity from the Secretary of State for Transport on the allocation of funding to support Northern Ireland in the transition to cleaner, greener transport.

We are also working with Whitehall officials on the UK-wide transport decarbonisation plan to make sure, again, that the Northern Ireland context is properly represented. That plan is due in spring or summer and will address some of the strategic energy issues and the responses to climate change. We intend to use that work to shape Northern Ireland's policy.

Along with the policy work, the Minister is looking at other initiatives through which we can support the decarbonisation of transport. Last year, the Minister announced the blue-green infrastructure fund as a catalyst for positive infrastructure and cultural change. Within that fund, a number of relevant projects promote low- or zero-emission transport and reduce reliance on the internal combustion engine. For example, investment in greenway projects and walking, cycling and other active travel investments. We have procured, as a small pilot project, a couple of electric vans to replace end-of-life petrol and diesel vehicles in the Department. We are running that as a pilot, hoping to learn from it and see to what extent we can roll that out across the Department. If we can make it work in the Department, that will give more information for rolling it out across the public sector and greening the whole fleet.

We are also looking at filters to reduce emissions on the Strangford ferries. You have just had a presentation about electric vehicles, focusing particularly on charging. Since 2010, we have been working to try to support the introduction of electric vehicles. The network that was developed by the former Department for Regional Development was commercialised in 2015, spun out to the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and is now operated on a commercial basis. That is in line with what happened in the rest of these islands. You heard, and we are well aware, that the commercialisation here has seen some quite significant market failure issues. That needs to be addressed but, because of the commercial realities, we need to look at the market and work out what gaps the market is not going to fill and what we need to fill. It is a very nascent market; it is very fast-moving. We need to make sure that we have the right number of charge points and the right type of charge points in the right places. There are an awful lot of players on the field. It is very complex and we are trying to work through it bit by bit at the moment. We are working with stakeholders, the energy strategy from the working group and the research, and we hope that that will give us a clearer sense of the way to go.

The Minister has also done other things to support the growth of electric vehicles. She introduced changes to the planning system through permitted development rights. That came into play in December and is intended to make it easier to site the points. She has contributed the match funding for the INTERREG project, which you discussed earlier, for rapid transport points. She has also written a number of times to OZEV and the Energy Saving Trust, that administers the fund for council-run, on-street residential charging points. First, she wanted to make sure that councils in the North could access the fund, and, secondly, we have had a number of discussions with OZEV and the councils about the lack of uptake. We are working to put a process in place that will support the councils in those applications.

Finally, we have been talking and working with ESB about how to repair the current points, extend the network and make it reliable enough to be chargeable. There are a number of very significant challenges because it is commercial. We have taken advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office on vires issues for the Department. There is also a number of state-aid issues that we are trying to work through at the moment. It is complex, but the Minister is keen to make progress.

Finally, before I pass over to Jackie, we are considering the introduction of a range of alternative fuels that could replace petrol and diesel for areas where electric will not work. We are looking at hydrogen, compressed natural gas and liquefied natural gas as sources of interim solutions for decarbonising the heavy goods sector. We are part of a steering group with Belfast Metropolitan College and the private sector for the INTERREG hydrogen project, GenComm. That project has provided the platform for the introduction of hydrogen buses to the Translink fleet. On that note, I will pass to Jackie who will talk more about the Translink interventions.

Ms Jackie Robinson (Department for Infrastructure): Thanks, Liz. Good morning, Chair and members. Thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I will take a couple of minutes to provide an overview of the work being taken forward to decarbonise the public transport sector.

Minister Mallon has made addressing climate change one of her key priorities. She is focusing on delivering clean public transport. However, the cost of doing that will be significant. At the moment, the full cost of decarbonising the bus and rail network is estimated at £3 billion over the next 15 to 20

years. Those figures are broad, capital estimates based on the prevailing market rates for fleet replacement, associated infrastructure and the electrification of the rail network. However, as technology develops, the figure will come down.

Minister Mallon has already invested significantly in moving our public transport bus fleet to zero emissions. You will be aware that, in February 2020, she announced the Translink procurement of three hydrogen buses from Wright Bus as part of the Northern Ireland hydrogen project. That project will see the first hydrogen buses, and in conjunction with Energia, the first hydrogen refuelling station in Ireland. The vehicles entered service in our public transport network in December 2020. I know that the Committee had an opportunity to view the buses just before they went into service. Translink is leading the way on zero-emission public transport vehicles.

In addition, Minister Mallon committed £50 million capital funding, under the New Decade, New Approach agreement, for the purchase of 100 zero-emission vehicles by Translink over the next two years. The vehicles will be made up of 80 battery-electric buses and 20 hydrogen-fuel-cell buses. It is anticipated that the first vehicles will go into service in Belfast during the spring of next year, before being rolled out to Derry. These are the first steps in achieving the Minister's ambition for the full decarbonisation of public transport.

Minister Mallon has also outlined her ambitions for our rail network as an alternative to road-based transport. She has highlighted that she is keen to do all that she can to explore how we can progress rail improvements within the budgetary envelope available to her. In seeking to realise the untapped potential that rail offers to address regional imbalance and deliver multiple benefits across our island, Minister Mallon has commissioned a number of pieces of work to improve our rail network. These include commissioning feasibility studies to bring phase 3 of the upgrade of the Derry to Coleraine line back on track — no pun intended — while also bringing forward studies for additional halts and a half-hourly service between Belfast and Derry.

With regard to further expansion of the rail network, the Minister is keen to take a strategic view on how we prioritise investment. The all-island strategic rail review, which Minister Mallon announced last month along with Minister Ryan, will allow us to consider the rail network across the island to view how we can improve it for everyone. It reflects the commitment under the New Decade, New Approach agreement to examine the feasibility of high- and higher-speed rail connections between Belfast, Dublin and Cork. Minister Ryan and Minister Mallon also have a shared ambition for rail and a commitment to tackling the climate emergency. They are keen that we use the opportunity of the rail review to consider how we can improve the rail network across the island of Ireland, including into the north-west. As a consequence, the remit of the review has been extended to consider the potential for interregional rail, including high- or higher-speed rail links to the north-west; rail connections to international gateways, which are ports and airports; the potential for rail freight; and decarbonisation of the rail network.

While that work is ongoing, Minister Mallon continues to invest, with the purchase of 21 additional carriages for the rail network. She saw the first of those being delivered in March. Those carriages are 20% more fuel efficient than previous trains, and will play a significant role in providing lower-carbon transport when the first of them comes into commission in the autumn. Early plans are also being developed for a replacement for the cross-border Enterprise fleet. As part of that work, low-emission options, including hybrid and full electrification, will be considered.

Chair and members, thank you very much, from Liz and me, for the opportunity to present to you. We are very happy, with our team, to answer any questions that you have.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you both for your presentation. As you heard from the witnesses who presented prior to you, they have concerns about a number of aspects of what you have touched on, particularly around the draft energy strategy and the work that the Department is undertaking. We very much appreciate that you want to do that forensically and get as much data and information as possible from experts in order to create a report that is actually meaningful. However, their concern is that it could take considerable time to see the outworkings of that. They have given information about conversations that they have had with their members, wherein around 58% of those who currently use electric vehicles are actually considering going back to petrol or diesel. That is a retrograde step and not particularly positive news for the Committee to hear.

My questions are really about the timescales for the work that you are carrying out with the Department for the Economy and the conversations that you are having with ESB, because another aspect of the witnesses' concerns was the existing network and the urgency to try to get it up and

running. Can you give us a timescale for the reporting and also for your engagement with ESB? At what stage might you bottom out the complexities that you are experiencing to look at other options?

Ms Loughran: I will take the first part of that and then hand over to Claire, who will talk about the detail of the engagement that is going on and the timescales for that work.

My first observation is that electric vehicles are really important, but they are not the most important part of this. There is a lot of work to be done on journey reduction and modal shift. Electric vehicles have a huge amount of embedded emissions in them, so they are part of the solution but not the whole solution. I will hand over to Claire, who will deal with the timetables for the work that we are doing on the charging network.

Mrs Claire Cockerill (Department for Infrastructure): As was said in the presentation, the research work that we are doing will be finished by the end of June. The options paper is also due at the end of June, and we expect some of the policy development work at UK level to be finished around that time. It will be a case of putting all of that together in order to inform the development of the final energy strategy, which is due to be published by the end of the year. That said, some ongoing work will be required. For example, one of the options that is being put forward in the energy strategy options consultation is to produce an EV infrastructure plan, which would follow working with stakeholders.

To pick up on the second part of the question, we have had meetings with ESB recently, and we understand that it is putting a replacement programme in place, which will address around 60 of the charge points — 30 of the double-headed charge points — and five rapids as well. We expect that that work will commence quite soon. The Minister is very keen to explore opportunities to support ESB in relation to the existing charge point network. We are looking at opportunities for the Department to provide support but, as Liz said, the procurement rules are complex, as are the state aid issues, so we are working through those. We are also engaging with OZEV and, as Liz said, the Minister has written to Whitehall Ministers to get a better understanding of what support will be forthcoming, such as the 10-point plan and the *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* electric vehicles that was announced at the end of last year.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): There seems to be some confusion as to what the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) project with East Border Region would mean for Northern Ireland as regards the number and location of the new charging points. Can you give us some more information about that?

Mrs Cockerill: East Border Region is leading on that work. The Department is not involved in the delivery of that work. We have provided match funding. *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* SEUPB and East Border Region as they are taking forward the delivery aspects of the projects, so they are best placed to advise on that.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): A further point that came out of our previous briefing was about whether any consideration is being given to a cross-departmental task force. We are very mindful of the fact that this issue does not fall solely within your remit or that of the Department for the Economy.

Ms Loughran: I will take that one, Chairperson. What we have tried to achieve with the transport working group is something that is cross-departmental and cross-sectoral. A number of thematic groups sit under that. It is not just about the Departments; we have tried to bring in the private sector and other players here because of the commercial nature of a lot of this. The Minister is not considering a task force at the moment, because that working group is bringing the stakeholders together. As the energy strategy is developed, we will consider the next steps as we reflect on what has come back in from the options consultation. While we are developing the strategy for moving forward, the answer to the question is not at the moment.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): My final question is about the options consultation document. How are you going about that consultation process in order to maximise engagement with stakeholders?

Ms Loughran: The consultation is being led by the Department for the Economy, and we have had input into its plan. When we did the work on the call for evidence, we ran some specific transport workshops. We will be looking to have similar transport-specific engagement this time. I do not know whether Claire has anything to add to that.

Mrs Cockerill: The Department for the Economy is organising some stakeholder events. They will cover different elements of the energy strategy. We will be feeding into that process. Hopefully, those events will take place in the next number of weeks, around mid-June.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the officials for the presentation. I have just a couple of points. Prior to this session, we had a briefing on the issue of electric vehicles. You indicated that the Minister was engaging with the AERA Minister and the Economy Minister about how they can all work together to encourage greater use of electric vehicles. Can you give us any more detail about the outcome of those engagements?

Ms Loughran: At the moment, there have been a number of discussions. Some work has been done in DFI about how the Departments might work together to encourage and deliver that. We are waiting for some more information from the research projects. One of those research projects is designed to help us to look at the sort of charging infrastructure that we need. We need to know what the right infrastructure is, including the right place and time and the right sort of charging points. Once we have that information, it will allow us to have a more informed conversation, particularly with the AERA Minister, about how we might work together to deliver some of that infrastructure.

Ms Kimmins: I do not know, Liz, whether you heard the points that I made about funding from the British Government decreasing charging. Has there been any scope for discussion by the Ministers about top-up grants or anything like that, which may help to reduce the barriers to the use of electric vehicles? The Chair mentioned a retrograde step, as people start to think about moving back to petrol and diesel cars because of the issues with charging points. Has that formed part of the discussions that have taken place so far?

Ms Loughran: The Minister has written to the Secretary of State for Transport about funding. I am sorry; I caught the last 15 minutes, so I am not sure that I heard all your questions. The sense that some of those programmes were coming to an end is not something that DfT has told us. The Minister is still very much trying to ensure that Northern Ireland gets its fair share and that OZEV is properly engaged with interests here. Significant amounts of money are available at the moment that we are not applying for. Our focus is more particularly on whether we can find a way to support the councils to access that money, rather than putting extra money in from the Department.

Ms Kimmins: The lack of uptake from the councils was one of the points that I raised as well. There is certainly a role for the Department to show some leadership and encourage them to do that. The point that I just made was about grant funding for purchasing electric vehicles. We are told that it is being decreased. In the previous briefing, we discussed the possibility of the Department, in conjunction with Economy and DAERA, looking at whether there is potential for us to provide a top-up grant in the North that may help to offset some of that. I wanted to raise that point.

There are a couple of other things, Liz. Regarding active travel, the Department continues to construct shared pathways for cyclists and pedestrians, but I know that best practice suggests that segregated cycle paths should be implemented. In the past five years, over 70% of cycle projects that have been progressed were shared facilities. Will the Department now be moving away from shared pathways to future-proof cycling infrastructure?

Ms Loughran: The best practice is contained in a practice note called LTN 1/20. It does not actually say that shared paths should not be used; it says that we should think carefully about their use. For example, if you are in an urban area, the presumption should always be to segregate, particularly in high footfall areas. In other areas, such as more rural areas and areas of long stretches, particularly where there is not high footfall, the guidance suggests that we go with shared footpaths. The job for the Department is to really try to make sure that we get the balance right and do not use shared footpaths that cause conflict where there is high footfall. I am not saying that we have got the balance right yet — we definitely still have work to do — but I want to make it clear that there is a place for shared paths. That is fully in line with the guidance; we just need to be careful about where we use them.

Ms Kimmins: That is fair enough.

My last point is about rural connectivity. It is important that we note how important connectivity is for everybody but especially in rural areas where people are more dependent on cars and public transport. We need to ensure that rural connectivity is enhanced and not jeopardised. Can you give

me a sense of what considerations the Department has given to the importance of connectivity in rural areas in the context of decarbonisation?

Ms Loughran: The transport plans are probably our main route for looking at individual areas and at the different needs of different places. Obviously, the mix on this for decarbonisation will be different wherever you are. Somebody who is living in inner Belfast will find it pretty easy to switch to walking and cycling, whereas somebody who lives a significant distance from services will always have a requirement for a vehicle. In the transport plans, we will work iteratively with the councils as they go through their local development plan process to look at making sure that what we are suggesting in transport terms fits with their local plans. The mix will be different: it has to be because there are different experiences for different people.

Ms Kimmins: That is fair enough, thank you.

Mr Beggs: I am picking up a lot of concerns today about what is happening. In particular, the UK has targets for 2030 and 2035 in the move away from petrol and diesel engines, and the Electric Vehicle Association Northern Ireland has indicated that uncertainty about charging points is putting a considerable number of people off and creating anxiety. So, it appears that there is an objective of *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* but not the delivery on the ground to enable that to happen. You say in your statement:

"ESB has advised that it hopes this work programme will commence over the summer 2021."

I would have thought that we would be pretty close to that now as the summer starts on 1 June. Has a clear date been given to you for when that work will happen, or are there outstanding issues that may stop it happening?

Ms Loughran: Some of the questions about ESB are difficult for me to answer, because it is a commercial proposition and there are commercial sensitivities. As far as we are aware, ESB plans to start the work that it has promised to do very soon, but the bottom line is that we cannot make it do that work. We can support and try to find ways to help ESB, but it goes back to what I talked about at the beginning: there are quite serious market failure issues in here and issues that have not been seen in other jurisdictions across these islands. Due to the commerciality, we are having to very carefully step through that and try to find out whether we can identify those points of failure and work out what the Department can do to move in without interfering with the commercial market. It is difficult.

As for giving confidence to people, clearly, we do not want to be in a position where people who have already made the leap to electric vehicles start to move away from them because of fears about the charging system. Modern electric vehicles have significantly improved their ranges over the last few years because, obviously, the technology is moving at pace. We expect the majority of charging to take place at home, but there is definitely still a role for charging points across the road network, just to give that confidence to people.

Part of the research work that I referred to will be about making sure that we try to build the points in the right places, and that will be about building points that are commercially viable. Otherwise, in a few years' time, we will be back in this situation saying that, even though we built points at x, y and z, nobody is paying to charge at those points because charging at those points will be more expensive than charging at home. Therefore, the commercial entity that is running them has no incentive to repair them. We are trying to do all the research work now to make sure that we get it right.

Mr Beggs: It is certainly vital to put that back in place. On the INTERREG funding and the new network that may emerge, I am surprised to hear that you are unaware of how it is going and the degree of applications. Do you not accept that the Department should be looking at ensuring that there is a strategic location on our main route networks at which the new charging points should be installed, rather than just waiting to see what the outcome is? Has the Department been engaging with local authorities to ensure *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* considered and, hopefully, applied?

Ms Loughran: We have had some engagement with SEUPB and the East Border Region. Again, we cannot tell them where to put the points. The Department can offer advice and guidance and is doing so, but the Department cannot direct this.

Mr Beggs: I appreciate that. You need to have local authorities, as I understand it, make applications. My question was whether you have been actively engaging with councils [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] and, indeed, on behalf of everyone.

Ms Loughran: Sorry, I am not sure that I caught all of that. There are two sets of engagement with councils. There is one on the on-street residential charge points, and we are very much engaged with councils on that, because that is the one where we are trying to support them to bring the money in from OZEV. On the SEUPB project — the INTERREG project — we are engaging mainly through SEUPB rather than directly with the East Border Region. Claire, I am not sure if there is anything that you can add to give Mr Beggs more detail on that.

Mrs Cockerill: I am not in a position, at the moment, to give an update on that. Another area of the Department is engaging with SEUPB, so we can perhaps come back on that.

Mr Beggs: OK. I am happy to receive information.

There is ongoing concern that the overall balance of capital investment by the Department has not moved significantly enough towards supporting walking and cycling routes, particularly in urban areas. Are you rethinking your capital investment priorities?

Ms Loughran: I do not want to speak for my finance colleagues. However, the Minister established the blue-green infrastructure fund last year, and £20 million was put into it this year. I expect something similar to go into that fund next year. The Minister's focus for the blue-green infrastructure fund this year is on improvements that can be directly delivered by our Roads divisions to the walking and cycling infrastructure. Yes, the Minister is looking at that. I do not know what the overall balance will be. Some of the preliminary figures show a big planned increase in direct expenditure from the Department on the roads network and walking and cycling provision on that network.

Mr Beggs: Thanks for that. I understand that smart meters can play an important role in developing electric vehicle usage in Northern Ireland and elsewhere. Is there cross-departmental thinking and discussion to ensure that the necessary infrastructure is put in place, rather than each Department ploughing its own furrow?

Ms Loughran: Yes. That is where the interface with the Department for the Economy comes in. Obviously, the Department for the Economy leads on that matter, but we are talking to it through the energy strategy process [*Inaudible owing to poor sound quality*] and reporting what we are doing.

Mr Beggs: OK. Thank you.

Mr Muir: I am conscious of the time. We will be chucked out of this room soon. Thank you all for coming along. It is appreciated. The last time that I saw Chris, he did not have a beard. Things have changed over the last year.

I have a couple of questions. First, the EV charging issue is a key concern. We are trying to encourage people to make the switch to electric vehicles and, frankly, the charging network is a bit of a shambles. We need to sort that out. The Chair touched on this point earlier: the CBI has recommended and called for an EV charger task force. We are seeing silo departmental working, because we know that the Department for the Economy and the Department for Infrastructure have responsibilities. To my mind, DFI should take a lead. Why on earth can we not get an EV charger task force to drive it forward and to address the issues? I will be honest: I appreciate the work that has been done, but I have no confidence that we will not be sitting here in a year's time discussing the same problems with the poor charger network. We need to turn that around, if we are to be in any way credible in dealing with climate change and the emergency that was declared.

Ms Loughran: We have brought a couple of CBI nominations on to the transport working group to pick up the task force concerns. Again, at the moment, I am focused on trying to work through the transport working group rather than setting up a separate structure. The CBI has nominated, and the next meeting will be the first attended by its nominated representatives. I have agreed that we will see how it works. If the CBI feels that it is not working, I will talk to Angela McGowan about a different approach. At the moment, we are trying to push all the work through the transport working group, because that gives us a good link with the Department for the Economy and pulls in its expertise, so that we are not working in silos.

Mr Muir: We need to be able to go back to people with clear timescales for when we are going to fix the charging network. We do not have that at the moment. When we engage with people who have electric cars and with user groups, all that we can say is that we are listening to them. This morning, we heard about the funding for the chargers and that it will potentially be two for each council area. We need to be able to come back with something a bit more ambitious than what we have. I appreciate that a lot of work has been done and that the Department is involved in so many good things, such as Translink's decarbonisation agenda. However, people are losing the will to live with the whole electric car situation. When people look at having an electric car, they know that the charging network is dreadful. There is nothing authoritative, inspirational or clear from the Department on how to fix that.

Ms Loughran: OK. I hear you. The only assurance that I can offer on the Minister's behalf is that she is aware of all the issues and has an action plan for getting us to the point at which we can give more clarity about what is going to happen and the timescales for that. I am waiting for the research on the right shape for an EV network here. I do not have that yet. It would be wrong for me to set dates without having more background knowledge.

Mr Muir: I appreciate that. I am also conscious of the time. The other issue is about the councils, which are a key part of government in Northern Ireland. They are very connected to communities, and the Department has been very keen to work with them to deliver active travel initiatives, particularly in relation to greenways and the EV charging network. We also know about the financial situation that the councils face, with the downturn in revenue and the increase in costs that they are experiencing. Yet, we are asking them to take forward some of those initiatives, some of which they are having to part-fund. Is there anything more that can be done to help them with that funding? I have spoken to at least one council that has been asked to take forward the EV charging network. It does not have statutory responsibility for that, so the first question that councillors will ask is why they are doing that when they are in a tough financial situation. Is there anything more that the Department can do, working in a genuine partnership with the councils, to help them with that?

Ms Loughran: I am developing a proposal at the moment that could potentially be funded from the blue-green infrastructure fund and would support councils and help with some of the match funding. We are looking at that, and we are working on it. There are also some practical issues for them around how to do that. We have solutions to the practical issues, but we know that we need to put more support into programme management and into supporting applications to OZEV.

Mr Muir: Thank you, Liz, that is appreciated.

I have one last question about modal change, which you talked about in your opening remarks. During the pandemic, we were all told not to use public transport unless it was essential. That message went out at the beginning, and it was devastating for public transport, because the previous message had been that we should use buses and trains because it is good for individuals and for the environment. The message, then, was that we should not use it unless we absolutely had to. We will need to ensure that, when we come out of the pandemic, it is not a car-led recovery — e-cars excepted. We have to ensure that we avoid that and that we encourage people to get back on buses and trains. We cannot do that by just saying that it is there, give it a go. What more is the Department doing to encourage more people to come back to public transport, particularly around concessionary fares for younger people who, once they can no longer avail themselves of concessionary fares, may be more inclined to use a private car?

Ms Robinson: I will take that and then pass over to Chris for a bit of detail on the Translink plan. Translink has a recovery plan to encourage people back on to public transport. I will let Chris talk about that in a moment.

We are looking at what we can do around concessionary fares. However, it has to be borne in mind that the concessionary fares scheme is underfunded at the moment. Last year, with the reduction in the number of people who were using public transport, it was not a problem for us, but in previous years — we are also anticipating the numbers that will come back — the scheme had been underfunded by around £7 million or £8 million a year, and that will only increase. The Minister is looking at options for the scheme, but, until we address the fundamental issue around that underfunding, we have very limited options for moving forward. Minister Mallon has engaged with Minister Murphy on that matter and continues to do so.

I will ask Chris to talk about Translink's return of passengers.

Mr Chris McLean (Department for Infrastructure): As Jackie said, Translink has put together a plan that will, hopefully, bring about the recovery of public transport after the COVID pandemic and as we move through the recovery. That is directly linked to the pathway to recovery, and, at each stage, we try to focus on what is appropriate at the time. For the first few stages, it will be about reminding the public about the restrictions that were put forward by our Public Health Agency and Health Department colleagues. We will build on that by reminding people that public transport is safe. We have a lot of material around that, and we will seek to show that the mechanisms that we put in place during the pandemic will continue to ensure people's safety.

Moving forward, as we go through the recovery, people will come back to public transport. The number-one issue for us will be about engaging on the capacity of our public transport. That is quite difficult at the moment with social distancing, so we are engaging internally in the Civil Service to make sure that, as we ease restrictions, we know the impact on the public transport network. We have only a certain number of buses, trains and drivers, so we will hit a limit. We are working through that — with our colleagues across the water as well — to make sure that we can bring about the safest capacity for people.

Translink's plan will also look at promotional activity. That will be coming forward, but we will, obviously, have to take something to the Minister. Promotional activity generally comes at a cost. It is very early doors, but, from a public transport perspective this year, our initial indication is that budgets will be very difficult. That is something that we will approach with an open mind to see what we can bring forward. The five-stage plan is encouraging, and the Minister is very clear that we have to build back better with a green recovery. This is our first step in that direction.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Unfortunately, we have run out of time for the use of the room. I apologise to those members who indicated, and, perhaps, they could provide their questions to the Committee Clerk in writing so that we can forward them to the Department for a response.

Thank you all for attending this morning. It has been incredibly useful, and we will return to the matter to follow up on a number of points. Thank you very much for your time.