



Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Role and Functions of Translink, including
Annual Report and Accounts and Business
Plan: Translink

20 March 2024

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mrs Deborah Erskine (Chairperson)
Mr John Stewart (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Patrick Brown
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Stephen Dunne
Mr Mark Durkan

Witnesses:

Mr Chris Conway	Translink
Mr Graeme Smyth	Translink

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Today, I welcome to the Committee Chris Conway, chief executive of Translink, and Graeme Smyth, Translink's public affairs and project communications officer. We appreciate your time with us and look forward to asking you some questions. We have the presentation that you provided to us. I invite you to take a few minutes to go through that, after which I will open up the meeting to members to ask questions.

Mr Chris Conway (Translink): Thank you, Chair and Committee members, for the invitation to be here today. Welcome back, and we look forward to working with you.

As you said, Chair, we have already sent you a lot of information, so I will quickly run through the highlights and hand back to you for questions, because I am sure that that is where you want to get to.

In the presentation, you will see that I wanted to give an outline of the make-up of Translink. Translink is a market-facing public corporation, which, compared with any other arm's-length body that you might be familiar with, is quite unusual. It has a statutory duty to operate commercially, but also in line with ministerial policy. We operate under a public service agreement (PSA) with the Department for Infrastructure.

Translink is a large organisation. We deliver 13,000 services every day across bus, coach, rail and now the Glider. We operate a large fleet of buses and trains and a large infrastructure, which is unusual for an operator. We manage and own all the infrastructure, including stations and halts, and we maintain the railway asset, the replacement value of which is around £5 billion. Maintaining that extensive asset takes a lot of investment annually.

The Committee will be very aware that public transport is central to the daily lives of many individuals and families. In one of the charts in the presentation, we have given you a few examples of the types of things that public transport enables. For example, we transport 55,000 pupils to school every day, and there are 400,000 concessionary fare passes. You can see the types of things that public transport enables across society. Translink is also a cross-cutting public transport enabler for the social, economic and environmental well-being of Northern Ireland. It plays a vital role in climate change, air quality, health and well-being and the economy, in relation to regional imbalance, for example.

Given all of that, the challenge that we have, as you have probably heard at this Committee from others, is funding. If you look at our funding over time, you see that per head spending on public transport in Northern Ireland over the last decade has been approximately 35% of the UK average. That probably goes back more than a decade. The Independent Fiscal Commission report, which refers to transport overall, not just public transport, shows that overall spending on transport in Northern Ireland is 30% below the UK average. Obviously, then, we are not spending at the same level as other parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland on our transport infrastructure and certainly on our public transport infrastructure.

It is worth noting as well that Translink does not have access to funding streams similar to those that are available in the UK. For example, the bus service operators grant is not available, nor is there local authority funding. All our funding comes through Stormont and from regional funding, such as Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV) funding. Given that we are more market-facing, however, we have a responsibility to drive the commercial side of the business, and we have shown a strong recovery in passenger journeys since COVID. We are at around 80 million passenger journeys this year. Before COVID, we were at about 84 million, so we are recovering strongly, and our revenue from our fare-paying passengers is recovering strongly on the back of that. However, the public service obligation (PSO) funding has not been growing to the same extent. It provides the socially necessary bus and rail services and concessionary fares. A pie chart shows how that revenue is broken up. It is relatively evenly split between those three areas: the bus service PSO funding, the rail service PSO funding and concessionary fares. I know that Department officials will be in later to talk about budgets, but, in 2023-24 we currently have a shortfall of £17 million in our public service obligation funding. An additional challenge with that is that, two months ago, the shortfall was £40 million. We always start the year with a big shortfall, and Translink tries to continue to manage services by using its reserves. At the end of the year, we usually get to a financially unviable situation, and then we get enough funding to keep us going to the end of the year. That tops up our reserves, and then we go at it for another year with underfunding. It makes it very hard for us to plan services on that basis. We know that there are opportunities to grow and increase the frequency of lots of services, but it is very difficult for us to plan when, year-to-year, we really do not know what our funding situation will be.

I outlined some of our capital investment over the past few years. Capital investment is largely to maintain our existing railway asset, which, as I mentioned, is a £5 billion asset. It is also to manage our fleet age and to decarbonise our fleet. It is also to look at ongoing investment and to enhance the public transport network across Northern Ireland. As shown in the plan that we put to the Department, over the next four years, we expect the requirements for capital spend to be around £1.5 billion in all those areas that we just talked about. That does not include programmes such as the all-island strategic rail review or the electrification project, for example, which would be above that. There is still some good news, despite those constraints. We have done the best that we can with the available funding. We worked closely with the Department for Infrastructure on that. We delivered a couple of key projects: for example, the north-west transport hub and a major project of track and signalling works across the railway to try to catch up on some of the backlog of work. We rolled out some longer trains and invested in a new fleet, as well as in zero-emission buses. Phase 1 of the glider was another key project. We have ongoing projects too. York Street station in Belfast is entering its final stage of construction, and Belfast Grand Central station is also entering its final stages. It is a key Executive flagship project, and it will bring the largest integrated transport hub on the island to Belfast and Northern Ireland. It is strategically important not only for Belfast but for connecting our bus and rail network across Northern Ireland, and it gives it significant capacity to grow in the years to come.

When the Minister and permanent secretary were at the Committee last week, they mentioned that we are in the final stages of the Belfast Grand Central station project, with the operational opening in 2024 and the full opening in autumn 2025. They mentioned that there will be some disruption as we go through those stages. We have a lot of public realm works to do around the station, and that work will start after Easter. As we transition from the old station to the new station, there will be some blockage of the railway and railway closures that have to be managed. When the station operationally opens in September 2024, a large piece of public realm works has to be done around Durham Street and

Saltwater Square. Again, that will take about six to nine months to do. That was highlighted, so I wanted to follow up on it. I know that you are planning a visit, so we can go into a lot more detail then.

We also have plans for, as I mentioned, the all-island strategic rail review, the electrification project and a lot of other projects. All of those are subject to funding. We have a very ambitious plan. There is no doubt that, across the UK, Europe and regions globally, public transport has a big role to play in climate change, air quality and connecting communities. Over the next decade, it will play a vital role in Northern Ireland as well.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you very much for that overview and for the information provided to the Committee. I will start with the public service obligation funding. If you were to receive the £17 million, would that be the answer to all your prayers?

Mr Conway: Effectively, that brings us to a break-even position. We try to put together a budget that is based on the network in the public service agreement, and we say, "That is the funding that is required to run that". A big portion of that, obviously, is commercially funded routes, and then there are all the socially necessary routes that we require funding for. That brings us to a break-even position. It gives us some flexibility in the frequency and additional routes that we can put on, but we would like to develop, with the Department, a strategy aligned to the regional transport strategy that also looks at how we grow the network in rural and urban areas and at additional frequency. The backdrop to that, however, will be the regional transport strategies, which are still to be published.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): You mentioned that, without public service obligation funding in place, it is hard to plan frequency and development, and you touched on that with regard to the plan. Do you see that as more of an issue in rural areas? You talked about Translink being a key driver in tackling regional imbalance, and some would say that transport — the bus service — is not in place in rural areas and that it is hard to travel from small rural towns or villages. Do you see that as a key part of the plan and strategy?

Mr Conway: Absolutely. The biggest portion of the public service obligation bus funding goes to the rural bus network, because provision for that area is mostly for social rather than commercial reasons. Not having certainty about the public service obligation funding restricts our ability to invest in that area.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Would you say, then, that it is the rural areas that miss out because you are not receiving the full funding allocation?

Mr Conway: I stress that it is across the network, but, proportionally, the bigger impact will be on rural areas.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): OK. You also talked about Grand Central station, the opening of the hub and the traffic disruption that is happening. Are you working at speed with the Department on getting out public messaging on that? What steps are you taking? You talked about after Easter, which is soon. What plans are there for a public messaging campaign?

Mr Conway: Back in November, we started working closely with the Department and a number of other key agencies. We set up a stakeholder group and started to engage with a lot of key stakeholders across Northern Ireland, including councils, the PSNI, other agencies and the Department for Communities. Engagement with business groups and local traders has also started. We have been doing a lot of that since November. We have started some of the works. We did a lot of the utility works in January and February, with little impact. We have other activities leading up to Easter. Over the Easter break, we will have a railway closure between Lanyon Place and Lisburn. That has been well communicated, with a lot of good engagement on it already. After Easter, we will start a lot more public engagement on the activity that will happen between May and September and between September and into 2025. We will do that in phases because it comes in phases. The first phase is the public realm works. The next phase will be more about the railway, and the phase after that will be about going back to public realm works. Those are specific areas, so we want to make sure that we engage with people about the impact that the works will have on them.

The most important message is about modal shift. We will put on a lot of additional public transport. We will put in some temporary bus lanes, for example, to make sure that public transport has good accessibility around Belfast. The message that we have for the public is about modal shift: use public

transport. The message that we have is this: you are not stuck in traffic; you are traffic. We want to encourage people to use public transport instead in order to ease the congestion that there might be as we do the works.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you for that. We are looking forward to our visit. Lastly, before I open questioning to Members, I have a question on the pay award. I would like to check in to see how your discussions with employees are going. That is critical for the retention and recruitment of staff. I assume that workforce is a pressure in many areas of the work. How are discussions with unions and the workforce going?

Mr Conway: Discussions are ongoing. I hope that you appreciate that we want those discussions to continue and that they will, at this point, do so confidentially. Therefore, neither we nor the unions will make further comment until we reach the end of those discussions. That is just to give us the space and time to have those discussions.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): You said that there was no more wriggle room in what was on the table. There was a £7 million pressure prior to the funding needed for a pay award. What are Translink's key priorities? In the absence of additional funding, you are looking at a pay award, having those discussions and trying to balance things. What will not be met?

Mr Conway: That is the challenge for us at the minute. I have said that we do not have any additional funding for pay. As I referenced, we forecast making a loss of £17 million this year. The discussions with the union are about what flexibility we can work on together to address the challenges.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I would like to follow up on that. I asked which of Translink's key priorities may not be met without additional funding. Do you envisage there being any key priorities that will not be delivered because of the funding position?

Mr Conway: The funding position is mainly about resource. It goes back to what we mentioned about there being areas, particularly post COVID, in which we would like to address our service offerings. We cannot address those until we have some funding certainty.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): I will move to members, starting with the Deputy Chair.

Mr Stewart: Thank you, Chris and Graeme, for coming along today. It is great to see you again. Thanks for the invitation to visit the hub late last year. It was great to see the progress. We look forward, as, I know, do other MLAs, to the tour and to seeing that come to fruition later in the year. I have a number of constituency issues to address, but, as always, I will deliver those to you in writing. Graeme and you are always prompt in getting back to me and helping me to resolve issues.

I want, first, to touch on the decarbonisation of the fleet and the electrification of the network. I appreciate that much of that is a massive capital plan that is reliant on funding. Chris, you touched on where we are with the decarbonisation of the fleet, but it would be interesting to hear your thoughts on the time frame for getting to complete decarbonisation.

Mr Conway: I will talk about buses first. We have a fleet of about 1,400 buses. Our plan is to add at least 100 zero-emission buses a year. We are not buying any diesel buses at this point. We have a coach network, which is slightly different, and I will come to that in a minute. On our bus network, however, we are very much focused on buying only an electric fleet and, where appropriate, hydrogen buses. Currently, there are 140 zero-emission buses in our fleet. They are primarily in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, but we have put some into Coleraine as well. We have about 100 buses on order with Wrightbus. We will see some of those in the Belfast Metro service, but some will go into our Ulsterbus network.

It is not just about acquiring buses but putting in place charging infrastructure, for which the availability of Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) connections is important, as well as all the infrastructure around stations. Where we go next will sometimes be dependent on where we can put the infrastructure. We would like to purchase about 100 buses a year, going forward. It will take us about a decade to totally decarbonise a bus fleet.

The coach fleet is not quite at that point with zero emissions. We are working with suppliers on what their time frame would be for looking at zero-emission coaches. We are looking at potentially using the

hydrogen option for that. We have started doing some feasibility work on the electrification of the railway. We are doing a feasibility project on the Belfast to Dublin section — the Belfast to Newry section for us — and how to connect with Irish Rail in the Republic of Ireland to electrify that part of the network. We are doing some early feasibility on what is required for the west of the network. That will be a big programme of work for us. It will probably take two decades to complete all of that. Certainly, bus is the priority right now, and we will move to rail after that.

Mr Stewart: Is there an indication of when that feasibility study might be finished and when we will have a bit of an idea about costs?

Mr Conway: For the Belfast to Newry section, it will be by the end of this year.

Mr Stewart: A review is under way of the concessionary fare scheme. I think that I speak for many when I say that the scheme is excellent. It encourages people who would not ordinarily use the network, bus or rail, to use it. If the scheme were to go, that would have a devastating impact. I am interested to get your feel for the impact that that would have on budget lines and what the impact would be generally on Translink when it comes to the use of the service and so on.

Mr Conway: I have always said that there is no such thing as a free service. Somebody has to pay for it, and, if the concessionary fare scheme were changed, we would hope to try to encourage those people to continue to travel, but it would have to be paid for in a different way. It would have to be paid for by the passengers themselves or in some other way. The risk always is that some of those passengers do not continue travelling on public transport, and, obviously, that has social and economic impacts. Certainly, it has the potential to have a revenue impact on Translink.

Mr Stewart: I have one final point, if I may, Chair, and I am conscious of time. I live in Carrickfergus, as you know. The east of the Province and everywhere generally sees a beneficial impact from the night-time services that are put on, particularly around Christmas. There are late-night trains and buses. They have reduced because of budgetary impacts. Are there plans to try to extend those again to try to build up the night-time economy and give people access, particularly given the lack of taxis in the cities? I know that it is all budget-dependent, but will that be looked at if the finance is there?

Mr Conway: We are very keen to look at that. Night-time services, by their nature, can be busy on some nights or at particular times of the night, but, at other times, they are not. Therefore, there is always a bit of funding required to sustain them. This year, leading up to Christmas, we put on a night-time service, but we did not have funding to do that, so we had to increase the fare to generate enough revenue to sustain it. It was only a pre-Christmas service. Obviously, after Christmas, the service changes quite a bit to reflect how people are travelling, and it is hard for us to sustain that financially. We have compared ourselves with what is happening in other regions, including Manchester, Dublin and other cities across the UK. They have tended to put on a service and gradually build it up over time. It can, over time, sustain itself, but it takes funding initially to get it going. In the autumn, we would like to put on an evening and night-time service again leading up to Christmas and then look at whether we have the funding to sustain that into 2025. There is a big demand for that, and there is a big benefit to the evening and night-time economy. As well as that, a lot of people work well into the evening and night-time, and it is a safe way for them to get home.

Mr Stewart: What was the response to the slight increase in price? I did not hear any negative feedback around that.

Mr Conway: It is always mixed when you increase fares, but, generally speaking, it was accepted that, if we wanted to have a service, it needed to be paid for and that it was still at a lower cost than a taxi fare.

Mr Boylan: Chris, you are welcome back.

Mr Conway: Cathal, thank you.

Mr Boylan: Welcome, Graeme. I agree with you about Weavers Cross. The more publicity and messages that we get out, the better. It affects everybody. I know that you have a number of partners, and, obviously, we will get a chance to go and see it. I encourage messaging as much as possible, and we will do our bit to get the message out. I can see that there will be problems if we do not get the message out.

I have three quick points. Well, I have three points. Whether they are quick is up to me. For years, you have been relying on digging into your reserves and on monitoring rounds, and you have been dealing with Tory austerity. We have been saying that for years, and people have not passed any remarks on it. How has that had an impact? I see that your programme has ambition. Over the last 10 years or so, how has that had an impact on what you wanted to deliver?

Mr Conway: Looking at resource funding first, we are trying to address a modal shift to public transport. The 2015 Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report recommended a shift towards investment in public transport if we really wanted to see that modal shift, but, unfortunately, not much has happened to address that.

The limit on resource funding means that we cannot increase frequency, grow routes in lots of areas where we know we could — we could put on more express services, for example, on our Goldline network — or invest in higher frequency on our rail network. We just do not have the funding certainty to do that. We get requests from you and from lots of people regionally, "What about a route here?" or "Could we do this?" or saying, "A community here needs something", but we cannot address them. We can address only what is in the public service agreement for the existing network. We struggle year-to-year just to fund the existing network, never mind what we need to do on extensions. The Department is developing a regional transport strategy. When that comes out, we hope to see recommendations on where we need to extend our bus and rail network, but maintaining that day-to-day will need both capital and resource funding.

The other area is the infrastructure. It has not had the required investment over a number of decades. A lot of the maintenance of the rail network should come from resource funding, but we have not had the funding to do it, so we have tended to get a lot of it out of our capital funding, which takes funding away from the capital plan. That is to maintain the network, never mind the enhancements and future extensions that we want to do. The whole system starts grinding to a halt.

We do the best that we can with what we have. We are efficient and have delivered some good projects — Glider is a good example — and some rail network investments. We just need to see more of that. Glider phase 1 was implemented in 2018. We are nearly at the mid-year refresh point of Glider phase 1 and still have not implemented Glider phase 2. Projects like that need to come along much more quickly. We need the capital and resource funding to enable that to happen.

Mr Boylan: On the modal shift, we are talking about making public transport more accessible. Rural people rely on cars, whether we like it or not. You bring only major rural routes in and provide transport. We have to get away from that. I have heard people talking about decarbonisation and climate change. Where are we with a carrot-and-stick approach? I do not like using that terminology, but, if we are serious about decarbonisation, climate change and addressing the rural-versus-urban issue — that is what it is, let us be honest — where are we with that? You mentioned the new regional development strategy: what are your plans?

Mr Conway: We could talk all day about that, Cathal.

Mr Boylan: That is why I brought the subject up.

Mr Conway: To get more people to use public transport, help the air quality agenda and address climate change, the big opportunities are in urban areas, because that is where the big movements are. In rural areas, it is more about how we connect communities, provide social cohesion for people and make sure that they can access transport. That can be done in different ways. Having a better network of park-and-rides is one opportunity, so that, in a rural community, you may have to use your car, cycle or walk for part of the journey, but you have access to a park-and-ride that allows you to continue your journey using sustainable transport.

You mentioned policies. There are a lot of policies that would help to achieve the modal shift. Only a small percentage of journeys are made using public transport versus the car. To be fair, changing that will take political leadership on schemes such as putting zero-emission zones in urban areas, looking at congestion charging and looking at the pricing of road transport via public transport or car. A lot of regions across the UK, Europe and Ireland are looking at those types of schemes, but those will take political leadership and will have to be matched with investment in public transport. If we are encouraging people to a modal shift, the public transport needs to be there to allow them to do that.

Mr Boylan: I feel that I have to ask this, but, in your opening statement, you mentioned the feasibility study on the Armagh to Portadown link. We were talking about connecting, and that is an opportunity to do that. Will you comment on that, please?

Mr Conway: We have started the feasibility work, which came up as part of the Union connectivity review, for the Portadown to Armagh rail extension. We hope to have it completed by the end of this year, and, from that, we will be able to determine the next steps.

Mr Boylan: I hope that it has a positive outcome. Thank you very much.

Mr Conway: If we get the funding, Cathal.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you for coming along, Chris and Graeme. What would the pie chart that you provided look like if it were for England, Scotland or Wales? You touched on the fact that we are not given as much money as those places. We have looked at the revenue from fares. What are fares like here in comparison with those in the other UK nations? Is public transport more attractive here or in those places?

Mr Conway: I can answer two sections of the question. First, if you compare the pie chart with what happens in Scotland, England, outside of London and Wales, you would find that the fare revenue would be about 40% of the pie and the public service obligation would be about 60%. That is because there is a bigger investment. That is not because the pie is smaller; the pie is bigger, but the proportion of public service obligation funding is larger. The NI funding versus the funding in other regions is referenced in the chart, where you can see that both resource and capital funding in Northern Ireland has been well below the UK average for around a decade. Certainly, the pie would be different.

Our bus fares are comparable to those in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Our rail fares are probably lower than those that you would typically see across the rest of the UK, and that is because the policy in Northern Ireland is to keep them consistent. That means that our rail fares are a little bit lower. Having said that, that is not the big driver; the big driver is the level of Government funding that comes into those areas versus what comes into Northern Ireland.

Mr K Buchanan: Are you seeing people going to public transport more than you did? What is driving that?

Mr Conway: Since COVID, we have grown back, and we hope to see that growth continue past where we were pre-COVID. Pre-COVID, we saw growth of about 1 million or 1.5 million in passengers a year, which is good. Most of that is through our marketing campaigns and adopting schemes like yLink, which encourages young people to use public transport. That is funded not by the Government but by Translink. We have a small amount of flexibility to flex routes where we see demand that can be justified. We look at different demand areas and try to address them. It comes mostly from where we can get additional demand through better marketing and some fare promotions for specific categories of the population, such as young people.

Mr K Buchanan: I see that capital investment is £1.5 billion over the next four years. That is obviously what you would like and what you require. What percentage of your capital investment comes from your reserves and how much is from the Government? Can you give me a breakdown?

Mr Conway: The majority of the capital funding comes from the Government. We access other sources of funding. For example, when we were starting our zero-emission bus project, we sourced some initial capital funding from the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles. We have sourced some of the funding for feasibility work that we are doing from the Union connectivity review. I have not mentioned this yet, but when we open Belfast Grand Central station, we are planning to put in an hourly Enterprise service from Belfast to Dublin. Some of the funding for that is coming from the Shared Island Fund from the Irish Government. We are also looking at bidding for funding through the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) for a new fleet for Belfast to Dublin. We look for other sources of funding, but it comes from those types of areas and then the Department for Infrastructure.

Mr K Buchanan: Of the £1.5 billion that you require, what do you envisage getting over the next four years?

Mr Conway: That is the million-dollar question at this point, Keith.

Mr Durkan: Hopefully, you will get more than that.

Mr Conway: Yes. You have departmental officials coming in after this session, and they will maybe refer to budgets and what capital funding will be available. Our first ask is for the £325 million that we are looking for for next year. We have projects lined up to deliver with that, but that will depend on the Minister and the Department's call.

Mr K Buchanan: Rural community transport is, obviously, much needed in the rural community to complement your service or you complementing theirs, depending on how you look at it. What is your working relationship with rural community transport like? You are going down a road, and 10 minutes later they go down the same road. How do you work with community transport on not duplicating services? In some places there is no service, and in other places there are two.

Mr Conway: We work with community transport, and there is opportunity to work closer with it in lots of areas. I mentioned park-and-ride facilities. Part of the network design in the future should consider including community transport bringing people to a park-and-ride facility and then Translink taking them on the rest of the journey. That could be a better use of resources for both organisations. We would like to continue to discuss that with community transport. It provides a vital service, and it is important that we continue to work together.

Mr Dunne: Thanks, gentlemen, for your presentation. I put on record our appreciation to Graeme for the regular briefings with local elected reps. Those are valuable. They are usually held in some of our in local bus and rail centres. The Translink figures for the number of journeys on even the Belfast to Bangor rail line increased in 2021-22 from 320,000 to 540,000, showing how valuable the rail connection is, certainly in my constituency. I know that you did a lot of maintenance work on the line over the last number of years, and that is particularly welcome.

The concessionary fare scheme has already been touched on. I reiterate the point that it is encouraging on to public transport people who would not normally use it. How valuable is the current service? Is there a way to make it more effective for you and the people out there?

Mr Conway: The scheme works pretty well as it stands. Obviously, all this is subject to funding, but we could extend the concessionary fare scheme to young people. Creating those behaviours when people are young and may stay on public transport for longer would be helpful. Typically, we have young people on a half fare until they are 16. Then, as soon as they are making the decision to use a car, we up their fare to full fare, so we are immediately discouraging them from using public transport and heading them towards car use. If we were able to keep a concessionary fare scheme until people were 23, for example, as other regions have done, it might encourage young people to stay on public transport for longer, and maybe that behaviour change would stay with them for longer. Encouraging young people to stay on public transport is the main change that I see.

Some people with disabilities have a concession. There are opportunities there to address some of the issues in the current concessionary scheme.

Mr Dunne: I appreciate that. Those are valid points. I noticed that another issue in your documents was Translink recruitment and retention. I appreciate that that is no doubt linked to the ongoing pay issues and that they are a factor in that. What steps are you taking to address recruitment and retention in Translink? The Department is facing similar challenges at every level, including in technical roles.

Mr Conway: We have a recruitment plan to address the numbers of bus drivers, train drivers and all our front-line staff, and that recruitment takes place on an ongoing basis. You will see some notices on buses to advertise it as well, and that is an ongoing activity. We had a really big challenge just after COVID when a lot of drivers went to other driving roles. That has started to calm down a little bit now, and we are starting to balance the market a wee bit in recruitment in that area. There are some very specific technical roles that are hard to get in the market generally, and we work with recruitment companies to help us to address that. We also work, where we can, with other agencies. If we cannot get the resource, we will work with someone else to try to help us do that particular activity. At the minute, it is starting to balance out a wee bit, and we are seeing some positive signs that the market is balancing a wee bit in recruitment and retention.

Mr Dunne: Good. I am glad to hear that. Hopefully, progress will be made in the ongoing negotiations. I know that the Chair touched on that.

I have a final question about the rail connection at the George Best Belfast City Airport. Obviously, that is a very important link, but there has been a feeling for years that the current Sydenham stop is under par and is not ideal. It was located for the old entrance back 15 years ago or maybe more. I know that it has been talked about for years, but are there any plans to improve accessibility? We have all seen, when driving on the Sydenham bypass, people carrying large pieces of luggage half a mile down a four-lane carriageway in the rain. Obviously, it will be a huge cost to put in an additional stop or to change that stop, but where are we with that? Is it on Translink's agenda?

Mr Conway: It is on the agenda. I do not want to go off on a tangent, but it is one of the issues that we have with planning and all that. We talk about local area plans and access to public transport, but a lot of the plans and things that are being built now are done without any consideration to public transport, and the plans were issued maybe a number of years ago. Belfast City Airport is a good example of that. As you say, the airport was moved and there was planning for that, but there was no consideration of what would happen to public transport, so we are now left thinking about how we can address that. We have met the Belfast City Airport senior management team and the managing director. We have discussed options and are going through some feasibility work with the airport on how to address that. Obviously, a private airport owner would benefit from that, so there would have to be some matching of funding between the private sector and the public sector to address that. Yes, we are definitely working on that. We are doing feasibility work at the minute to consider the different options and see what the costings are.

Mr Dunne: Good. Would it be an additional stop, or would it be a replacement for the Sydenham stop?

Mr Conway: We still have not finalised the options. You could extend the existing stop and provide a crossing closer to the airport, or there are options to put in an additional stop, but that would put two stops very close together, so we have to manage all that too. The options are still being worked through.

Mr Dunne: Good. That is good to hear. Hopefully, it will be kept high on the agenda. Thanks, gentlemen.

Mr Brown: Thanks, Chris, for your presentation. Graeme, it is good to put a face to all the emails that we have been getting. It is always very useful and helpful to hear what is going on.

I have two questions. The first is on the future ticketing update. How is that progressing? Specifically, I would like to know why the ferries have not been included in that service, particularly the Strangford ferry, which is in my constituency, but also that in Rathlin. There may be operational reasons for that, but I would like to find out what those are. That has been a cash service for far too long in most parts of the country, but, in rural areas in particular, where banks are closing and ATMs are not easily accessible. Not having cash available is a barrier to accessing public transport a lot of the time, so that future ticketing service will be a major and long-awaited upgrade.

The second question is about unused Translink assets. I think that you said at the start that you manage quite a large asset base that is to the value of around £5 billion. I have found locally, and I am sure that other members have experienced this, that there are quite a lot of derelict and unused assets that could be put to better use for a range of projects either in the public estate or potentially by private or community or voluntary interests. As an example, there are disused bus stations in Saintfield, which I used to represent, and there are trackbeds littered right across Northern Ireland that are not maintained and are overgrown. Are they still owned by you, or are they owned by Translink's holding company?

Mr Conway: No.

Mr Brown: No. Can you clarify that?

Mr Conway: Yes. I can clarify that.

Mr Brown: I would be keen to know your thoughts on how we can protect and enhance those trackbeds.

Mr Conway: On the ticketing question, we have rolled out contactless ticketing to Belfast Metro, Derry/Londonderry and Foyle Metro. We have also rolled out to a number of Ulsterbus depots; for example, the Europa station in Belfast and the Bangor station. We are about 30 % to 40% of the way there with Ulsterbus, which is a little bit more complex because of the mobility aspect and making sure that we have good connectivity right across our network whenever people go to use contactless. We hope to roll out Ulsterbus between now and the end of the year and to complete Ulsterbus and NI Railways (NIR). You will see ticket vending machines going into the rail network at the minute, and, again, we hope to have the railway network completed by the end of this year. That gives us further opportunities for the further integration of all that, which will come after, and to go to an account-based ticketing system that is similar to that in London, which is just tap on, tap off. Again, that could be a big opportunity to encourage more people towards public transport. That is where we are with ticketing.

As I mentioned, Translink is a public corporation. It is a legal entity in its own right. We do not have any responsibility for ferries or ferry ticketing. I am not even sure what the configuration requirements are for that. The Translink ticketing system could be extended, or there could be a unique ticketing system for those. Again, I am not sure what the right solution for that is. The Department would have to address that, but it is certainly something that we would be happy to work with it on.

Mr Brown: Of course, when you say "Translink", I hear Department. It is the same Department.

Mr Conway: Yes, it is.

Mr Brown: I appreciate that it is a private company, but it falls under the remit of that Department. If the new ticketing system is best practice, would it not make sense to provide it in other public transport settings, such as those two main ferry services — Rathlin and Strangford? I appreciate that, for the fully private ferry contractors, that may not work.

Mr Conway: We can pick that up with the Department.

Your other question was about unused assets. Other than those on the Lisburn to Antrim route, a lot of the other trackbeds are not owned by Translink. They were sold off many years ago, so they do not come under Translink's ownership. There are very few assets, such as derelict bus stations and things like that, that have not already been sold off. Saintfield is an exception. The main reason for that is that we are working with the Department to get a bus lay-by there. Once we have secured approval for that, we intend to dispose of the rest of that land.

Mr Brown: Do you know why that particular one has taken so long? It was one of the first cases that was brought to me when I was first elected as a councillor back in 2014. That was part of the talk then. It seems to be taking a long time to move or dispose of those unused assets. Have you any idea why it is taking so long?

Mr Conway: That particular site has had some complexities. I will not get into a lot of detail now, but we can talk about it afterwards. We are keen to try to move it on now. Everywhere else where we have had those issues, the land has already been disposed of.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): You got reeled in there with the two questions. You definitely got more.

Mr Conway: Yes.

Mr Baker: Thank you, Chris and Graeme, for coming today. You will be glad to know that I never do final, final questions. All my questions, to be fair, have been worded in different ways, but your answers have covered them, so I will not re-ask them.

I will make one point that just came to me when schools were mentioned. It is around Grand Central station and possible disruption. I just want to make sure that that information goes through to the stakeholders and schools. After Easter, with exam time, those changes and stresses are already there. I am very lucky that I am from west Belfast, and we have the Glider. It has changed so many

behaviours, especially for young people who travel. The connectivity that they have with it is fantastic. I just want to make sure that they have that information.

Mr Conway: We met the local schools, the hospitals and other bodies in the area. We met those stakeholders.

Mr Baker: There was just that wee point. I knew that you would do that anyway. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you, Danny. That was a very valid point.

I want to say hello and welcome to those from the schools that have joined the Committee.

Mr Durkan: I thank you fellas for coming along.

This is another bleak presentation. Sadly, we are used to it at this stage, and we are only a couple of months into the mandate. However, we certainly appreciate and welcome Translink's ambition. It does not sound that far away from the Department's ambition and direction of travel, but that ambition needs to be matched with investment. I panic when I hear you say that you are not even assured of the capital allocation that you are depending on for next year. That is worrying. There is a lot on your plate and your radar.

This is a priority for me. The first thing that needs to be sorted is the pay dispute. I appreciate that negotiations are ongoing, but you are only as good as your workforce. You have a very good workforce, but, currently, they are not a very happy one, and that is entirely understandable. While I appreciate that the negotiations are confidential, are you, Translink, as a company, being supported appropriately or adequately by the Department? Do you feel that, or does it just say to you, "There, you've got your gettings, now you sort it out"?

Mr Conway: We work closely with the Department on all issues. It is very aware of this issue, and the Minister is well aware of it as well. We also have to strive to make sure that public transport remains affordable. That is in everyone's interests. It is about trying to have those discussions in a way that not only addresses any staff concerns but makes sure that public transport is affordable and that we have the investment for the future. We work closely with the Department on those discussions.

Mr Durkan: The disruption of a day of action lasts a day, but the damage lasts a lot longer. I do not mean the wider economic damage; I mean the damage to the reputation of public transport and the perception of it as reliable, which is what you strive for and what we need it to be.

Are you doing much work or have you been involved with councils that have been drawing up their local development plans and identifying opportunities for increased bus infrastructure and bus lanes? I asked the Department about this; it might have been last week or the week before. There is a lack of bus lanes outside Belfast.

Mr Conway: To answer the question specifically about places outside Belfast, the answer is yes. In talking about the north-west, we work closely with the council there. For the new scheme that it is planning, we have suggested a number of areas where bus priority could be better used. We are really keen to get some bus priority into Derry/Londonderry, for example. There are some good opportunities there. We have just invested in a new zero-emission fleet there, and encouraging more people to use public transport would be very helpful.

The council has set up a group to look at how to encourage more people to use public transport, and we are very active with it on that. So, yes, we have been working on that. We engage with all the councils on their local development plans. However, sadly, even in Belfast, the last bus lane that went into Belfast was when Glider was implemented in 2018. We have not been growing our ambition on bus priority since that. There has been a big gap. We hope that, with the Executive now back, we can start to address that in all our urban areas.

Mr Durkan: You have had investment planned, and Danny referred to the Glider in his constituency, and there is even the electrification of the bus fleet up with us. Has the move to contactless ticketing, for example, seen an increase in passenger numbers because you are making it easier and more attractive for passengers?

Mr Conway: Absolutely. We saw a 40% modal shift from when we implemented Glider phase 1. We need to see more of that in areas right across Northern Ireland. The uptake in contactless ticketing has been very significant as we have been implementing it. Anywhere we do investment, we get a big benefit straightaway. It is about doing more of that and joining up the network so that we can get those benefits.

Earlier, we talked about some of the benefits. It is not just about the benefit of modal shift, which is very important. We know that our hospitals, for example, have real challenges with car parking and people accessing their hospital appointments. Public transport can play a major role in that. We can definitely do more on that, particularly in rural areas. We talk about the regional imbalance in the economy and everything else, and if investors are going to come into some of those areas, they need good infrastructure and public transport access. There are lots of benefits across Northern Ireland to putting in the investment. Although the investment is significant — it is in the millions of pounds — it is relatively small when compared with the investment that is going into some other areas, yet the benefits of it could be seen across government.

Mr Durkan: So, where modal shift is concerned, the bang for buck of investment in public transport is unmatched.

Another issue that I have been raising of late is the Climate Change Act, which puts an obligation on the Department to spend 10% of its transport budget on active travel. I am a big advocate of active travel, but I am also a realist. We are not going to manage to spend 10% of the transport budget, no matter how small the transport budget is — it is too small for us now — on active travel, whereas you would get a much bigger bang for buck if the definition of active travel could be extended to include public transport in some way. Have you considered that?

Mr Conway: We could connect to parts of active travel. For example, a park-and-ride facility that includes active travel is one way that we could address that. The Minister in the Republic of Ireland has said that his ratio of spend on public transport versus roads is 2:1. There could be opportunities there from policy shifts towards public transport if we started to address the balance of funding. In fact, back in 2015, the Northern Ireland Audit Office recommended that. We still have not done it. There are opportunities to do that, Mark. There are opportunities for us to work closely with active travel to make sure that we join that up. Sustainable travel is really active travel and public transport working together.

Mr Durkan: And, finally —. *[Laughter.]* It is my first and last final question. I referred to — you mentioned this — the uncertainty around your capital allocation next year. I am thinking particularly of phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine rail line, so is there no assurance that projects that have been identified for commencement next year will happen?

Mr Conway: We have a plan to start the work on that, but it will be subject to the capital budget. That is in our plan, which I have shown you today.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Thank you. I just want to pick up on two areas. One that you may be aware of is the Transport Hub Alternatives Group and the Boyne bridge. The group put forward the option of a safe pedestrian crossing and redesign rather than demolishing the Boyne bridge. Do you want to comment on that?

Mr Conway: We have had lots of consultation on that, basically, from 2015 onwards. We submitted our plans on what we consider to be the best option for passengers, regeneration of the area and protection of the heritage in the area. The original Saltwater bridge is actually buried well down beneath the ground. We have bored holes there and checked where the bridge is. We have agreed with the heritage team that it will remain in situ; we will not disturb it in any way. As we build the new Saltwater Square, we will refer to it in heritage terms so that people can still come and see where the old bridge was. In reality, from an engineering point of view, it is impossible to retain the bridge. From a pedestrian accessibility point of view, it would not meet current accessibility standards. We covered all that extensively in our consultation as part of our planning. The planning has been awarded on the basis that we reconstruct that whole area from a public realm perspective. Obviously, that work is well advanced now.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): You mentioned in your evidence that you have had to utilise capital funding for maintenance. Obviously, that should come from your resource funding, as you said. Does that occur annually?

Mr Conway: It does, yes.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): Do you need to seek the Department's approval when reclassifying capital to resource?

Mr Conway: We do. We do an economic appraisal, as we do for any capital project. We go through the normal process to identify the work that needs to be done to a particular asset. Having to wait every year to get capital allocated, and then go through an economic appraisal and a capital appraisal, is a cumbersome way in which to do maintenance. Resource funding is typically done for maintenance on a multi-year basis. We agree the amount of funding that we need to maintain the network over multiple years. That allows us to engage more efficiently with our supply chain, whereas, with capital funding, we do maintenance in a stop-start way.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): For how long have you had to shift —?

Mr Conway: For as long as I have been in Translink, so 10 years.

Mr Boylan: Chris made an important point, which Mark picked up on, about the council. I am not blaming anybody, but we know from working up here that there still seems to be a mentality of Translink working on its own. You mentioned Sydenham. I know that that involved a private company and that the matter was dealt with, but we now have a situation in which we are looking at spending public money to connect the station to the airport again. That silo mentality has to stop. If we are serious about addressing all the issues, the Committee needs to have a proper conversation about how the Department, the council and those responsible for connections link up. There is no point in bringing in new policies and legislation if each partner is on a different pathway, because that seems to be the case. It is a conversation that we will have to keep on our radar. It just does not seem to be working out right. We might have to spend public money and justify spending it to address a private company's issue.

The Chairperson (Mrs Erskine): There is a cross-departmental element to connecting communities, dealing with regional imbalance and all those issues.

I say a big thank-you to you, because you have excellent staff. I pay tribute to Graeme and his team in particular. When MLAs, as public representatives, contact you, you are very good at helping us with our queries. We appreciate the work that goes on in what is a challenging budgetary environment. Thank you for your time today. We really appreciate it and look forward to working with you. We also look forward to our trip to the new hub. It will be exciting to see it.

Mr Conway: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for that feedback as well. I will pass it on.

Mr Smyth: Thank you, Chair, for your kind words.