



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Consumer Council NI and YouthAction:
Launch of 'Transport Matters' Report**

12 January 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson)
Miss Michelle McIlveen (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Conall McDevitt
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

Ms Antoinette McKeown) Consumer Council for Northern Ireland
Ms Kellie Armstrong) Community Transport Association
Ms Jenny Pyper) Department for Regional Development
Mr Jonny Buckley)
Ms Christine Crawford) Northern Ireland Assembly Youth Panel
Mr Stephen Orme)
Mr Norman Maynes) Translink
Mr Christopher Allen)
Mr Jerome Carleton)
Mr Ross Cooper)
Dr Anne Marie Gray)

Ms Ashley Holmes)
Ms Sinead McKenna)
Ms Suzanne McLean) YouthAction Northern Ireland
Ms Laura Marley)
Mr Chris Mohan)
Mr Rohan Muckrijee)
Ms Charlene Mullan)
Mr Philip Rafferty)
Ms June Trimble)

The Chairperson (Mr Cobain):

I will start by thanking you all for coming to Parliament Buildings to participate in this interesting and worthwhile event. We are here to launch the YouthAction and Consumer Council ‘Transport Matters’ report. I welcome the young people from the YouthAction community leadership programme who carried out the research and produced the report, the main focus of which is on transport matters. This event provides the Committee with the extremely important opportunity to engage with young people on public transport issues. Perhaps more importantly, today gives the young people who researched and compiled the report the opportunity to engage with key stakeholders in the policymaking process, which is one of the main aims of that research. The Regional Development Committee is pleased to be able to, in a small way, assist those young people in achieving their aims.

We will hear from YouthAction and the Consumer Council about the report and the research on which it was based, and it is important that I do not cut across any of their presentations. However, I will give a flavour of what to expect here at Stormont this afternoon. Shortly, I will hand over to representatives of YouthAction and the Consumer Council, who will provide a brief introduction to the research behind the report. That will be followed by a drama presentation. There are a lot of actors at Stormont and the other 106 who are not here will be disappointed that they cannot play a part in the play. Some key messages from the research will be delivered by young people from YouthAction and the community leadership programme.

We will then take a five-minute break to allow you to refresh your cups and us to prepare the room for the plenary session. The Committee is looking forward to interfacing with young people. It will begin at 4.30 pm. *[Laughter.]* I say 4.30 pm as a politician: it is now 4.40 pm. However, it will begin as soon as possible. The purpose of the plenary event is to have a discussion between key transport providers and stakeholders and the young people who carried out the research.

You have all been provided with a copy of the report, and I hope that everyone here is prepared to engage in discussions on the report’s findings and recommendations. The Committee has held a number of events such as this. We have always found those less stage-managed and more interesting, and we get more out of them. In a plenary such as this, participants tend to be

more relaxed than they would be in Committee surroundings. Therefore, we are keen to receive some sort of feedback from the people engaged in this event about whether this is the sort of forum in which they would like to interface with the Committee, rather than going to a Committee meeting.

During the discussions, members of staff with roving microphones will be available, so that questions, comments or contributions can be made by people on the floor. The plenary session will be recorded by the Official Report, and that will be used to formulate a report to Conor Murphy, the Minister for Regional Development, with a request for a formal response to the Committee within a set period. The outputs from this event will be reflected in the Committee's end of mandate report. A departmental response can be taken in an early session of the incoming Committee in the new mandate.

Again, I welcome you to Parliament Buildings for the launch of the report. I will hand over to YouthAction and the Consumer Council to give you a brief overview of the report and the research behind it.

Ms Antoinette McKeown (Consumer Council for Northern Ireland):

Thank you very much, Fred. Good afternoon everybody. I am delighted to see so many young people here, safe and well. We are delighted that the Committee for Regional Development has provided such an important platform to enable you young people to share your attitudes, views and experiences of public transport here at the heart of decision-making on these issues in Northern Ireland.

We are also very pleased to be working with YouthAction to harness the skill, vitality and energy that so many of you young people have displayed in contributing to the research. I know that Ryan from the Consumer Council and Caroline from YouthAction have both worked really hard to ensure that the views that are presented reflect the young people's views, and I thank Ryan and Caroline for that.

Every time that the Consumer Council seeks the views of young people, you give us some really strong views, with conviction and clarity. Every time that you are asked for an opinion or

for plans or solutions on how we can improve things, you give us that with clarity and you give us practical, achievable and creative ideas. We thank you for that. However, it also begs the question: why do decision-makers not engage with you more often? Too often you are asked too little about the public service provision that is there for you. In designing the research, the Consumer Council is very committed to giving young people a voice in public transport because we know that you are one of the largest user groups in Northern Ireland.

We are equally committed to working with the Department for Regional Development and with Fred and the Committee on its implementation. Fred, I welcome your words about the Committee's commitment to taking forward the recommendations. We want to give young people a voice on public transport, and we will work hard to ensure that your voice matters and that it counts.

Ms June Trimble (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

Chairman and Committee members, thank you for inviting the young people from YouthAction and the young people from the young farmers' clubs who have been involved in the research. At YouthAction, we believe that young people should really be at the heart of public policy discussions and decisions and that they should be contributing to political dialogue at all opportunities, so we thank you for taking the findings of their research so seriously and for inviting them today.

This is the first time that we have had a formal partnership with the Consumer Council, and it has been an excellent working opportunity. Ryan has been a great help to Caroline and Suzanne in putting together the piece of work and working with the young people. Young people are key consumers, so we are keen to collaborate with the Consumer Council on future opportunities.

The topic of public transport, particularly rural transport, is very important to the lives of young people and is of particular interest to me. I am a regular user of the number seven bus from Donaghadee to the city every day, so I have a lot to say about public transport and I would welcome the opportunity to do so at any time. Indeed, it is a family trait. My mother, who is in her 80s, is an avid user of the free bus pass, and, in one week, she could have been to Cork and Rathlin Island. The joke at home is that I will be billed by Translink because my mother has

overused her free bus pass. Joking aside, the bus passes for senior citizens have revolutionised their lives, and I can see that every day.

It is now time for the Committee to look at young people. Public transport is so important to young people and to how they live their lives and get about. It is very important that they now have a say and that you take some action on improving public transport for them. The one point in the research that is most important to me and that I bring to your attention is in the summary at the beginning. Most of the young people who were surveyed said that, once they drove a car, they would not use public transport. That is a key message, and we must encourage young people to be good users of public transport. Therefore, I recommend that you provide free transport for young people up to the age of 18 to foster good use of public transport in the future, but that is just my personal comment.

My job today is to introduce our young people. They have carried out the research and written the script, and they want to present it to you in a short performance. I ask the young people from the community leadership programme and their working groups to do their performance of the findings.

On resuming —

The Chairperson:

For the Committee, this is probably the most important part of the evening, when we get to interact with you to get a better understanding of the problems and issues that you, as young people, have raised in the report.

One issue in the report that struck me was that of the availability and cost of public transport for younger people and how that impacted on them and their ability to engage in social and educational activities and, more importantly for many, employment opportunities. I would like to have some discussion around that. Perhaps one of the young people involved in the report would like to kick that off and give us some indication of their thinking and some examples.

Ms Charlene Mullan (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

I have been involved in the transport research from the start. I am from Fermanagh, which is quite a rural area, and I was working in a very rural area, Garrison. One example in the report is that young people have to go seven miles backwards to get a bus to go forwards. A big thing for young people in rural areas is that they are not able to get jobs and they think that they have to depend too much on their parents, which takes away their independence. They are not able to go to youth clubs or take part in other activities, and, if they are taking part in other activities, they rely heavily on their parents to take them to those activities, because there is no transport, especially after a certain time and on certain days. That is a huge issue, and it cannot be good for their mental health.

Ms Laura Marley (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

I have been involved in the transport research from the beginning. I spoke to a group of young people, and most of them said that the cost of transport has gone up since they reached the age of 16 and is a bit high. They used to pay a certain amount, and, as soon as they hit 16, the cost went sky high. Young people over the age of 18 pay more. Those young people say that if the price were cut, they would probably use public transport more.

Mr Chris Mohan (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

I am from the YouthAction theatre. The problem that I have seen is that every couple of years the price of public transport rises by 5p or 10p. That does not seem a lot at the time, but, added up, it is a lot more than what we were paying 10 years ago. It would be great to see a reduction for a change, whenever that is possible, to bring the price back to what it used to be. I also think that it would be great to have student discount on buses.

The Chairperson:

The Committee is in support of public transport. We want to see more people using buses and trains and we want to take cars off the road. To do that, cost is a big issue, not just for young people but for people who use public transport. We are as keen as you are to see public transport become as competitive as possible, and we understand that pricing is a big issue.

The other big issue is that we need public transport to be available when people want it. It is

no use having cheap public transport if there is only one bus every three hours. The Committee is keen to address all those issues.

For many years, we pressurised the Department to ensure that public transport was put back on the agenda. That issue was not on the agenda for many years, but it has been over the past couple of years, and we hope that that improvement will continue.

Mr Jonny Buckley (Northern Ireland Assembly Youth Panel):

When we met to discuss transport issues, a lot of our members came to the conclusion that they were not using public transport any more, mainly because they had serious issues with bus drivers' attitudes towards young people. We came to the conclusion that the introduction of secret inspectors on buses might improve that. Such inspectors could keep tabs on bus drivers and check whether they are value for money. The youth panel thought that that would be a good way of encouraging more young people to start getting back on to public transport.

The Chairperson:

The vast majority of bus drivers do an excellent job. However, the Committee has had one or two issues with the attitudes of people working in public transport. Bus companies have agreed to run additional customer services courses for bus drivers and people who interface with the public. Again, that is a big issue. No one wants to get on to a bus or a train and be humiliated by a driver. However, the vast majority of people involved in public transport provide an excellent service. Like all of these issues, a minority colour the rest.

However, bus companies are trying to deal with that by talking to, educating and training their staff. That is the best way to deal with it in the long term. We are also trying to address that. The Committee has discussed those issues; however, they are not isolated issues in the sense that they are not just about young people. Those attitudes are experienced across the board, so it is not an age thing. The companies are trying to deal with that through additional training.

Ms Sinead McKenna (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

I do not use public transport as much as I should. A few weeks ago, we went online to check the bus timetables because we were planning to go away. We would have needed a degree to look at

the website; it is wild. I am a phone addict and use apps. As Terry said in the performance, if there were an app that enabled you to enter where you are and where you wanted to go and that told you how much it was going to be and at what time it was leaving, it would be so much simpler. More young and older people are using smartphones, iPhones and even iPads. That kind of app would be helpful and might mean that they use public transport more.

The Chairperson:

The new Transport Bill, which the Committee has just finished and published its report on, provides for a new integrated transport system that will hopefully deal with all of those issues. The Bill will hopefully be passed by the Assembly before the end of this mandate.

The Committee has also looked at how people with specific disabilities, such as blindness, can access that technology. After interfacing with groups and taking their information on board, we encouraged the Department to put some of that work in the Bill. You will see that the Bill encourages new technologies and makes those technologies open and accessible to every single person in Northern Ireland, to try to make public transport accessible to them.

As far as new technologies are concerned, I am totally illiterate. I am lucky if I can turn my phone on in the morning. However, I understand how important new technologies are to younger people, and all the bus companies should take that on board when they are producing timetables. Technology should be used as a way of getting information to young people and of getting them to use a service. We are in favour of that.

Mr Philip Rafferty (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

I will go back to the issue of cost. I am from west Belfast, up on the Andytown road. It costs £1.70 to get into town, which I find bizarre. Through the years, the prices have gone up every so often. I am not particularly happy about that because I go into town every week, so I spend a lot more money than I should. I should be walking down to Andytown, but I got a bus once and it cost me £1 to get from one wee small area to another wee area in Andytown. I could have walked it — it would have taken about five minutes — but I decided to get the bus, and £1 for something like that is bizarre, never mind £1.70 to get into town. It is £1 to do that wee small journey: I do not understand what is happening there. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Boylan:

Neither do we.

The Chairperson:

I am sure that Translink will be glad to hear that.

Ms Ashley Holmes (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

I am from the YouthAction NI community leadership programme. From a mother's point of view, getting on buses with a pram is a bit of a nightmare. Obviously, there are disabled facilities, but there should be more space because more than one pram might need to get on a bus.

Mr Ross Cooper (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

My question is more to do with age.

The Chairperson:

Is that because you looked at me? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Cooper:

I was not going to say that in public. People over 16 are charged an adult fare, but, in the eyes of the law and the government and all of that, a person is not an adult until they are 25. Why and how is there that difference in age?

The Chairperson:

Those are all detailed questions for someone from Translink, who can, hopefully, give you some sort of explanation.

Another big issue is availability of rural transport. Conall and I are the two townies on the Committee. For a townie from north Belfast, I am an expert.

Mr F McCann:

I live in the rural part of west Belfast. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson:

Rural transport is a big issue for us. It is also a big issue in respect of social inclusion for people, especially older people, in rural areas.

Mr Stephen Orme (Northern Ireland Assembly Youth Panel):

I am from the Northern Ireland Assembly Youth Panel. When we discussed the difference between the ages of 16 and 25 and the definition of an adult, we came to the conclusion that many of the financial restrictions that a person faces at 16, they face from the ages of 16 to 25 because of A levels and the fact that they only have time for part-time work. There are also university fees to pay. There are student cards for a discount — usually 10% or 20% — in private stores, and we would support a similar scheme for public transport.

Mr McDevitt:

I will pose a quick question on the point of cost and concession and all that sort of stuff. It is a theme of the report and quite a few of you raised it. A lot of you said that if you buy a car or start using a car, that is it: you would never go back to public transport. By way of a show of hands, who agrees that once young people get into a car, they will not go back to public transport? Who thinks that that is correct?

The Chairperson:

You are sorry that you asked that question.

Mr McDevitt:

That is good to know. I think that that is what we believe as a Committee, but, a lot of the time, that evidence needs to be presented. This report will help us to do that.

We should make you aware that our departmental budget came out today, and it is not good news for anything that we are debating today. It looks at fare increases and fewer routes because of the cutbacks that are kicking in. That you have been able to come here and produce this report is quite important. It will allow us to speak a little louder than we are normally able to speak on these issues. I suggest that you take the opportunity to contact your MLAs directly and follow up

on this report because, if you do not do that, the consensus position is that once you get in the car, you forget about the bus or the train.

Mr Jerome Carleton (Right Here, Fermanagh):

The big problem with rural transport is that young people find that they cannot get anywhere after a certain time. I do not drive and if I have to get a bus home, the last bus that I can get is at 5.45 pm. I cannot get home by public transport any time after that. Young people have the same problem: buses are not running after 6.00 pm or 6.30 pm, and we cannot get young people together into groups to do things. They rely on taxis, other young people, their friends or parents to run them places. If public transport were running, they would not have that problem of getting to groups. It is hard enough to get young people in a rural area involved in groups without having the problem of getting them to a meeting place.

Mr Boylan:

I will pick up on that point, but I will say a few things first. I want to thank the people here for their views on this report. It is an excellent report and it is the kind of thing that helps us to contribute to any piece of legislation. The information in the report is very important. I also want to thank you for the piece of theatre. You sometimes see theatre in the Assembly Chamber, but I guarantee that you will not see theatre as good as that.

Only three of us have been on the Regional Development Committee since 2007; members have changed, but my main gripe has always been rural issues. The Chairperson shares that with me. I represent Newry and Armagh, and I am well aware of the limited public transport that there is in rural areas. I am delighted that you have come along and given us some ideas into that and highlighted the issue. We are well aware of it. Conall asked an interesting question about people driving cars. Naturally, young people want to get their driving license, get into a car and get about, and there is a big dependency on cars in rural areas; there is no doubt about it. That is because of the lack of public transport. There are just some community transport organisations and local sports clubs such as GAA clubs that provide transport.

I want to try to nail down with you how we, as a Committee, can realistically address the issue of rural transport. I want to know where the new ideas are. We mentioned the budget and there

is going to be a serious look at what is available in the budget, but we are trying to get new ideas and bring things about. When I mention rural transport, viable journeys and viable trips are always talked about. You cannot realistically look at running a bus at 8.00 pm, 9.00 pm or 10.00 pm when only two people may get on it. We want to try to work in new ideas and work with you to come up with ideas on how we can address that issue. You have experienced it: you are sitting there, you cannot get out, you cannot get involved in any activities and you are limited in what you can do, even in meeting up with friends. Thank God, in the IT age, you can all text, but you need to get out, for your well-being and everything else. I want you to touch on that and try to give us some ideas. We have some ideas ourselves.

As the Chairperson will tell you, he did not know what rural was until I came into the Committee. When I leave the Committee in March, the focus will still be rural. We want to nail this down. We want a good public transport system. We understand the need for cars in rural areas, and that will continue until we get a proper integrated system. Perhaps someone has some ideas or would like to comment on the main issues.

Mr Christopher Allen (Right Here, Fermanagh):

The Chairperson said that he is not too sure about applications and iPhones and all that stuff. If this kind of event were to happen again, could you have two young people sitting at the table who know what it is like to be in our shoes and know what is going on?

Mr Boylan:

Certainly, we like to create opportunities for people to come along and we will give everyone the opportunity to have their say. We have looked at all the technology. We are not all receiving concessionary passes like these men to my left. We all have knowledge of IT systems and everything else, and we are looking at all those things. You are right: the more people that we get to present to the Committee, the better. There are opportunities through consultations and everything else. As I said, this is a wonderful report and it is a good opportunity and a good start. Long may it continue. There are a lot of groups doing different things, and putting forward ideas, as regards youth action. We are always prepared to listen. The Chairperson is getting on a wee bit, but, to be fair to him, he will give anyone the opportunity to come to the Committee.

Mr G Robinson:

I am from a rural area as well. I am absolutely delighted to be among you here today. It has been very enlightening. One or two of you mentioned the 16 to 25 age group. Unfortunately, I am not in that age group, but we should focus on it. Ulsterbus and all the different companies that provide transport services should look at the report. A lot of young people use public transport, particularly in rural areas. As someone said, there is often no public transport after 6.00 pm. If young people do not have a car, or if their parents do not have a car or if it is away, they are stranded for the rest of the night and are unable to go out until the next morning.

We should lobby for, and look after, 16- to 25-year-olds as much as possible. Some people in that age group work, often for a very low wage, and some are at school. We should target those people as much as possible. We should highlight those types of issues when we meet officials from the Department for Regional Development and even take them as far as the Minister.

Ms Kellie Armstrong (Community Transport Association):

Good evening. Many of you know my face. You asked for help and suggestions. As you know, community transport is a community-led solution to local transport needs. Everything is tight in the current economic crisis. Transport is a cross-cutting issue that affects employment, education and health. No matter what age people in Northern Ireland are, they are affected by transport. Is there any opportunity to look at some sort of cross-departmental transport plan so that we can integrate services and use the yellow education and library board buses and health buses for young people after 6.00 pm?

The Chairperson:

A lot of issues are cross-cutting. That is not the issue. The issue is the end result. As a Committee, we are keen to do as much as possible to work with other Committees to produce solutions to problems. It is important to do that, rather than living in silos and saying that we cannot do anything because something is a health matter or whatever. As a Committee, we do not involve ourselves in that. We try to resolve issues as much as possible.

Community transport is a huge issue, not just for the youth but for older people, who are socially excluded and depend completely on community transport because they physically cannot

get to a bus stop. There are many issues: young people need community transport for jobs and education, and older people need it for social reasons. We are a big supporter of community transport because we know how important a role it plays in the rural areas.

A lot of issues are cross-cutting. If Committees and Departments were more flexible in coming to solutions rather than looking after themselves and what they want to do, it would be far more beneficial for everyone. We would then actually get a solution. In the current financial straits, we will hopefully be driven to the conclusion that we need to work together, because we do not have the resources to do everything that we used to do or duplicate what we do, so we will have to focus our resources. It may be a way of bringing people to the realisation that we all need to work together. That is a simple idea, but it is very difficult to do when you need to deal with a range of different Committees.

Mr McDevitt:

I want to pick up on the iPhone app idea and about people being more mobile and not so much PC-based. That is something that a lot of us empathise with. The idea of better integration was mentioned in the presentation and in the report. If you get off a bus in Dublin having come from out of town, you can get on a bike to reach your destination. Do you have really strong opinions about that, or was it just a good bit of theatre? Would you like to see a bike scheme in Belfast? Would it be good or right for the city? Would it be pointless? Would all the bikes be nicked?

Mr Boylan:

I want to pick up on Kellie Armstrong's point. She hit the nail on the head. The Committee can make recommendations through the Transport Bill. There needs to be a collective and cross-departmental approach. Everyone I have talked to about rural transport has been realistic about what we can achieve, but we can work in a cross-departmental fashion to facilitate some of your suggestions, at least. That is why I asked whether there were any other suggestions about that issue. That is the way for us to go. The Committee will support that.

Mr G Robinson:

I agree with Kellie as well. She and I know about the rural transport situation in our area. The rural transport providers do a tremendous job, not only for young people, but for elderly people

and people with disabilities. That is one of the areas that we should be looking at and working on together.

Mr F McCann:

I live in inner-city Belfast and it takes me two or three minutes to walk into the city centre to all the amenities. Sometimes you can lose the sense of how important public transport is to people. I only recently became a member of the Committee for Regional Development, but since I joined, my colleagues, especially those who live in rural areas, have made me aware of the importance of rural transport to people who live in those areas.

As Conall mentioned, we heard a presentation on the budget this morning, part of which was concerned with community transport. The point was made that a £10,000 cut in community transport routes in rural areas could represent a devastating blow to community transport infrastructure. That all needs to be taken into consideration. Where I live, I mostly use black taxis to get about, and I also get on buses. Since I have been on the Committee I have learned that the issue is about making transport more accessible, better and cheaper for people to use. It is not just about the convenience of getting from A to B, but about dealing with the serious amount of traffic that we have on our roads.

In our meeting this morning we heard that the education and library board fleet in Fermanagh is bigger than the Ulsterbus fleet there. That is crazy. It is like the argument about schools that close at 4.30 pm. All facilities should be brought together. We need to pull those threads together to ensure that those facilities are widely used. That makes for a cheaper and better approach, especially for people who live in rural areas.

The Chairperson:

I know that a lot of people want to speak. We could take three or four contributions. There are people here from Translink and it is important that they address some of the questions that were asked.

Ms Suzanne McLean (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

I want to emphasise the point that we are making about an integrated approach. That is in our

recommendations and is one of the things that kept coming up in rural communities. We have talked about it a lot. It is really important that we start to think about that and work in a cross-departmental way.

I know that I am repeating myself and saying what has already been said, but it is important, because apparently research shows that if you hear something seven times, it goes into your brain and sticks there. *[Laughter]* So, hopefully, if we keep saying and saying and saying it, it will get it into people's brains, and we will start to do something about it. It is really important that we start to think about how we can make this work. With those education and library board buses sitting there not being used, and that fleet being bigger, we need to be integrating services. That is really important, and I want to emphasise that again.

Ms Christine Crawford (Northern Ireland Assembly Youth Panel):

I am from Armagh, which is quite rural. I know that it is unrealistic to say that we should have footpaths where everybody lives in rural areas because it is a safety issue. However, I got the bus to school and home from school every day, and I had to walk home on nights such as this. I live quite a bit away from the bus stop, and even just reflective clothing would be a good safety idea for those using public transport in rural areas.

Mr Rohan Muckrijee (Right Here, Fermanagh):

I went to Magee College in Derry. Back then, three years ago, I could not get a direct bus from Enniskillen to Derry. I had to get a bus from Enniskillen to Omagh and wait for a link bus from Omagh to Derry. A few times I missed the bus or the bus was late. As a result, I pretty much had to hold back the whole journey, and call for a taxi or lift. That was very inconvenient. I do not know whether the situation has changed, but we have a bus every hour from Enniskillen to Belfast. That is a fantastic service, but why do we not have a bus directly from Enniskillen to Derry?

Dr Anne Marie Gray (YouthAction Northern Ireland):

I represent the board of YouthAction Northern Ireland. We are acutely aware of how the lack of access to public transport impacts on young people in a whole range of areas. Suzanne and others spoke of the importance of an integrated strategy, but having looked briefly at the budget

proposals document from the Department this morning, we are really concerned that the issue of young people and transport could very easily be lost as more publicly identifiable priorities come to the fore.

It is really important for the Department to think about the strategies already in place: the anti-poverty strategy, the children and young persons' strategy, and the hopefully forthcoming strategy on young people not in education, employment or training. Unless there is an improved public transport strategy for young people, a whole range of measures in those other strategies will not be achieved. We find that problem all the time, when young people tell us about the impact that it has on their ability to access training programmes, to go to college or university, or to access social events. It also has an impact on their social inclusion and mental health.

Ms Jenny Pyper (Department for Regional Development):

I am involved in work on a new regional transportation strategy for Northern Ireland. The timing of this event is excellent, and I congratulate everyone involved in the report and today's presentation. I have been involved in a lot of consultation events and have never been at one that was so clear, compelling and so much fun. There are a lot of lessons for us from the way that the report has been fed back and in the detail of it.

As I said, we are working on a new regional transportation strategy, so this event is well timed to inform that strategy. I want to mention a couple of things that we are taking account of in the new strategy. Almost everyone has mentioned the integrated approach, and some really good points were made about making better use of the infrastructure that we have. With the budgetary constraints, we will not be able to buy or build our way out of a lot of the transport problems that exist, and the Department recognises that. However, we could definitely make much better use of the infrastructure and services that we have. A key theme in the new strategy will be around sustainability and increasing the use of public transport and means of active travel to find ways of integrating active travel, such as cycling, with public transport. That theme has come through strongly today, and we are definitely with you on that.

We are acutely conscious of the difference between rural and urban issues, and I am keen to have more dialogue with young people, particularly on rural issues, because, in many ways, they

are quite different from a lot of the urban issues. That is recognised, and we will have a specific section in our strategy looking at rural transport issues.

It was great to hear all the references to and illustrations of the power of technology. That is really compelling. I have two kids who use the bus all the time for school and for getting out and about, but they are not at the age where they are out later in the evening. As a parent, the one thing that I want to know about is when the bus is coming and when they will be home. I am constantly asking them to text me to let me know where they are. I do not think that it is a leap of faith to get the bus information in a timely way. I have seen the smartphone apps that developers have created off their own bat, based on information that is publicly available, similar to the Roads Service road cameras, through which apps have been developed that help people to plan their journeys on the roads. We need to see that extended out to the public transport network, and that will definitely feature in the new strategy. The Chairman referred to the Transport Bill and the importance of it, and we are definitely with you on that as well.

I will not go into any more detail. I reiterate how useful the research is, and, when we move to public consultation on the new regional transportation strategy, which I hope will be in March, I will be keen to follow up with YouthAction and have more dialogue specifically as part of the wider consultation on the strategy. I can see already a good synergy with a lot of what you have said, and there is a lot of food for thought on the issues that we have not yet taken account of.

Mr Norman Maynes (Translink):

I add my congratulations to YouthAction and to the Consumer Council for undertaking the research and putting it so succinctly into the ‘Transport Matters’ publication. I thank the young folk who participated in the drama, which I thought was absolutely excellent and brought out all of the important issues.

You talked about fares, and, if you are using a Metro or Ulsterbus bus service, I strongly encourage you to get a Smartlink card. A Smartlink card offers a saving of around 35% on a cash fare. Instead of spending £1.70 on a Metro or Ulsterbus fare, you can get it for £1.10 with a Smartlink card. All the customer has to do is add five journeys on the Smartlink, which will have a life of 12 months, so you have to use only five journeys in 12 months. You can top up a

Smartlink card at any PayPoint agent in Northern Ireland, and we have an additional 85 agents in Belfast. You can buy your first Smartlink on our website, so it is fairly easy to get your hands on one. We promote that on a lot of our buses, and we really want to push people to that cashless way of travel. There are huge incentives with it.

You talked about the cost of travel for people over the age of 16. Unfortunately, we do not receive any concession fare recovery for travel for people over that age, but we are conscious of the higher fare that applies at that age. Tomorrow, we have our third meeting on looking at the possibility of introducing a youth ticket. We would like to introduce that through smart card technology. The person's photograph would be on it, so it would be personalised, and we are trying to think of a fully integrated product with Northern Ireland Railways, Ulsterbus and Metro. That card would cover someone until their twenty-third birthday, whether they are a student or not. However, we have a long way to go on the technology. The business case will not be in by this September, but we are fairly hopeful of getting an innovative product next year.

Another ticketing innovation is mobile phone ticketing, which, all being well, is something that we would like, and plan, to introduce for railways in April this year. We hope that people will be able to buy weekly and monthly tickets on their phones and, for the first time ever on railways, three-day tickets. Those three days would have to be used within a seven-day period, not three consecutive days. We believe that that would suit people who are making the occasional journey during the week on railways. If that proves successful, we would like to roll out the use of mobile phone technology.

In the past year, there has been a big growth in Europe in what we call m-technology, particularly in the airline business. The other growth area for that technology is nightclubs around Europe, as it makes it a lot quicker for people to get in. We are moving ahead on that and we would like to introduce that within three months. However, please use Smartlink; there are big savings there for you.

Customer care is extremely important for us. We place a lot of emphasis on customer care and put our drivers and conductors through rigorous courses. However, as Fred Cobain said, we do get it wrong on the odd occasion. We carry 78 million passenger journeys every year. That is

equivalent to carrying the entire population of Northern Ireland every week on our buses and trains. Every passenger's ticket has a number that can identify the driver and the service. If someone has a complaint, they can write in and provide the ticket number, the date and the time of travel. That is all that we need to identify who was involved, and we can quickly sort out any issues. We encourage you to contact us.

We also very much believe in liaising with young folk. At the end of 2009, we created the Translink Youth Forum, of which we have had five meetings to date. Members are aged between 12 and 22, and around 30 people normally turn up at each meeting. The forum has been great for us. It has created its own logo and sweatshirts, and places an article in every edition of our in-house magazine, 'Expresslines'. If any of you want to join that forum, please contact us and we will accommodate you. For anyone beyond the age of 22, we hold 30 passenger group meetings a year, in various locations, covering bus and rail travel, and we are always looking for more members.

I am happy to address any other issues. Thank you.

Mr Boylan:

I welcome those last comments, especially those from the Department. You have to realise that it is fine for people who can access that transport and have the option of integrated tickets. However, if you look at where the rail network is in the region, you will see that there are vast swathes of the North where it is not accessible. I am glad that Jenny was here to talk about the regional strategy. That is what the Department needs to focus on now, because we need to address that.

I welcome the comments from Translink, but, coming from a rural area, I know what is available and what is accessible. That is what we are trying to address. It is OK for people who live in certain areas and can access transport, and that service is integrated. That is a natural process that we should be looking at, but we also want to address the other issues. Now is your opportunity to do that, with the strategy that is being developed. That is what we want to see.

The Chairperson:

I thank the individuals who made this event possible. I speak for all Committee members when I say that, for us, the event has been highly interesting, stimulating and productive. Hopefully, we have taken on board a lot of the suggestions that have been made. We are now more aware of the issues around young people and transport.

I pay particular thanks to those who produced what is a very interesting report. I thank everyone who participated in this event for their time and effort. One reason that the Committee sponsored the event was to provide young people with the opportunity to speak to and interface with the Committee. I hope that that has been of some use to you.

The next step is the publication of the plenary discussion, as recorded by the Official Report. Everyone who participated in the discussion will receive a draft transcript from Hansard.

Finally, I thank the Assembly external liaison unit for all its hard work and for staying behind this evening to help us. I thank the Assembly broadcasting team for providing a recording service, and I thank the catering and support staff for their help and for the tea and sandwiches this afternoon.

Thank you very much for coming. I hope that you all have a safe journey home.