



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**Key Issues and Future Challenges:  
Accessibility and Sustainable Transport**

23 February 2011

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**Key Issues and Future Challenges:  
Accessibility and Sustainable Transport**

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

Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson)  
Mr Billy Armstrong  
Mr Cathal Boylan  
Mr Allan Bresland  
Mr Fra McCann  
Mr Ian McCrea  
Mr George Robinson

**Witnesses:**

Ms Kellie Armstrong	)	Community Transport Association
Mr Andy McClenaghan	)	Consumer Council
Mr Ryan Simpson	)	
Mr Kevin Doherty	)	Disability Action
Mr Dermot McCloskey	)	
Mr Michael Lorimer	)	
Mr David McDonald	)	Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee
Ms Charlene Mullan	)	
Mr Neil Halliday	)	Northern Ireland Environment Link
Mr David McCann	)	
Ms Denise O'Boyle	)	Older People's Advocate
Mr Michael Hughes	)	Rural Community Network

Mr Stephen Wood	)	Stephen Wood Consultancy
Mr Tom McClelland	)	Sustrans
Mr Steven Patterson	)	
Mr Bernard Clarke	)	Translink
Mr Malachy Campbell	)	World Wildlife Fund
Ms Caroline Redpath	)	Youth Action
Ms Denise Rodgers	)	

**The Chairperson (Mr Cobain):**

Invitations for the event were sent out at very short notice, and I want to thank you all for taking time out of your schedules to come along and speak to the Committee this morning. As you all know, the current mandate comes to a close in the next four or five weeks, and the Committee is keen to discuss some of the issues that arose during the mandate. Probably more important for the Committee is for you to identify the issues of concern that the incoming Committee for Regional Development will encounter.

The Committee wants to address a number of the issues that it has dealt with over the past four years, namely, networks and gateways; accessibility and sustainable transport, which this group will discuss; and water and sewerage services. We are keen to hear the views of key of stakeholders on the major gains — if there were any — and developments over recent years. It is also important to identify what opportunities were lost by the Committee and the Department over that period, what the key strategic challenges will be for the incoming Committee and what needs to be done to meet those challenges.

You are all aware that the issues for discussion today are extremely important and that a lot of work is required on the part of stakeholders and the Committee to make them come to fruition and to take them forward in a way that will improve the quality of life for everyone who lives in Northern Ireland. That is the main hope of the Committee. It will be even more difficult to address some issues because of the budgetary constraints that will become apparent in the next couple of months.

We have tried to make the format as simple as possible. After each stakeholder has spoken,

Committee members may want to ask some questions for clarification. Staff from Hansard are here to compile the Official Report of the meeting. That report will form part of the report that the Committee will make to the incoming Committee following the election. The report will also be published on the Committee's website. To ensure that the transcript is accurate, I ask those who speak to please identify themselves and the organisation that they are from. Again, thank you all very much.

**Mr Steven Patterson (Sustrans):**

Together with our colleagues here, Sustrans has worked closely with the Committee over the years. We contributed to the sustainable transport inquiry that the Committee undertook. That was a useful exercise, but the question is how much of an impact that inquiry has had on the Department's thinking and on the transport budget proposals for the next four years.

On the policy side of things, the regional transportation strategy (RTS), which Stephen helped to write, covered the period from 2002 to 2012 and, in it, a halfway review in 2007 was promised. That review has still not taken place. In the intervening period, however, other things in the world were changing. There were concerns about climate change and carbon emissions from transport, and health concerns about the increase in obesity in society and the resulting significant cost to the Health Department and the Northern Ireland Executive. It is regrettable that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) has not carried out a review of the RTS, particularly given those concerns about climate change and health. The changing financial situation has meant that the economics of the investment strategy for Northern Ireland have changed significantly.

Part of the initial problem with the RTS is that we are not just basing transport on the outcomes; that is, what we build, how many miles of road or cycle lanes we build, how many buses we put on or how much money we spend. The more challenging task, and what we would be asking for in a review, is to set targets for how we want people to travel, the percentage of trips by certain roads and the length of journeys. Without targets for what we are trying to achieve in travel behaviour, whether it is for 20% of people in west Belfast to travel by Metro or 10% of people in Derry to travel by bike, we will be spending a lot of money without knowing what it is that we are trying to achieve. On the positive side, the splitting of sustainable travel away from a Roads Service-led function in DRD to the transportation policy division headed by Tom Reid has been a good move. As long as the connectivity with Roads Service is maintained, that will be a

challenge for DRD over the next four years.

The Department's budget has reflected the fact that there has obviously been a large emphasis on dual carriageways and road building. The A5, in particular, seems to be draining the money away from so many other transport initiatives. We have major concerns about that, because we believe that the balance is wrong. Alternative to that sort of investment, the money could be much better used in the maintenance of the existing road network and invested in the shorter journeys. Why build a new A5 dual carriageway if the existing roads are falling apart? Seventy five per cent of our journeys in Northern Ireland are less than five miles. Therefore, a lot more focus should be spent on those shorter journeys, which, coincidentally, are the journeys that could be made by walking, cycling or using public transport, or a mix of all three. The Metro bus service has been a really good example of how public transport can be improved.

There is so little emphasis on the shorter journeys. Last week, we pointed out to the Committee that the equality impact assessment of the budget did not take any cognisance of young people walking and cycling. I hope that that point will be picked up on. There seems to be a culture in DRD that short journeys, which are those with potential for active travel and are often made by the most vulnerable people in society, are being overlooked in favour of inter-urban transport, which will, in turn, lead to less money for other things and will increase journey lengths. If you build more roads, people will travel further.

I apologise for what is a slightly urban focus; no doubt my rural colleagues will talk about the impact on their areas. The Rural Safe Routes to Schools project involved 18 schools and had a ring-fenced budget and a good partnership with government. It demonstrated a significant change away from driving and an increase in walking and cycling from 20% to 33%. We have demonstrated that that can be done. As a result, there was a motion in the House to invest more in walking and cycling for children. That debate was very well attended by Members and the motion was passed, but the Department has been very slow in taking that forward into delivery.

**Mr Michael Lorimer (Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee):**

Legislation has been a great driver for change. Although the Disability Discrimination Act has weaknesses on transport, there are accessibility regulations for vehicles. That means that when government buy vehicles, there is no option but to meet the accessibility standards.

The accessible transport strategy (ATS) has been successful in securing investment for replacing transport vehicles. We have seen a revolution in the past 10 years in the age of the bus fleet, the rail network, and investment in stations and facilities. We have good physical access to transport, which compares favourably with many UK regions. We also have an accessible transport strategy for old and disabled people that gives a policy framework for the Department to maximise its investment in those services.

We have moved from the traditional approach of providing services for disabled people, which was largely about accommodating and providing separate services for disabled people, to a mainstream emphasis on removing barriers that make accessing transport difficult.

**Mr David McDonald (Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee):**

I will give examples of that change, which has made a massive difference to the life of so many people. In 1995, when the Disability Discrimination Act was coming into force, I used to travel to London regularly. I had just started to use a wheelchair. It struck me at that time that I was able to travel from Bangor on the train — in the baggage car, I have to say; it was freezing cold but at least I could get on the train — to Great Victoria Street, where Translink had one accessible Airbus. That was the only accessible vehicle it had except for Easibuses, which came in after that.

I was able to get on the aircraft at the international airport, travel to Heathrow, get the Airbus from Heathrow to London, and then it was Shanks's pony in the wheelchair to the hotel. You could use Hackney cabs in London, in contrast with here, where I could not get to even Newtownards. Not only were the buses not accessible but no taxis were accessible. My father lived in Newtownards and I could not get to see my parents. I find a massive contrast between that situation and how things are now.

Today, I can get to Newtownards, albeit by Door-2-Door or taxi. I still cannot get onto buses in this country because they do not accommodate my wheelchair. However, most people can get onto buses. So, there have been massive changes with the investment in vehicles. By and large, Belfast is accessible to most wheelchair users and disabled people, except for audio-visual in buses, which we will come to.

The trains are very much accessible. The new trains are excellent. You can now get into a

carriage that is warm as opposed to the baggage car. You are with other people as opposed to being with the guard. Me and the guard used to have good chats, and we got well used to each other when I used the baggage car. Now, we get in with the public. It is quite nice to travel as a member of the public with other members of the public. There have been mammoth changes in public transport, which is a real blessing.

Michael spoke about the ATS. A lot of physical changes have been made here and there has been a lot of investment in the physical structure of vehicles, buildings and stations. However, a lot of the problems now are attitudinal. Those persist. It is a culture, and a culture is much harder to change. I will give you a couple of examples of that, one funny and one much more serious.

A couple of years back in Great Victoria Street I bumped into a guy I know who is blind. He had bought himself a new phone and we were sitting chatting about that when the train came in, so we moved through the barrier. We were talking and about to move up to the train when a guy from Translink took the blind guy by the arm and said, "Come on and I'll get you to a carriage." He was not asked whether he wanted to be taken to a carriage. He was not asked where he wanted to sit. I did not see him again until I got off the train at the other end in Bangor. The point is that that member of staff should have asked the guy first what he wanted. He could have held on to the back of my wheelchair, got on the train with me and we could have sat together. Those sorts of things need changing.

The other more severe issue is about a young woman with a learning difficulty who is out all the time and enjoys being out, but who will not go into a bus or train station at the time that the schools get out, because the kids make fun of her. The public attitude has to change too, but that must be led by the professional attitude. The public follow what the professionals do. Therefore, we need to much improve the professional attitude, from the Department down to the people on the ground. That will start to change the public attitude.

**Mr Lorimer:**

We could be here all day talking about lost opportunities. We believe that there has been a failure on the behalf of the Department and others to understand and implement the ATS. That has led to many lost opportunities. David talked about culture. There is a culture within government, not just DRD but other Departments, of a "traditional" approach to dealing with disabled people, providing and promoting accessibility and the inclusion of disabled people. That is exemplified

by the focus that the Department puts on the Door-2-Door service. That is a very necessary service for people who, with the best will in the world, will never be able to access mainstream public transport. However, it is not the solution to all disabled people's and older people's transport needs.

That culture is also illustrated by the massive problems that we have had in getting positive measures put in place to promote the use of mainstream public transport. The issue of audio-visual on buses is a prime example of that. We have been talking to the Department about audio-visual since 2003, and it has been a fight to get it. I have to say, and David will endorse this, that the support and work of the Committee for Regional Development has been vital in progressing those issues.

There are reams of missed opportunities that we could talk about. Perhaps David wants to say a few words.

**Mr McDonald:**

I find this all the more sad, because, during the better years when money was available, a lot of opportunities to make investment and change things for people were lost. That happened because people have not been listened to. The people who are affected by this were not heard by officials when they should have been. Improvement work would have cost a lot less had it been done at the right time.

I will give you a couple of examples. A buddy scheme was introduced with the idea of assisting people to get out and about. People would go out with a bit of assistance and support, especially people who may not have been out since they had become disabled. However, the buddy scheme was structured around Door-2-Door. For the life of me, I cannot understand why a buddy scheme is needed with Door-2-Door. With Door-2-Door, people are picked up at their door, a driver gets out and assists them to a vehicle and a driver assists them into the building at the other side. A buddy scheme is not needed for that. Travel training and a travel scheme are needed for mainstream public transport. To me, money was wasted on the buddy scheme, which should have been enlarged to incorporate all sorts of public transport and encourage people to use public buses and trains instead of the Door-2-Door service. Quite the opposite happened; the scheme encouraged people to use the more expensive and subsidised Door-2-Door service.



I have been arguing for quite a while with folk about the difference between accessible vehicles and accessible services. Some people have some difficulty picking up on that concept. An accessible vehicle is all very well, and it is grand that a lot of money has been put into accessible buses and trains. However, what happens if people cannot actually get to the bus stop to get on an accessible vehicle? If the bus stop is halfway up a hill, a person in a manual wheelchair cannot get to it. If a blind person has to cross the road because the bus stops on only one side of it, they cannot get to the bus. Those people still have no access to transport. That is why we need to look at the structure of and attitude towards how transport is provided.

The removal of Easibus services across the country is a major disaster, and it looks as though they are going to go in Belfast too. Easibus performed a task, not just for disabled people but for all sorts of people, including young mothers with prams and older people going out during the day when their relatives with cars are elsewhere. Easibus could get up small streets. It got up my street. I have a mile to go to my local bus stop. I cannot get on the bus, so it is immaterial to me, but it is difficult for somebody who has to try to push a wheelchair a mile up a hill and get on a bus. They will have to use the Door-2-Door service.

We have missed opportunities across the country, where local town services could have been improved. We could have used smaller Optare-type buses to ensure that more people would use the transport in the towns. That is different from travelling between the towns. As the gentleman from Sustrans said, many journeys are about five miles. Why do we not maximise the transport available and get buses going up small streets, and not only along the main routes, so that they can pick up as many people as possible? Those are the sorts of opportunities that we have missed. They would have saved money, now that we are in dire straits. It is a shame. We could talk about it all morning, but I will leave it at that, and we will, hopefully, move on to better things.

**Mr Lorimer:**

Looking at the key strategic issues and what else can be done, the point has already been made that the financial situation is dire and there is a possibility that the cuts and savings that are being made will impact very heavily not only on disabled and older people, but on those people, such as young people, who rely on forms of transport other than the car. That reinforces the points that Steven made earlier.

There is a chance that we could go backwards, but there are other opportunities for change, with public transport reform and, as Steven talked about, the review of the RTS. There is an opportunity to look again at that and at how we can maximise the money that we have. One of the things that we need to do is change and challenge the culture that stereotypes and simplifies things, and develop a better understanding of the issues, rather than going straight to the policymaking.

The ATS needs to be revisited. We responded to the previous action plan of the ATS and asked the Department to review it, because we felt that it was not working. We need to move away from a focus on the alternative services and maximise the use of a much more accessible public transport network, albeit within the confines of the current saving proposals. Furthermore, we should be encouraging more people to use public transport. One thing that we would like to question, even from the Department's point of view, is whether the existence of a separate transport programme for people with disabilities encourages the Department to segregate and oversimplify. Are we looking at a radically different approach to the wider issue of accessibility and social inclusion?

**Mr McDonald:**

I want to broaden the discussion out to refer to other Departments. We are going into a very difficult stage for the country, across the UK and in Northern Ireland. I want to look at one or two things that are already occurring that give real cause for concern. The consultation on disability living allowance (DLA) and its mobility component finished on Monday. One of the big concerns around that is the fact that they are proposing to take the mobility component away from people who live in residential accommodation. A young man with a learning difficulty who lives in residential accommodation told me that the residential home pools residents' mobility component, and it is used to pay for a minibus to take them out. He is petrified — I cannot use a strong enough word — that the combination of his DLA being taken away and the reduction of the Door-2-Door service will affect his ability to get out. Therefore, it is not only about what one Department does; it is an accumulation of what happens across all Departments.

The other day, I was told about a group of visually impaired people who meet regularly. They have been using Health Service transport to get them to and from their meetings one evening a week. They have been told that that transport is no longer available for them. In its budget proposals, the Department is also proposing the removal of group travel from the Community

Transport Association budget. Who else do those people turn to? That might be the only night they get out each week. How do those people get out any more? People are being knocked about left and right because Departments are making decisions in isolation from other Departments. That will end up in disaster for many people.

I will come back to what I said earlier about Easibus-type services, although I am not talking about just Easibus. We need to look at maximising the use of town services and trying to reduce the need for the Door-2-Door service. That will be reduced anyway, but, using the eligibility criteria, we need to look at who uses the Door-2-Door service. It is difficult to get because a lot of people are using it who could, maybe, use public transport.

A lot of the time public transport is not being advertised as being accessible. For example, there is a photograph in Translink's headquarters in Central Station that shows a wheelchair user getting off a bus, which was taken five years ago. There is another photograph, which is out in public view on the way down to the trains, of a young woman who has learning difficulties using a bicycle and getting off the train. Translink has never swapped those two photographs around. The young woman using the bicycle getting off the train looks "normal"; it does not frighten the public, if I can put it that way. The young woman getting off the bus in the wheelchair is very obviously a disabled person. Why can we not visibly promote the use of public transport by disabled people much more often? That needs to be done as well.

**Ms Caroline Redpath (Youth Action):**

We did a presentation to the Committee on 12 January 2011 on research that we did on young people and public transport last year. We presented it through performing arts, but I am not going to do any singing or dancing today. I want to make a couple of points, as well as welcoming the Committee's positive response to that research, which we did with the Consumer Council. I will pick up on the challenges relating to public transport and young people using public transport. One of the key issues for us is that older young people aged 16 to 25 are at the age when they begin to drive cars. If we do not do something about that, we are going to lose a whole generation of travellers who might avail themselves of public transport. If we are going to talk about sustainable public transport today, we need to focus on that.

One of the solutions is concessionary fares for young people aged up to 25. With budget cuts, the economic circumstances and youth unemployment, it is important that we encourage young

people to use public transport and have concessionary fares for them, especially if we want them to take up even part-time employment or volunteering opportunities to develop their employability and skills. Two of the key findings from the report concerned the affordability and availability of public transport for young people. The costs of travel for young people in rural communities and its availability are issues for them, especially for their social lives and for the economic benefits of employment.

**Mr Michael Hughes (Rural Community Network):**

I apologise in advance for talking with a bias towards rural communities. Access to transport that is available at relevant times to do relevant things is the issue for rural communities. Even today, I have a meeting in Cookstown at 2.30 pm, and to use public transport to get me from my home in Donaghmore to here and back to Cookstown for 2.30 pm cannot be done. I live 10 miles from Cookstown, and, in order to get to work at 9.00 am, I leave home at 7.15 am using public transport, but I cannot use public transport to get back home again before 7.00 pm. It is difficult for many people in rural areas to access public transport at relevant times.

That is not to say that there are no potential solutions. A huge range of public transport passes through many rural areas every day of the week, particularly from Monday to Friday. We have school, health and public transport buses. The reason why government have not even attempted to target or clear up the accessibility issue is that Departments still work in silos. In any of the Scandinavian countries, a bus is a bus. At any given time of the day in many rural areas of Northern Ireland, there are three buses going into a major town and each picking up only one or two people because the services are siloed. If we ask anything of the Regional Development Committee, it is to encourage all the Departments with public transport buses to work out how they can work better together to deliver a better quality of service for rural areas using the scarce resources that we have.

If we are serious about getting people out of cars, we have to get serious about fares. It is only by using public transport that you get to know how costly it is. For me to get to Cookstown five days a week using a SmartPass card will cost £24, whereas I can buy £15 worth of diesel for my trusty Toyota 1.9 to do me the week. A day return fare from Dungannon to Belfast costs me £15. For the whole week, it costs £65. For a lot of people in rural communities who really want to try to use public transport, the cost puts them off.

The other thing about transport is the timing. Many people here find that rural public transport might be all right for the early morning, but after 6.00 pm it is virtually non-existent. Caroline also made that point. For young people, or even for adults to access adult education classes in their nearest town, there is no choice but to use cars. Can we have joined-up thinking using the resources out there? We must use education, public health or public transport buses in a way that might join up transport provision.

At the other end of the scale are older people. It is really important for rural communities that we try to put in place measures now for older people that will prevent us from having to come up with a very expensive cure later on. In 2025, some 30% of rural communities will be over 60 years of age. At over 60, you may have a car, so you will have a fair bit of independence. When you get to 70, that car may be taken off you or you may not be able to drive and suddenly your independence is gone in a stroke. That independence is very important to people. If we continue to centralise services in towns, older people will have to access those services by other means. Access by bus cannot happen. People will have to use cars, taxis or get a friend to bring them.

Perhaps the Regional Development Committee can ask the Health Department to organise services or appointments for people coming from one area at the same time. In that way, maybe a community can get together to hire a community transport bus or whatever to bring those people, as a community, to the service and back again. What we have heard is that people roll up to Belfast City Hospital at 9.30 am to find that their next-door neighbour, or someone who lives 400 or 500 yards down the road, has an appointment at 9.15 am. It goes on and on.

If we want to take people out of cars, have sustainable transport and contribute to the Executive's vision of a strong and vibrant rural community, it is important that the public transport that we have is better used. The people, as experts in living in rural communities, should help those who design the transport solutions. Ask people in rural communities what is relevant to them, and they will tell you. If you develop a transport system that is relevant to rural people, you will get them out of their cars, get accessible transport and reduce greenhouse emissions.

**Mr Malachy Campbell (World Wildlife Fund):**

I thank the Committee for the invitation; it is good that it has initiated this meeting. Listening to the Chairperson, it seems that the Committee understands many of the issues that are pertinent to

the question.

Our submission made points about the general sustainability of transport, including the economic, environmental and social aspects. I will not touch on those today, not least because previous speakers spoke well and got the points across. I think that David McDonald made good points about accessibility, which demonstrated how difficult that issue is to tackle. I do not envy the Chairperson in his task of making recommendations. However, David spoke well in getting us to think about transport generally.

At the strategic level, Northern Ireland imports about 99% of its energy, which is a precarious, unsustainable position. Globally, 95% of the energy for transport comes from hydrocarbons. So, we are in a difficult position in both Northern Ireland and global scales. I could go into the emissions scenarios, which in Northern Ireland is considerably worse than other parts of the UK. However, because I want to be brief, I will focus on issues primarily relating to economics and peak oil. I will also focus on some of the drivers for change.

During the previous session, the Chairperson mentioned EU legislation. The 2008 EU renewable energy package set targets for the percentage of energy that member states had to generate from renewables. For the UK it is 15%, and because it is energy, that means electricity, heating and transport. As a result, it is predicted that we will have about 40% of electricity generated from renewable sources, as well as 10% to 15% of heating and 10% of transport. So, we will have to make transport more sustainable and renewable whether we like it or not.

The issue of peak oil also arises. At the moment, oil is more than \$100 a barrel, and the variation in oil price is also a real consideration. Between 2000 and 2007 an economist at the University of Surrey found that the increase in oil prices cost between €400 million and €700 million extra. That would meet all our targets in the EU package. Therefore, the economics for change are strong. Overall, we have to start moving towards a low carbon economy. That was mentioned briefly in the previous discussion on networks and gateways. We have to make our transport system more sustainable, and there are drivers and factors that will compel us to so. However, it is the right thing to do in the current economic and political circumstances.

Every Department's budget is being squeezed. However, with respect to the DRD's money, previously there was an 80:20 split on roads, and that pattern is continuing. The World Wildlife

Fund and others believe that there should be at least a 50:50 split. Ideally, spend should be predominantly on public transport and sustainable means, with about 20% on roads. We would like to see a 50:50 split in the next budget. Transport needs to be made more sustainable, and the move to a low carbon economy is essential.

**Mr Kevin Doherty (Disability Action):**

This is the second time that we have been here. We find it very interesting to hear what others have to say. I reiterate David's comments, and it is important that the Committee takes all of them on board.

Our organisation has delivered transport services for a number of years and has worked very closely with the DRD. We have commented before, but in my view, to move forward, financial measures need to be developed and linked with the social return on investment in providing transport services for people with disabilities rather than just the financial and cost aspect of the whole thing.

**The Chairperson:**

The Committee also believes that a silo mentality is operating. From the outside, looking in, one can see that it is quite simple: joined-up government should mean exactly that. However, I assure you that it is not as simple as it seems. A lot of people here are very defensive of their Departments. It becomes very frustrating when one knows perfectly well that problems can be solved by working together and co-operating, but that does not seem to be the mindset of some individuals here.

We had a very successful night with Youth Action when we discussed young people and public transport in rural areas. The Committee thought that it was a very successful night.

The simple message is that there is a clear relationship between public transport, fares, and accessibility to trains and buses. When we look at the outcomes of the Budget, it is a complete reversal of that: there will be higher fares, less service and more isolation. That is frustrating for us all. The Committee has a particular interest in rural transport and social exclusion among people in rural areas. We have always tried, as far as possible, to advance that matter, and we are happy to do so.

Accessibility to transport is another big issue for the Committee. The Committee believes that every person who lives here should have access to transport. We have listened to the financial arguments, but they really do not hold up. It is not always a matter of finance; it is a matter of communities working together and making sure that there is equality in the community, whether it is in urban or rural transport. It does not really matter. Modern city public transport systems use audio-visual technology. We are making slow progress towards that, but at least it is on the agenda. We are always trying to champion that.

We are also championing integrated ticketing systems. The word “promise” is probably the wrong word to use, but the Department has told us that it will make sure that the integrated ticketing system is accessible to people with disabilities, particularly those who are blind. So, we are trying, as far as possible, to do as much as possible but sometimes it gets extremely difficult and frustrating, and I am sure that it is more frustrating for you than for us.

**Mr Boylan:**

Apologies for being late: my Toyota Avensis 1.9 diesel did not want to start this morning.

**Mr F McCann:**

That is his code for sleeping late.

**Mr Boylan:**

If I had relied on public transport, I would not be here until 8.00 pm tonight.

I have championed rural issues as best I could during my time on the Committee. The Chairperson spoke about the silo mentality. I think that the roles and responsibilities of each Department need to be examined. They will say that they have a duty to provide certain facilities, and the DRD, Health and Education Departments will each have an element of that. It is easy to talk about working in partnership but Departments can hide behind their roles and responsibilities. The key to any change is to address that first. That is the starting point.

The Committee can try to help, but only from the DRD point of view. However, in time, hopefully in the next mandate, we will look at that. That is key to solving part of the rural problem. We have a total reliance on cars and no quick fix. I appreciate people coming today to give their views, and you are correct in what you say. The people who deal with these issues



daily will provide the greatest input, and through them we will make the change.

Malachy spoke about a 50:50 funding split. In an ideal situation, it would be fine to change that; but we have to be realistic. At the moment, 80% of the infrastructure is rural. That is the make-up of the North and we need to address that. I do not want to make this a rural/urban issue but we can certainly make changes in urban areas. That is quicker to do. You spoke about stops a mile down the road: I think that there is also a role for local government in that matter.

**Mr G Robinson:**

I welcome you all; it has been enlightening. I am always spellbound by David and how positive he is even though he tries to use public transport as much as he can. I listened carefully about the rural transport situation. I represent rural people more so maybe than urban people. I spoke to Translink a couple of years ago about getting services after 6.00 pm to rural areas. There was a three-month trial and I think that the service was very poorly used, with three or four passengers the odd night. Translink was out of pocket because people just did not use the service.

That brings us to the situation where so many people have a car. However, the cost of fuel going up all the time will, in itself, probably bring more people back to public transport. So, when the Committee and Assembly hear of such things, we must keep a close watch and do all that we possibly can to help that situation.

We were under direct rule up until four years ago. Have you found any difference now that we have our own Assembly, and Ministers who you and we can tap into? Is our local Administration working?

**Mr McDonald:**

Very definitely, yes. On occasions, we had access to Ministers under direct rule, but not to the same extent of talking to local politicians who understand the situation much more clearly. We have been well-received and heard by this Committee and other Committees, and that has made a difference. Without the current situation, we would not have gotten as far as we have. We have got far: we have made a massive stride. Investment in public transport and the buses and money for Door-2-Door happened because we have a local Administration. I very much welcome it.

**Ms Redpath:**

Having a local Administration has been very positive, and it is important for young people to engage with the Committee. We are still in the early days of having our own Government making decisions. However, if we are trying to develop a healthy democracy, it is especially important to engage young people in political discourse. That is brilliant. The young people get to know you. We also have an opportunity to do things in different ways, to be creative and encourage other young people to get involved, especially if we want to get young people to register to vote, which I am sure you all think is important. Engaging more with young people and learning about their needs is important for a healthy democracy.

**Mr F McCann:**

It is important that there is a local Administration here that people can and should be able to tap into, whether Ministers or people such as ourselves who sit in the Assembly. If we cannot do at least that then we have failed in our task in providing for people. We should always be accessible to the people who put us here.

The Chairperson mentioned silos. Yes, there are silos between many Departments. For me, and certainly for a lot of others, it has been a daily battle, like pulling teeth or trying to fight a system that has been there forever. We have had the first four years, which is only a short time. The learning is ahead of us, and there is a learning curve for you and for us. Unlike Cathal, I never take the electorate for granted. If we are lucky enough to be re-elected, then we hope that the last four years' experience will help us to deal with the issues. Cathal and many others on the Committee are constant champions of rural issues, sometimes much to the annoyance of the Chairperson and me, who are urbanites. However, I have to keep reminding him that 35% of west Belfast is rural.

Questions posed by young people when they were last here included how people tied in directly with us and with those who provide the transport system, and whether they were being listened to. I am lucky to live in a city. However, it is only when one is on a Committee such as this that one discovers the major hurdles and difficulties for people with disabilities and those who live in rural areas. We need to focus our minds and attention on that.

You were asked whether you think things are better since the Assembly came into being. Has the interaction between statutory authorities got any better? That is one other way in which we

need to use our influence to ensure that the people who have experienced those difficulties — the people in this room — are being listened to. The guy from Sustrans talked about the A5, but the A8 was not mentioned. Representatives from the Federation of Small Businesses said earlier that the A5 would open things up but was taking too long to build.

**Ms Kellie Armstrong (Community Transport Association):**

This is all very positive, and I do not mean to be negative, but one thing that has blatantly not worked is the fact that the public transport reform —

**Mr F McCann:**

Do not say the Assembly.

**Ms K Armstrong:**

Local transportation plans were built into public transport reform. That would have fed directly into planning and would have stated exactly what local people were missing. If there had been an opportunity to integrate that more with Translink and build on the existing network, that would have been perfect, but there is absolutely no support or funding for it. Councils will not have any powers to do anything about it. I see a difference with what is happening across the water, because the personalisation and localism agenda is working to make sure that people who have access needs, who are older or who are rural dwellers are being catered for. We are missing a trick here, and it would be great if the next Committee thought hard about that.

Is it because we are having to fight so hard with the limited resources that we have, that we have to pass the buck and say that, as the health sector is saying, we do not have a statutory responsibility to deliver non-emergency passenger transport? The Department of Education can say that transport for the special education needs sector is not on its radar and that it will not provide it. Is there an opportunity for the Department for Regional Development to say in the future that its statutory responsibility is the mainstream public transport network services and that everything else is secondary?

**The Chairperson:**

Much of what we have been talking about goes back to the debate about silos. I am not saying that there is an abundance of resources; there are resources that are underused and could address some of the issues that you have talked about. The education service has a fleet that it uses until

3.30 pm in the day and then the vehicles sit in a garage until 7.00 am or 8.00 am the next day.

We think that local councils are central to addressing the issue of rural transport. Many of us here are former councillors, and we know that councils want to be involved in anything that directly affects ratepayers and that they would be keen to work with the DRD. We have raised those issues, and we keep pressing. We are not the Department, we are just a Committee. We press continuously on a lot of issues, and rural transport is a particular issue for us, not only because it affects young people but because of the social exclusion of older people. We believe that although there may not be a total solution, there are additional resources that can be obtained without any extra cost.

**Mr F McCann:**

One of the important issues is that we lost the opportunity to implement the RPA. That would have had an impact on the delivery of a lot of services.

**Mr Patterson:**

I will make one quick point, Chairperson. Mr Robinson asked about how things have been different under devolution. The availability of Ministers has been very positive, as has the availability of the Committee. I genuinely appreciate the work that the Committee has done on transport.

I will pick up on the last two points. Northern Ireland, compared with the Republic or GB, is different in that local councils do not have the transport brief. That is a very important issue, because, as members who have been councillors know, councillors do not have the responsibility for making difficult decisions about what happens for example in west Belfast or County Tyrone or wherever. In future, it will be important for the Committee, as a regional Committee alongside a regional Department, to look at regional infrastructure, such as big roads, railways, buses and other inter-urban matters.

However, there is also a need to recognise how the Department and Committee engage with local councils on the 63% of journeys that are under five miles. It is a weakness that, structurally, responsibility for transport never lay with local councils. It would be good to explore that issue interdepartmentally and with regard to involving councils. If the health development unit in Belfast, which is bringing the health trusts and city council together, could also bring in transport,

that is starting to get a local partnership in the urban and rural areas.

**Mr Tom McClelland (Sustrans):**

I echo what Steven Patterson said about the work of the Committee. It has been enlightening how open-minded the Committee has been, and the hard work that it has put into improving and being constructively critical of the Department is good.

One big issue was overlooked, and it is more a philosophical point in that there has been a big drift from urban areas into the countryside over the past 20 to 25 years. It is a question of taking a long-term view of spatial development and reducing the need to travel, which is a huge issue.

Michael Hughes mentioned the problems faced by older people in rural communities, especially those over 60 years old. As an over-60-year-old cyclist, I can assure him that travelling by bicycle when you are over 60 is good for your health. You can increase your public transport catchment area and do not create social injustice for Fra McCann's constituents by emitting CO2 down the Westlink.

Finally, to encourage sustainable transport we much reduce road danger. Some responsibility for that lies with another Department but the Committee should bear that issue in mind. That ties in with social justice in that there is a socio-economic gradient that deprived children have a far greater killed-or-seriously-injured rate than the children of wealthy parents.

**Mr B Armstrong:**

Today has been an eye-opener for a lot of us. Years ago, there was cheap transport and fuel, and everyone wanted to drive a car. However, almost every student from a rural area goes to school on a bus, and, after they go home buses are non-existent. Maybe the way forward is for school buses to be run by a kind of transport authority: they take children to and from school and then continue running as a bus service. Children go to school on buses, but when they reach 16 or 17 they are all looking their own wee private cars. If the bus service was still available, however, there might not be the same view about looking for a car. It is a question of independence. The school bus service finishes at 3.00 pm or 4.00 pm instead of continuing. As for the bicycle: it is a good idea, but a dangerous thing to do on rural roads. You could get killed.

**Mr Stephen Wood (Stephen Wood Consultancy):**

I speak on behalf of my consultancy and for Professor Austin Smyth, the voice of transport planning professionals. I want to make two points. The first is about linking accessible transport with sustainability. Good, accessible transport is good public transport and vice versa.

There is a strong network effect; if you chip away at one part of it, the whole thing can come tumbling down.

Secondly, as we decide on how we are going to deal with the challenge of sustainability, and maybe I am stating the obvious, we have to devise a greenhouse gas target. That target has to be devised with full knowledge of where people work and live in Northern Ireland. Once we have that target, we have to get behind it in planning and delivering a new transport system.

**Mr Hughes:**

I want to answer Fra's question about the relationship with statutory agencies. For most community and voluntary sector agencies, the relationship with statutory agencies probably remains the same; adversarial and risk-averse. We should be trying to take calculated risks to move things on. For a lot of community and voluntary sector groups, the relationship with statutory agencies is still not what it should be. The reason is that, at Executive level, there are clear guidelines about how things can be done. However, those messages get lost as they are transferred to the ground through delivery agents. So, there is a lot of work to do in that area.

I will not get into some of the comments that there have been about rural roads —

**The Chairperson:**

Please do not.

**Mr Hughes:**

— nor will I talk about people moving from rural areas and PPS 21 determining what type of people live in rural areas rather than what type of houses are wrong for those areas.

One key thing that the Department for Regional Development can do is try to deliver on the Bain report on the relocation of public sector jobs. We have a major site 17 miles from Belfast called the Maze. A statement of government and of a new Northern Ireland would have been to

relocate public sector jobs to the Maze and implement a sustainable transport solution by using the rail, road and canal networks to demonstrate to the people of Northern Ireland that we have a new beginning. Could we have a commitment to the Bain report on the relocation of public sector jobs?

**Mr F McCann:**

I want to make one wee comment on the Bain report. I know that people are in a rush to move public sector jobs out of Belfast, but most public sector jobs are in the greater Belfast area. Most of the most socially deprived areas in the North are in west and north Belfast, which have little or no public sector jobs. So, there needs to be an equal spread.

**Mr Hughes:**

Absolutely.

**Mr McClelland:**

I know that I have 30 seconds to speak. I just want to correct Mr Armstrong's impression of road danger. First, he makes a good point that there should be road-danger reduction. Secondly, statistically, cycling is no more dangerous than walking.

**Mr Lorimer:**

I want to come back to rural transport issues. There is always a danger that we are oversimplifying arguments. I live in a rural area, about a mile from the local bus stop. I came here by public transport this morning. People do not know what is out there and what opportunities there are for them to travel in rural areas. The opportunities depend on the rural area that you live in: I fully appreciate that Cookstown is much more difficult place to get to than Mourne, which is where I live. That reinforces the need for much more localised transport planning.

**The Chairperson:**

On behalf of the Committee, I want to say how grateful we are that you all came this morning at short notice. The discussion has been interesting for us; I hope that it has been for you. It is important to the work of the Committee that issues are identified by stakeholders rather than politicians. You have more experience of this stuff than we do. You will all get a copy of the Hansard report of the meeting, which will also be published on the Assembly website. Thank you

very much for your time.