



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE FOR  
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
(Hansard)

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**Public Transport Reform**

16 September 2009

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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## COMMITTEE FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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### Public Transport Reform

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16 September 2009

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

Mr Fred Cobain (Chairperson)  
Miss Michelle McIlveen (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Cathal Boylan  
Mr Allan Bresland  
Mr Willie Clarke  
Mr Tommy Gallagher  
Mr Danny Kinahan  
Mr Raymond McCartney  
Mr Ian McCrea  
Mr George Robinson  
Mr Brian Wilson

**Witnesses:**

Mr David Brown	)	
Ms Catherine Mason	)	Translink
Mr Ciaran Rogan	)	
Ms Karen Magill	)	Federation of Passenger Transport
Ms Norma Smyth	)	
Ms Antoinette McKeown	)	Consumer Council for Northern Ireland
Mr Ryan Simpson	)	

**The Chairperson:**

We will now receive a briefing from Translink. I welcome Catherine Mason, David Brown and Ciaran Rogan. Thank you very much.

**Ms Catherine Mason (Translink):**

Thank you for inviting us. We have made a submission to the Committee, but we will also use some visual aids to give an essence of what was in that paper. One important aspect of public transport reform is meeting the arrangements for EU 1370, because there has been a change in the EU regulations, so doing nothing is not a possibility. A direct award contract needs to be awarded to the in-house public transport operator, if there is to be one. The alternative proposal, which the Department for Regional Development (DRD) is keener on, is a more widespread re-organisation and the introduction of a middle tier.

I will first consider the alignment of the progress made so far with the objectives and the extent to which the objectives are a continuation of what has already been achieved. Some members are relatively new to the Committee, and they may not have the full details. I believe that Doreen Brown gave a briefing last week concentrating on four areas, so I will try to keep to those. She spoke first about the integration of transport modes. There is clearly very good integration between bus and rail transport, not only of services, but also of information. We have a leading-edge information system, and a new bus and rail smart card will be launched on 5 October. There is also a lot of integration with car travel, for example through park-and-ride facilities.

The second area that Doreen spoke about was availability. Over the last decade there has been a huge increase in the fleet and number of services, as well as passenger numbers. There is a lot of wider availability already. In relation to affordability, I felt compelled to pull out an extract from DRD's document, which states that fares in Northern Ireland are actually quite favourable when compared to those in similar environments. We agree that we like to provide value where we can, and we want to continue to do so.

In relation to higher-quality services, I draw attention to the fact that Translink was named the UK 'Rail Business of the Year' for all aspects of rail services — an award that is judged by peer groups across the whole UK. Translink's customer satisfaction numbers are good. In fact, they are at an all-time high and getting higher. Passenger numbers have been growing substantially. Funding levels are relatively lower and, on a public service obligation (PSO) subsidy per rail-going passenger, lower still. Therefore, Translink can clearly agree with the public transport reform objectives, and a huge amount of progress has already been made against them through the delivery of a growing number of high-quality services that are good value to the taxpayer, as

illustrated in our submission.

We have provided members with a handout, which contains a graph from a PWC document that illustrates funding levels in UK regions and shows that public transport funding in Northern Ireland is substantially lower than that in any part of GB. The first graph on page 3 of the handout shows the level of passenger growth in bus and rail, which is heartening. The second graph on page 3 shows passenger numbers per 1,000 heads of population. Northern Ireland is almost exactly the same as Wales, but is clearly behind in urban areas because our comparator is not specifically with urban areas. However, we perform better than the south-east, the south-west and the east of England, which are not that dissimilar from Northern Ireland and are in line with Wales.

The next page deals with customer satisfaction, which for Translink, as members can see, is running at an all-time high. Punctuality — a very important part of service delivery for many customers — is the subject of the next figure. It shows that our achievements are well ahead of targets and are very strong. Separately, on page 5 of the handout, there is a graph that shows that the PSO subsidy per rail passenger has been falling substantially. That is due to a combination of a reduction in funding for the railway and an increased number of passengers.

Translink will work with DRD in developing the middle tier. It is vital that public transport funding makes its way to front line services rather than being caught up in any increasing level of bureaucracy. The documents received by the Committee thus far on the public transport reform process show a £5 million saving over five years, but a cost of £907,000 a year, which is a net annual saving of about £173,000. To put that in perspective and relate it to wider public transport availability, the present savings could probably fund a couple of buses.

Funding of core public transport has been declining over the past five years. Buses are down 5.8% and rail 2.7%. However, Translink has made savings; it has increased efficiency year-on-year and significantly increased public transport. As I said, fares compare favourably with those in GB. On school transport provision, the index of cost per pupil for Translink is 80 compared with the education and library boards at 107, and that is another example of the value that Translink can deliver.

In conclusion, there is a clear requirement for change. However, compliance with EU 1370

can be achieved by means of a direct award contract. We all wish to avoid money being diverted from front line services. I remind members that Translink is a public corporation; it is not a private-sector business. It is configured as a public corporation under the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, which means that it does not have shareholders. The money stays in the public system; it does not go anywhere else.

**Mr Gallagher:**

Thank you for your presentation, part of which struck me because of my own perspective. You were talking about wider availability and accessibility of public transport and about how Northern Ireland has a much wider spread compared with equivalent areas in GB or the Republic of Ireland. My local bus service is largely run by Bus Éireann, even though I live in Northern Ireland, in north-west Fermanagh. Were it not for the coverage from Bus Éireann, the part of Fermanagh that I live in would be very poorly served. There is co-operation between Translink and Bus Éireann, which is a good thing and possibly works both ways.

In the presentation, you set out the figures for comparison over the next five years and explained how the outline business case and Translink regard them. There is not really much difference over the five-year period — it comes down to a couple of buses. Will you reassure us that your figures are solid and reliable?

You mentioned increased bureaucracy. If I am reading your submission rightly, you think that the new agency will bring increased bureaucracy. Will you tell us more about your concerns?

**Ms Mason:**

The figures in our submission are taken from the Department's outline business case. Therefore, with regard to the validity of those figures, they are from the Department. Those figures show that Translink could save £7 million over five years and £12.4 million if an agency was created. The incremental £5.4 million of savings are all made in Ulsterbus, and the £907,000 of incremental costs will all go to the agency. Consequently, on the basis that a huge amount of Ulsterbus costs are people and service delivery, you are looking at a situation in which the savings are being made in one place and the cost is coming from another. That is the way the figures are put together.

**Mr Gallagher:**

What about your concerns about bureaucracy?

**Ms Mason:**

My concern is always to ensure that frontline services receive as much money as there is available and that there is as much streamlining as possible in the process to deliver that.

**Mr Gallagher:**

Will you elaborate on the way in which the agency might contribute to increased bureaucracy?

**Ms Mason:**

If the agency has an increased number of people who are not delivering front-line services and the savings that are delivered as part of the process come from Ulsterbus, which is delivering front-line services, there is a risk that, although there is very little between the cost and benefit, the place where the cost comes from will be different from the place where the benefit is felt.

**The Chairperson:**

There are a number of new members on the Committee. Will you briefly explain why the Department decided to establish an agency?

**Ms Mason:**

I would not feel comfortable speaking on behalf of the Department.

**The Chairperson:**

Will you speak on behalf of Translink?

**Ms Mason:**

As members will know, last year we suggested that there were scenarios in which an agency was not required. The Department drew up an outline business case, which suggested that there were costs and savings to be made. The balance of that is that an incremental cost will go into an agency and incremental savings that are believed to be possible will come out of —

**The Chairperson:**

I know that. What explanation did the Department give Translink for supporting the idea of an

agency?

**Ms Mason:**

The Department says that it conducted the outline business case and that the numbers show that there is a net benefit from establishing an agency. I do not feel comfortable putting words into the Department's mouth.

**The Chairperson:**

I am not asking you to do that. I am asking you to explain. Obviously, you have had meetings with DRD about this issue.

**Ms Mason:**

Yes.

**The Chairperson:**

I am asking you to transmit for the members the Department's thrust in its dealing with you on the matter. I am not asking you to speak on behalf of the Department.

**Ms Mason:**

I do not think that I can clarify —

**The Chairperson:**

What did DRD say to you about the structure of the agency?

**Ms Mason:**

It said that the outline business case said that the agency structure continued to be the best route, because there were more savings with it than with the two-tier option.

**The Chairperson:**

The agency would produce savings?

**Ms Mason:**

Those are the savings that I speak of: the £5 million over five years at a cost of £907,000 with a net effect of £173,000 per annum.

**Mr Boylan:**

Thank you for your presentation. I note that these are DRD figures, and I have concerns about that. When DRD made a presentation to the Committee last week, we talked with Doreen Brown about the quality of the data, and she expressed concerns about that herself. All of that information is crucial.

In the light of that, the figures in your handout refer to Scotland. Is it the case that more money is pumped into transport and, ultimately, more people use public transport in Scotland, or can we use any part of that model here, especially in relation to the gap between the provision of transport in urban and rural areas?

**Ms Mason:**

Scotland is probably not such a good comparator to Northern Ireland because it has a couple of very big urban centres, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Wales is a UK region that is a better comparator. Scotland has very substantially increased its spending per capita on transport and that has proved successful. To be fair, DRD has put money into public transport during the last decade, and we have seen some stunning improvements in the delivery of public transport in Northern Ireland.

In the graph that shows the funding of public transport in Northern Ireland versus GB, the yellow line representing Northern Ireland is quite separate from other regions of the UK. The funding for Wales is substantially higher. The passenger numbers graph with the blue lines also comes from DRD's document; those are numbers from government statistics. We provide passenger numbers equivalent to those in Wales, but we use a lot less funding than is available to provide public transport there.

**Mr Boylan:**

Chair, I will find out in a couple of weeks' time whether public transport is any good. We are taking up the challenge to take public transport to work, so we will see what it is like to travel from rural areas.

**Mr Ciaran Rogan (Translink):**

The comments about the uncertainty around the figures did not relate to those on funding and

passenger numbers. The researchers referred last week to figures about the benefits that would derive from the establishment of the agency.

**The Chairperson:**

Ciaran, public transport here has been the poor relation as far as public expenditure is concerned for so long that, even with small amounts of investment, there will be dramatic increases in the number of people who use it. The key will be sustaining the number of passengers who are willing to use public transport. Starting from a low base, it is quite easy to pick up momentum from investment in trains and buses; but can that be sustained over time? That will be the key point for the Committee.

**Ms Mason:**

At the moment, we continue to see growth in areas despite the fact that we are in recession. I have no hesitation in thinking that that will continue when we move out of recession. Inevitably, if there are fewer people in work, there will be fewer commuting and shopping journeys.

The whole process of public transport reform does not put more money in. As I said, the net effect is £173,000, which equates to a couple of extra buses in service. However, the money that has gone in, which is less than that in GB, has delivered some stunning results, as can be seen. As Ciaran said, that is not where the uncertainty lies. The numbers that are a little less certain are those to do with whether £5 million of savings can be made, and the outline business case is explicit that it is not clear how those savings would be made.

**Miss McIlveen:**

We should not underestimate the concerns expressed in the report compiled by the Assembly Research and Library Services about the reliability and robustness of the data that formed the basis of the outline business case. Does the difficulty with data originate with the manner in which questions were formatted by those seeking information? What was the concern? Essentially that report makes Translink look particularly bad. Is there a rationale behind why things have gone so wrong?

**Ms Mason:**

Thank you for giving us an opportunity to answer that one. Translink is a very integrated transport organisation. That is why it runs as efficiently as it does, and why half the funding that

is available in Wales delivers as many passengers as in Wales. It is a lean, mean and integrated organisation, and that means that the numbers are put together in a certain way. Like all such things, if one asks a different question of the data, the data is not configured to answer that question. We did not know what kind of questions would be put to Translink as part of the outline business case.

Benchmarking is a very difficult thing to do. The benchmarking that underpins the outline business case compared Metro with other operations in urban centres in GB. That was a fairly straightforward benchmarking exercise, which found that Metro operates very efficiently. NIR was benchmarked against Irish Rail, and that was done reasonably easily. NIR is seen to be working in a similar way to Irish Rail. However, because it is completely unique, it is much more difficult to benchmark Ulsterbus, as there is no equivalent service in GB. The benchmarking exercise was carried out against private companies in GB.

First, Ulsterbus is much bigger than any of the individual private companies in GB for which the Department could obtain accounts and make comparisons. Secondly, no private-sector company in GB does the amount of work with schools that is done by Ulsterbus. We suggested that the amount of schools work done by Ulsterbus should be normalised. Ulsterbus carries 65,000 pupils to and from school each day. No company in GB does that. That is where the difficulty has been. However, to refer back to your concerns about the numbers, that is also where all of the savings are perceived to be.

The benchmarking exercise found that there were two well-run companies, Metro and NIR, and, because it is an integrated organisation, the same people run Ulsterbus, but, because direct comparisons cannot be made, it is difficult to see whether Ulsterbus is well run. However, I contend that there is a lot of efficiency in Ulsterbus as well; it is just that it is difficult to benchmark against GB companies.

**Mr W Clarke:**

Do you envisage any difficulties in relation to the sharing of facilities and infrastructure with other providers?

**Ms Mason:**

If the process is properly managed, there should be no issue with that. It is obviously one of the

outcomes of public-transport reform. If there is a contract with Translink for service provision, and if those who would share the facilities are able to work within the rules and regulations of bus-station management, then there should be a way to deliver that.

**Mr David Brown (Translink):**

Safety will obviously be paramount. It is fine to share, but people have to work to a very high safety standard.

**Mr W Clarke:**

It is about integration with other providers and services.

**Mr Rogan:**

There are private operators in our stations already.

**Mr D Brown:**

That exists currently.

**Mr W Clarke:**

Will that extend with the reform?

**Mr Rogan:**

That is the proposal.

**Mr W Clarke:**

Might it cause difficulty? That is what I am trying to get at.

**Ms Mason:**

In principle there is no difficulty, but in practice each individual location will need to be considered.

**Mr G Robinson:**

My question has been answered.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much.

**The Chairperson:**

I welcome Karen Magill and Norma Smyth from the Federation of Passenger Transport. Good afternoon.

**Ms Karen Magill (Federation of Passenger Transport):**

As there are new members on the Committee, it is probably a good idea to go back to where the process started. I think that I am justified in saying that I am the only original member of the stakeholder forum, which has been running for some time. The Federation of Passenger Transport represents public transport and the private-sector operators. It originally represented only the private sector; it now represents both. Our organisation has been part of the whole process, and I am the only person who remains from the beginning.

We based the process of considering the public transport reform document and the outline business case on a broad set of principles. Like the Committee, we received those documents at the end of June 2009. Following that, some of our executive committee, of which Norma Smyth is a member, and I reviewed those documents.

As we have said previously, we favoured the agency option for no other reason than we believed that it made the most sense. That option is simpler than it is being made out to be. Our understanding is that the agency option would involve the people who are currently involved in transport. A licensing department licenses services, and the Department for Regional Development funds them. When we first started in the industry, those bodies did not communicate. There is no real collective integration or co-ordinated thinking on how school transport, community transport and other peripheral services are delivered.

We believed that the agency option would deliver that integration, because it proposes to take the people who are currently involved in all of those areas and put them into an agency. We understand the agency option to involve the same people and the same salaries under a different structure, and, therefore, we believed that it was the most sensible when we considered what it would deliver.

We had a few concerns with the outline business case and the proposals. Those concerns came down to whether the chosen option would deliver what we had based everything on, which were the principles of sharing and moving forward. We addressed our concerns to the Department for Regional Development, and we have received clarification on those.

We were concerned about whether the new language that was introduced by the consultants meant exactly what we thought as regards the design of the network and the delivery of the services. We were also concerned about the equality of access to bus stations, the perception of the private operators and the awarding of contracts. All those concerns led us to be fearful of a move away from what we thought was the best option for us all to move forward together with public transport.

**Mr Boylan:**

The data was mentioned. The main issue should be the provision of service and value for money. That is important, especially in rural areas, to address all of the issues and tackle the issue of getting cars off the roads. You said that combining the agencies is a good way forward. It seems to make sense. How do you envisage the business case improving connectivity and filling the gap between urban areas and rural areas? We have that problem.

**Ms K Magill:**

We do have that problem, but we do not need to have it. A middle-tier agency that looks at Northern Ireland should set out the network of services that it provides and outline the areas that do not have a service. Primarily, it should ask how it can deliver a service to those areas and talk to those local communities and councils. That will mean that there is local involvement with the people at the coalface who need it.

Services should be delivered through the network of operators: we have Translink and a private-sector operator, so we have enough vehicles. However, we need to look at how we can best manage our resources by redesigning the network so that we can build up a new network of services that delivers more flexibility, more choice for the passenger and many more services. For example, we all live or have relatives who live in rural areas. There are enough small operators that know their local communities and that could look at delivering services that Translink, as the big transport provider, should probably not be delivering, so that it can

concentrate on the main arterial routes.

Smaller operators should feed into the main services that Translink currently provide and allow them to develop. Let the smaller operators that know their communities do the early morning and evening connections, and they can look at what they can do for the community during the day and at how they work with the community transport providers.

The same applies to school bus routes. Are we hindering Translink by forcing it to transport schoolchildren every day and making it fit that responsibility in with its other services? Maybe, the system should be designed slightly differently so that school services and mainstream services are separate. All schoolchildren in Northern Ireland, bar those with special needs, should be able to get on a bus to go to school. The two-or three-mile element does not make sense; why does every child not have the facility to take the bus to school for a small charge?

The buses are carrying more children and building their network. Let Translink concentrate on doing that efficiently, and let the small private operators come in where they are required. There are enough decent operators who will do that. That is how we should look at the system.

We felt that the middle-tier agency was all-inclusive, because it was bringing together all the transport needs. All the people involved need to look at the situation and say how they make best use of the resources in the public and private sectors.

It does not matter what happens in transport in Northern Ireland, because the only people who ever get hauled over the coals or told off are from Translink — poor Ciaran is always on the radio, trying to defend Translink. The bottom line is that our system is not perfect, but we are trying to perfect it. We have the wherewithal to do that as long as we have the will to do so. We all have to share the blame, which is why we have to work together and why local input from everybody — not just from the funders and the providers — is important. Input from local councils and local communities is very important.

**Mr Boylan:**

Excuse my manners; I forgot to thank you for your presentation. I honestly thought that the Scottish transport model would be similar to ours, but it is obviously not. Has our model been tried elsewhere or is it new?

**Ms K Magill:**

We have been looking at the situation for some time; we have had our trips and have looked at how models of transport work in different areas. However, as Catherine Mason said, not every country has a transport system that does the amount of school work that is done in Northern Ireland. We cannot make another model fit our requirements — we have to make a model for Northern Ireland that fits what we want our public-transport network to do. That is why we need to adopt a different approach.

**Miss McIlveen:**

Thank you for your presentation. You raised a number of concerns. What correspondence have you had with DRD? Have you received any clarification from DRD on those concerns? You also mentioned in your presentation that you held a stakeholder forum on 8 September. Will you elaborate on the outcomes from that?

**Ms K Magill:**

We received some clarification from DRD. In our organisation, I am part of the stakeholder forum. I can give my comments to DRD and the Committee. However, because I am so closely involved, in order to make sure that we are doing our job properly, we give the comments back to a selective group on our committee to ensure that we are doing the right thing and that I have not missed something. That group now has the comments from the forum, and we are due to get them back by Friday of this week.

I can see where the issue of language — the differences in terminology — has raised concerns. I have been reassured that we have not really moved too far away. We had some concerns about a few of the functions. However, we now have the policy, and we will not be able to answer some of those concerns until we get down to the detail and the logistics of how the processes will work. I was trying to get to that point by reading only part of it. I have been reassured. I can come back to you with any comments from our committee, but I really do not foresee any major issues at this point.

**Miss McIlveen:**

It would be very helpful if you were to pass on any clarification you receive about your concerns because that is something that we will be looking at too.

**Ms K Magill:**

We can do that for you.

We had a stakeholder forum meeting on 8 September. The stakeholder forum meets every month. Since we received the reform proposals, we have been meeting to update each other and to see where we are, where we have been and what the next steps are. Last week's meeting was another step in that process. The DRD representatives advised us that they were coming to see this Committee the next day and that we would all be giving evidence the following week. It was all quite straightforward.

**Mr McCartney:**

I am sorry that I missed the beginning of your presentation. One of your areas of concern is access to bus stations and other facilities. Can you tell us what you mean by that?

**Ms K Magill:**

To date, there has been a problem with the private-sector operators getting access to the local bus stations and passenger facilities. One reason for that is that there are not enough facilities in Northern Ireland for all providers to access. The other issue is that, as Translink runs the mainstream public services, it is given priority access because that is, historically, the way it has been.

We knew that there was going to be a new process, but the document was worded in such a way that we were not sure what it was going to be. We did not know how the new middle tier was going to handle that. At this point, we are still not sure. We have been reassured that it will be linked to the contracts that are awarded. If contracts for the new network are awarded to Translink and four other operators, all those operators will have to have facilities in the areas in which they operate. They will have to be able to get into the stations and so on. Therefore, we have been reassured that new middle tier will have the proper, adequate system and process and that it will ensure equality and compliance for all operators. If it does not, I will be back.

**Mr McCartney:**

I am a frequent user of the Airporter service. I know that Norma is involved in that. I want to congratulate you on its excellent initiative on Wi-Fi.

**Ms Norma Smyth (Federation of Passenger Transport):**

Thank you.

**Mr Gallagher:**

You say that you favour the agency proposal. What is your view on the fact that the Department will be represented on that agency? Can you foresee any possible conflict of interest, for example?

**Ms K Magill:**

I do not. I do not see how we can do it without the Department. If the Department, effectively, owns and funds the network, how can it not be involved in it? The Department should have the skills and expertise to make sure that everybody on that middle-tier agency and everybody who delivers services do it properly. Therefore, I do believe that there is a role for the Department in the agency. It has a responsibility to be on that committee.

**Mr G Robinson:**

You mentioned stakeholders. Who is involved in that?

**Ms K Magill:**

The stakeholder forum consists of the Consumer Council, the Department for Regional Development, the Department of the Environment, the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHCo), Translink and the Federation of Passenger Transport. SOLACE, the local government representative, was also involved for a while. We invited the Department of Education, but it did not see it fit to take part at that point.

**Mr G Robinson:**

The forum's membership is wide ranging.

**Ms K Magill:**

It is. The aim was to make it all-inclusive and to make sure that we were looking at the matters from every aspect.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much.

*(The Deputy Chairperson [Miss McIlveen] in the Chair)*

**The Deputy Chairperson (Miss McIlveen):**

I welcome Antoinette McKeown and Ryan Simpson. We are sorry for keeping you waiting. You will have 10 minutes in which to make your presentation.

**Ms Antoinette McKeown (Consumer Council for Northern Ireland):**

On behalf of the Consumer Council, we are pleased to be here to give you what you expect from us: the view through the Consumer Council's lens on the public transport reform consultation process.

I shall begin by acknowledging that there has already been a lot of reform to structures, roles and functions. We are looking at the continued impact of those reforms on the passenger, whether that is a schoolchild travelling by bus in Fivemiletown, a commuter travelling by train from Ballymena to Belfast, or a pensioner travelling on a concessionary pass to Newry. That is the level that we want to bring matters down to.

We want passengers to be offered a quality experience; a point of benefit that will allow customers to be retained and gained in the public transport system, especially when belts are being tightened in the current recession. The Consumer Council does not necessarily see value for money being achieved by offering the cheapest possible fares. Although we recognise that ensuring low fares is important, we want to see an increase in the uptake of a range of issues and initiatives, such as fare promotions and discount fares for regular users, and we want to see cheaper fares offered for multi-journeys, for example. We want to see the further promotion of a range of initiatives to ensure better value for public money. That leads to other benefits with regard to congestion, dwell times and boarding, for instance. There is a 16% take-up on some of those multi-journey fares, and we want to see that increase.

Passengers want to see a punctual, reliable and dependable service. If I want to be at the doctors' surgery at 10.30 am, I want to ensure that I can rely on public transport to get me there on time, rather than having to rely on my car, particularly as so much has been invested in the public transport system.

To increase the uptake in public transport, it must be made easier for people to book a seat on a bus or a train, whether through the use of a call centre or a website. It is imperative that the systems provide information and easy access for passengers.

You will not be surprised to hear the Consumer Council saying that we are looking at the person, not the system. It is not about the systems or the provider; the person is at the heart of the matter. We want to see better integration between bus services at a local level, between bus and rail and between a range of modes of transport that dovetail. Consumers continue to raise with us the issues of integrated ticketing, timetabling and bookings.

Our research shows that, second to the price of fares, consumers are concerned about network coverage and frequency of services. We want to see those concerns addressed in the reform of public transport reform. Ultimately, it is about quality service and customer care. People expect to have a consistently high service, and it is right that they have that. We want to see accessibility to public transport that is second to none for older people, people with disabilities, and parents with small children.

Those issues are not new; the Committee will not be surprised to hear them. Addressing them is key to building a system that fits the needs and expectations of consumers. That is why it is our starting point today.

There are a lot of pressures on budgets, and we recognise that. Besides the push from EU regulations, competition and contracting issues, we acknowledge the improvements that have been made in investment in infrastructure, in the fleet and in the focus on driving up passenger numbers. However, some issues continue to exist, not least those that I have outlined in respect of passengers. The Consumer Council is keen to support a sustained passenger growth. That will be the economic success of our public transport system, which will require less public money in the form of subsidy.

The viability and sustainability issues are important. I am interested as to why 36% of people who were surveyed said that they would not stop using their cars, regardless of how our public transport system looks. There is an attitudinal barrier to the use of public transport, despite the fact that it has improved vastly in the past number of years. People do not see those

improvements, because they are not using public transport.

Rural coverage and services continue to be an issue for us. Northern Ireland is still a highly rural region, and we want to see schemes, such as concessionary fares, to encourage more people in rural communities to use public transport.

I have mentioned some of the issues in relation to tackling preconceptions and cultures. That is why the public transport system needs to provide a difference; it should be the first choice, not the last resort. That is where the Consumer Council wants to push passengers. We want to increase the buy-in or ownership from the public, so that it is seen as the people's transport system. The Consumer Council wants to see more energy and ownership around that.

I am also interested in the Consumer Council's research that shows that young people are more focused on obtaining their driving licences and getting into a car than in using public transport. Unless we break that cultural cycle, we will not see increased economic viability in our public transport system.

As regards maximising efficiency and value for money, the provision of public transport is subject to financial constraints, as is other public spending. We recognise that, but the Department for Regional Development's outline business case is driving us towards bringing forward the public service reform that it recommends. It has already estimated savings of between £5 million and £20 million as a result of that reform. That provides a really good opportunity to demonstrate to the public the efficiencies that can be made from going forward with the proposals as they stand.

I have already covered integration and seamless service, and I will move on quickly to controlled competition and innovation. I am conscious that I am moving quite fast, but I know that the Committee's time is tight. The current system has some competition. We think that the market could be tested a bit more in order to bring some innovation and better standards for public services. We are interested in exploring that further. We want to meet passenger expectations, as we have outlined.

The Consumer Council has been involved in the reform process to date. We have been a member of the stakeholder forum, and have a statutory role to represent the interests of

passengers. We have carried out research and brought forward evidence and opinion from consumer panels. We deal with passenger complaints and inquiries, and we consult with passengers. That gives us a unique insight into the issues that are bugging passengers and into customer needs.

As for the way forward, the Consumer Council welcomes the policy direction that is set out in the current proposal document. We think that that direction is right, and that the principles have been followed. I want to acknowledge the work that DRD has done with the stakeholders. It has engaged, carried out pre-consultation processes and listened. That is really important in building consensus for the consultation document that we have been part of developing. We welcome the overall approach.

The Consumer Council has raised issues that still need clarification, but we recognise that, as we work through the reform process, some of those will be dealt with. The split between the service network design and delivery is clear in the document, but the question of who designs and who delivers is crucial for getting the best deal for consumers, as is getting the traction or tension that allows for that negotiation.

Consumers continue to raise issues around the management of, and access to, facilities. We need clarity on that as a matter of urgency. It is a key issue for passengers; no one wants to stand outside Jurys Hotel in the driving rain, where there is heavy traffic, to get onto the Aircoach when there is a publicly funded bus and train station around the corner. That is a very practical issue, but it impacts on travellers' comfort and safety, and, given that they are paying for the bus station, we would like them to have access to it.

There are issues around the timescales for implementing change to benefit passengers. We recognise that we are on a continuous improvement drive, and although we are fully behind the move toward consultation on the current proposals — apart from some of the caveats that I am outlining — we do not want the continuous improvement approach to be held up during that process.

We are calling for further information from, and discussion with, DRD. That has been welcomed in response to our role, in route-licensing appeals and, generally, in the reform process, because we want to play a role and would like to see more information on the make up and role of

local partnerships as we roll out the RPA for 11 new district councils. We think that there is a pivotal role there in relation, not only to the local councils' role, but to the roles of community planning, the power of well-being and how local consumers' voices can be brought to bear in the public transport system.

In moving forward, we want to recognise that the current reforms are not necessarily dependent solely on legislation and structural changes. We can do a lot, and we want to continue to work with DRD and Translink, and other providers, to maintain, sustain and grow passenger numbers, because there are clear economic and sustainability benefits.

We want a clearly defined programme for driving forward continuous improvements during the transition process, so that we do not take our eye off the prize with regard to consumers' needs. We want to see it as part of the staged, managed transition, and we want to play our role.

The challenge, which the Consumer Council is asking the Committee to focus on, is how to make the reform relevant to consumers. It is a matter of setting the context for the passengers who travel every day and for those whom we hope will travel in the future. We want to make sure that the reform objectives are clear, are communicated to consumers and are consistent with other policy and strategy initiatives that are being taken forward. For example, we know that the regional development strategy is due for review; that consultation has begun on planning reform; and that the RPA is being taken forward. We want to see some cohesion across the piece, so that people understand that the Assembly and the Executive's actions will impact on the quality of their lives. Therefore, we want to see coherence with those other policies that are adding value to existing work.

I will finish my presentation where I started: with respect for consumer values. There should be engagement throughout the process, and we welcome the consultation as an opportunity to engage. The consultation should involve passengers at local and regional levels. Choice, value for money and improved services will be driving the issues that we will look at. The Consumer Council will complement the public consultation exercise with consumer panels, and we are keen to come back to the Committee with feedback from those if members feel that that would be worthwhile. I am sorry that I had to gallop through my presentation.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

Thank you very much. I am surprised that your presentation is so positive. You mentioned that you are happy to support the agency model. Why did you come to that conclusion?

**Ms McKeown:**

Along with consumers, we have had some concerns about design and delivery. If there is a separation between the organisation that designs the network to get the best for passengers and the organisation that delivers the service, there will be creative tension, which will enable us to get the best for consumers, as opposed to the easiest option. We see the agency as an opportunity to streamline and clarify those roles.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

You also mentioned controlled competition and your intention to explore that further. Will you elaborate on what you propose to do?

**Mr Ryan Simpson (Consumer Council for Northern Ireland):**

The idea is that, in rural areas, there are small, private operators that want to run services but have a problem getting licences and so on. Therefore, we want to stimulate the system so that, as was said in one of the earlier presentations, those smaller operators have the opportunity to feed in to the wider network. If there is a separation between design and delivery and the network is mapped out, private operators have the option to show initiative and to be innovative by highlighting and filling the gaps so that they complement mainstream public transport.

**Mr I McCrea:**

Thank you for your presentation. This is my first day on the Committee, so excuse me if I raise issues that have already been addressed.

I have had plenty of experience of rural transport. Two-thirds of my constituency is rural, so I am fully aware of the problems experienced by people in those areas. Addressing rural coverage and services is a key theme in your submission, and I fully support that. Since your recent stakeholder meeting, have any of the issues that affect rural transport been addressed, or are they still problematic?

**Ms McKeown:**

As Northern Ireland has such a large rural community, public transport in those areas will continue to be a challenge. We recognise the difficulty and the economic viability of putting a large bus on a rural route if it is only lifting two people every hour, so we are being fairly pragmatic about the best use of public money. However, as Ryan said, there are some other innovative ways in which we can look at providing a more tailor-made service for rural communities through a range of operators.

Having spoken to people in rural communities, it was interesting to find that it does not take rocket science to provide them with what they need. It is often about using a smaller provider to get people in rural communities to arterial routes, where the bigger buses can pick them up. That is what we mean when we talk about integrated systems.

**Mr R Simpson:**

Some of the rural community transport partnerships work with Translink on some of the bigger routes. An agency model would mean more joined-up thinking between community transport and larger providers such as Translink, the private sector and Roads Service. The best approach could then be taken for each small rural area. It is not a case of not providing a service to a rural community just because a large bus does not suit. Providers can link up with community transport and with local taxi providers. It is about getting the best system that works in each rural area.

**Mr Boylan:**

Thank you for your presentation. We sometimes receive presentations that list models that look good on paper. There is a big difficulty with the agency model. I keep harping on about rural communities, which rely heavily on car transport, and we have to accept that. It is OK to say that smaller operators can be used, but first it must be ensured that the service is fit for purpose. Competition is needed to ensure value for money, and that will be difficult. Under the business case and as the agency model is set up, perhaps that could be kept under review.

A fresh start is needed to address the issue. We have some data and information on the rural areas. How do you see the business case addressing that? How can the attitude of young people be addressed? Particularly in rural areas, they want to get into cars, and we have to accept the fact that they are dependent on cars. That is a bigger undertaking. How can that be taken

forward under the agency model?

**Mr R Simpson:**

The agency model allows more scope for identifying which routes of public transport make money and which routes lose money but are socially necessary. The two could be tallied up and money that is made on the more popular routes can offset the smaller routes. That already happens, but the complete clarity for everyone to know what is happening is perhaps not there.

On the point about buy-in, local partnerships will give people, through community groups or through local representatives, more scope to get their issues across and get a public transport system that works for them, whether they live in a large town, a small town or a rural area. Many people currently do not know about the mechanisms by which they can give their opinions on what they need from public transport. Local partnerships may provide a more formalised mechanism for getting their views across.

**Ms McKeown:**

You raised a serious issue about young people. If we do not break the cycle of attitude that the car is best, we will not have a sustainable public transport system, even in the medium term. We have had preliminary discussions with DRD on taking some work forward on that, so that we can start, through our education work, to impact on those attitudes and preconceptions. It might be as simple as trying to get young people on to a public transport system that has vastly improved in the past four or five years.

**Mr Boylan:**

Substantial moves forward have been made on infrastructure and connectivity. What is the position on that? Is there much of that in the business case? Is it based on trial and error? It has to be viable.

**Ms McKeown:**

Connectivity is a major issue, particularly in rural communities. That is why we support the agency model. If design and delivery is placed in the one functional area of responsibility, it enables one to look across the piece to see where connections can be made with a range of providers and to see, as you said, whether those providers are fit for purpose. A lot of work must be done on improving connectivity, but, in practical terms, it is achievable. We must look at the

positive aspects.

**Mr McCartney:**

You listed a number of issues for clarification with the Department with regard to the view of the way forward. Can I have an update of that situation and your view of the Consumer Council's role in licensing appeals?

**Ms McKeown:**

We have had further discussions in the past week, and we have managed to clarify most of the issues. The final document for consultation has made the split between design and delivery much clearer. We are continuing to discuss access to facilities. Our position is clear, in that we want to give all public transport passengers access to bus stations. The route licensing appeals will be dealt with in the legislation, and we are happy with that.

**Mr McCartney:**

What was the Department's response to the issue of access to facilities?

**Mr R Simpson:**

Its response was to clarify that there would be a robust system of contracting behind that to allow other operators, if they meet the criteria, to get access to stations. The details are still ongoing, but the language has been changed somewhat in the document to strengthen it.

**Mr McCartney:**

So you hope to see an improvement in access?

**Mr R Simpson:**

Yes.

**Ms McKeown:**

We want, rather than hope, to see an improvement in access facilities, if that is OK.

**Mr McCartney:**

That is a different thing altogether.

**Mr G Robinson:**

You have put a lot of emphasis on passenger care and safety. I do not know whether it is the same in other areas, but the bus depot in my area is open from Monday to Friday only, and there is no access to it on Saturdays, even though buses run on Saturdays. That is a big downfall. I hope that that is an isolated incident and that that does not happen in other parts of Northern Ireland.

**Mr R Simpson:**

For any passenger, getting on a clean, new bus is part of the journey, and we must look at the facilities — the access and safety aspects. We want to see those aspects of public transport, whether it is a city or a rural area. The facilities should be available, and if they are not there, and if it is viable, moves should be made to improve them.

**Mr W Clarke:**

Mr McCartney asked my question about facilities. The best opportunity for rural communities to influence service provision is through the local transport plans between local councils and the agency. Would that be your view as well? It is a bit of a leap in the dark; you hope that the work will be carried out. Do you think that there is enough input and local knowledge?

**Mr R Simpson:**

The process might adapt as it progresses. However, any engagement is better than none. Once it has started, there will be scope to push it further and to ensure that local voices are heard. If the system is not meeting the needs of people, there is an opportunity to voice those needs so that things can be pushed in the right direction.

**The Deputy Chairperson:**

No other members have indicated that they wish to speak. Thank you for your presentation. It was very interesting.

**Ms McKeown:**

Thank you.