

Introductory Statement from Anne Graham, Chief Executive Officer, National Transport Authority

Chairperson and members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to attend. I understand that the Committee wishes to receive an **update on the National Transport Authority's sustainable travel operations**. To assist me in dealing with your subsequent questions I am joined by Hugh Creegan, Deputy CEO and Jeremy Ryan, Director of Public Transport Services with the Authority.

Responsibilities of the Authority with regard to public bus services provision

The Authority is responsible for the provision of an integrated, accessible public transport system. BusConnects and Connecting Ireland are key public transport programmes where the Authority in association with transport operators and local authorities have planned new and improved networks to allow the continued economic and social development of our cities, towns and rural areas. The services are planned by the Authority to allow residents and visitors the choice of sustainable, low carbon emission transport for some or all of their journeys.

Public Transport Numbers

Once again, I am happy to report that public transport numbers continue to grow on all our subsidised services. The total passenger numbers in 2023 at 311 million represented a 24% growth on the previous year's figures and a 5% increase on pre-Covid passenger journeys. In 2024 to date, we have seen a 9% growth on bus services in Dublin, a 10% growth in Luas services. Bus services operated outside Dublin by Bus Éireann grew substantially last year at 20% higher than 2022 passenger journey numbers but this growth has tempered to 6% this year so far. Rail services grew to 46.1m passenger journeys in 2023 which was just back at pre-Covid levels and the growth in volume this year so far exceeds 2023 levels by 9%. Our passenger numbers on regular rural services delivered under the Connecting Ireland continue to grow exponentially.

This phenomenal growth does bring about its own challenges where demand exceeds capacity at times. We are working with operators to provide additional capacity where necessary and where driver and fleet resources allow.

Improved Services

Some key service improvements that have been introduced in recent times:

- Southern orbital bus services in Dublin have seen 40% growth in passenger numbers compared to background network growth, since they were introduced;
- 41 ICR rail cars are being introduced into the rail fleet which will allow additional services to be introduced in the new rail timetable from August this year;
- 16 new or enhanced Connecting Ireland rural bus services have been introduced in the first half of 2024.

Our ambition is to continue to improve services across our cities, towns and rural Ireland through our BusConnects and Connecting Ireland programmes in partnership with operators and local authorities. Phase 6 of BusConnects which includes Spine E will be introduced later this year.

Contract Performance

Along with a number of customer service metrics, the key performance metrics for all bus operators are as follows:

- lost kilometres which is a measure of the contracted service kilometres that were not operated
- punctuality is measured for each stop along the route and is measured differently for low frequency routes compared to high frequency routes.

These metrics, along with other customer-focussed metrics are used by the Authority to measure operator performance. The reports on transport operator performances are published regularly on our website and an annual performance report is produced, the latest being available for 2023. The NTA does not pay for any services that failed to operate where the failure was in the control of the operator. There are also penalties imposed on operators for the punctuality target for the service or contract not being met. Similarly, failure to meet

the fare collection targets can result in a financial penalty. In contrast, if the operator exceeds any targets, a bonus is paid.

In recent times, the performance of the bus operators has been impacted by the loss of drivers and mechanics and this has resulted in the loss of services and an increase in lost kilometres. In terms of driver recruitment, Dublin Bus and GoAhead are in a stable position but Bus Éireann have shortages in Cork in particular which is impacting on their performance in this city. Recruitment of additional drivers and mechanics for BusConnects in Dublin is steady but not at the pace that we would like to see, which is delaying the next phases of BusConnects Dublin.

The next challenge facing the operation of bus services and to some extent Luas services is the growing level of car congestion in our towns and cities. We urgently need to address the lack of priority for the bus services as their end-to-end journeys are increasing because of car congestion. For example, route 208 in Cork has seen its journey time increase by 25% in the last 5 years. To ensure the same frequency of service, the Authority must add in additional fleet and drivers to keep the same frequency of service. In the case of route 220 in Cork we have added four additional vehicles and up to sixteen additional drivers to this route in recent years at a cost of €0.5m. With congestion continually worsening and a lack of bus priority, further expenditure of approximately €1m will be expended on this route in the coming months, just to stand still. This situation is replicated right across the system such that I estimate that tens of millions of euros are being added to the cost of operation of bus services just to maintain the same level of services. The provision of bus priority through BusConnects schemes allows us to reverse that trend and start building in efficiencies into the service that can be re-invested back into improved frequency and coverage of services. It makes economic sense.

In Dublin, we have six of the twelve corridors that have received planning approval from An Bord Pleanála with no substantial amendments to the schemes. Two of those schemes are the subject of Judicial Reviews and cannot be progressed until those Judicial Review processes conclude. The NTA is in now planning to bring two schemes forward to commence construction in Q1 next year:

- Liffey Valley to City Centre

- Ballymun/Finglas to City Centre

The remaining schemes will be scheduled sequentially such that a maximum of four schemes will be undertaken at any one time. While there will inevitably be some disruption during the works, the customers of the bus services operating on those routes will be the first to benefit from end-to-end bus priority, shorter journey times and much greater levels of reliability and punctuality. The Authority will have in place a comprehensive programme of local engagement to ensure that residents and business owners are informed of any impending work that will impact on their local area.

In terms of the other cities, BusConnects Cork Sustainable Transport Corridors are being finalised for planning by the NTA.

So, in summary, the key priorities for the NTA to achieve improvements in public transport services are:

- Adequate capital funding in the current and future NDPs to deliver improved transport infrastructure to support the growing sustainable transport demand;
- Sustainable multi-annual funding for the operation of public transport services;

That concludes my introductory statement. I trust that we can answer any queries that arise.