



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into the Better Use of Public and
Community Sector Funds for the Delivery of
Bus Transport in Northern Ireland:
Easilink Community Transport Briefing

9 January 2013

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Jimmy Spratt (Chairperson)
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr David McNarry

Witnesses:

Ms Mary T Conway	Easilink Community Transport
Mr Paddy McEldowney	Easilink Community Transport
Mr Daniel O'Hagan	Easilink Community Transport
Mr Bert Wilson	Easilink Community Transport

The Chairperson: I welcome to the Committee Mr Daniel O'Hagan, Mr Paddy McEldowney, Ms Mary T Conway and Mr Bert Wilson. You have 10 minutes in which to make a presentation, after which leave yourselves open to questions.

Mr Daniel O'Hagan (Easilink Community Transport): I and my colleagues at Easilink thank the Committee for the opportunity to present here today. I work for a Strabane-based charity called Strabane Community Project, which provides a range of services for older people in that area, including a community meals service; a luncheon club; meals on wheels; a weekend chilled meals service; Good Morning Strabane, which is a listening ear telephone alert service; befriending; respite care; and a handy van service. We are a voice for older people across the Strabane district. I have been a voluntary director with Easilink Community Transport for over six years. I am committed to the organisation's aims of combating social exclusion and isolation. I see at first hand the huge benefit that rural transport services provide in my local area. People who might not otherwise see anyone for days on end can access local and community services and live a happier, healthier and more active life. As chairperson of Easilink Community Transport, I confirm that we, as an organisation, have been crying out for years for better and more efficient working together across statutory transport provision, especially with the Departments of Health and Education and the Department for Regional Development-funded urban door-to-door transport scheme.

Speaking on behalf of Easilink's 18 voluntary directors, I think it is critical that the Committee understands that we give of our time, expertise and local knowledge to help Easilink Community Transport. As directors, we see the difference that the service makes to many individuals and groups in our rural areas. We are involved to ensure that as many people as possible get access to critical

services, such as local health appointments, luncheon clubs, shopping and community activities. Transport is not our main focus as directors; our main focus is combating isolation and social exclusion. We just happen to achieve that by transporting people to their essential appointments and activities.

The Department of the Environment (DOE) is currently reviewing bus licensing in Northern Ireland, and it has indicated that it sees rural community transport partnerships having a commercial bus operator's licence in the new arrangements. The directors of Easilink Community Transport have no interest in running a commercial bus company. We are totally committed to operating a not-for-profit charitable organisation for the benefit of those who need the service to live a healthy and happy life. If community transport is forced into a commercial licence, it will rip the heart out of the 10 years of work that has been put into our company by many committed and dedicated local volunteers.

I will now hand over to Mary T Conway, the vice chairperson.

Ms Mary T Conway (Easilink Community Transport): Hello, members. I am the manager of Omagh Forum for Rural Associations. We are the rural support network for the Omagh district; one of an infrastructure that covers the whole of Northern Ireland. We provide development support for community and voluntary groups and associations. Through the work that I do, I am very aware of the need for sustainable rural community transport services. I have witnessed the development of community transport in the Omagh area over the past 12 years and have been a voluntary director with Rural Link initially and now Easilink for nine years. I have been a rural dweller all my life.

Working with rural community groups across the Omagh district, I see the huge benefit that the community transport service offers those groups. It allows them to bring their members together to participate in local community activities or to travel further afield. What that means is that people from a small town or a small isolated hamlet can access the minibus that comes to their area. It comes to their door, picks up the people and takes them into the local town, where people can do their business. Individual members are dropped off at a particular point where they want to go, and drivers can wait on them and then go on to the next place. What is unique about community transport is that it is a door-to-door service. To that end, the volunteer drivers in those organisations offer the groups a very cost-effective way of travelling to and from their activities. DOE's proposals to change the licensing of community transport vehicles from the current not-for-profit 10b permit to a commercial bus operator's licence will automatically exclude those volunteer drivers. That will have a very negative impact on our rural community groups and their valued activities.

Like Danny, I am a very committed voluntary director with Easilink Community Transport. We strive to provide the best service that we can to our rural members through the not-for-profit charitable ethos. Any move towards bringing in a commercial licence for community transport would be a very significant shift away from our ethos and from the very reason why we, as directors, are so committed to the charitable rural transport services that we provide. I feel strongly that that will seriously jeopardise the most important element of our services, which is local people volunteering to help those in need in their own community. Community transport and community development principles support people who are socially excluded — those who really need access to community transport. From that point of view, we fully endorse the work.

I will hand over to Bert Wilson, who is a fellow director.

Mr Bert Wilson (Easilink Community Transport): I am a farmer and have been a councillor for around 12 years on Omagh District Council. I have been a voluntary director of the Cavan Development Association as well, and I have played a very active part in promoting the rural transport service across the Omagh district through my role as councillor. I have been involved with Easilink Community Transport in our efforts to engage more with the statutory sector in the west, particularly regarding the Departments of Health and Education. We have shown a willingness to work in partnership at any level, but have had only limited success in engaging with the statutory sector. The main barriers we continue to come up against are central procurement policies and procedures within the statutory sector that exclude community transport providers from bidding for any transport work.

Those officials working locally in the west within the Education and Health Departments have expressed a desire to engage with us, but tell us that when they go to the Central Procurement Directorate or to departmental level, the idea is rejected due to procurement guidelines. We feel very strongly that there is work that we could do for those Departments on a non-profit basis that could save the relevant Department money and would allow us to schedule that work along with our existing transport commitments. Imagine one vehicle travelling along a particular rural route carrying 15

passengers, rather than two or three vehicles carrying four or five passengers each — in fact, it is sometimes fewer — the school bus, the day centre bus and the community transport bus.

We have exhausted all avenues locally to try to progress the issue but we feel strongly that it can only be solved centrally at departmental level. As Easilink directors, we feel that DRD is best placed to lead on this, and we are aware that any attempts to engage in meaningful discussions to progress it further depend a lot on the willingness of the other Departments to commit to the process. The idea has been mooted for a few years now, but, unfortunately, there does not seem to have been any real progress. The basic assumption with Departments working together locally on transport provision would be to achieve efficiencies and reduce congestion on our roads. We feel that it is a great opportunity to save money and help the environment.

As a councillor, I have taken it to Brussels and our MEPs and also, through the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, to the rural White Paper. As a rural person, I believe that rural dwellers are severely disadvantaged. I see taxis travelling on my road, picking up children for school who have health problems. Where three or four taxis run that route, one vehicle could probably do that. As well as that, with our hospitals now at Altnagelvin and Fermanagh, there is no transport for families. In the area that I represent, which includes Gortin, Greencastle and that area, they are mostly one-car families. When the father is away working, there is no transport to bring those people to hospital appointments or anything like that. I believe that we are really disadvantaged. Senior citizens —

The Chairperson: I ask you to draw your remarks to a close to allow Mr McEldowney some time, because you are totally out of time.

Mr B Wilson: Senior citizens who have free bus passes and live maybe five miles from a Translink route need some way of getting there. This is one of the main ways that they have of getting there.

Mr Paddy McEldowney (Easilink Community Transport): I will quickly give a brief outline of our organisation. I have been manager of Easilink Community Transport for just over eight years. Easilink provides DRD-funded rural transport services across the three council areas of Omagh, Strabane and Derry City. Easilink has been formed by the merger of three previous community transport partnerships from each of those councils.

The new organisation employs 25 people across the three council areas, with bases in Omagh, Strabane and Claudy. We are governed by a voluntary board of directors that represents groups and individuals from across those three council areas. Easilink has a very strong and long-standing volunteer car scheme, availing itself of the commitment and dedication of approximately 45 volunteers. Easilink operates 14 accessible minibuses, ranging from 10- to 16-seaters. The Dial-a-Lift services are delivered to our members from Monday to Friday between 8.00 am and 6.00 pm, using a combination of minibuses and volunteer cars. We also have a group hire service, which is available to our rural community groups, which uses our minibuses on a paid-driver or volunteer-driver basis.

I will give you a wee snapshot of what we do on the ground. In the financial year ending in March 2012, we provided 42,000 Dial-a-Lift trips to our members. Of those, 59% were via minibus, and in what I consider a huge contribution, 41 % were delivered by local volunteers. Dial-a-Lift services were delivered in that year at £12.77 per passenger trip. The average cost for Northern Ireland Dial-a-Lift across the community transport sector is around £17 and the urban door-to-door average is £18. So, we feel strongly that we have shown a good track record in delivering a service very efficiently for the Department and using our money very wisely. In the same period, we provided 37,000 group passenger trips to our rural community groups. Again, it is very important to be aware that 68% of those trips involved a paid driver and 32% involved a volunteer driver.

Easilink has always been very proactive in securing additional funding to enhance the service we provide to our rural members. We do not sit and wait on a DRD handout; we go to look for more. In recent years, we have attracted substantial funding from the Lloyds TSB Foundation. In 2008, we got £100,000 for a six-year project, which meant we were able to get an additional vehicle and a part-time driver. Just last year, we secured £90,000 from the Big Lottery for a three-year project for the lease of a minibus and to employ a part-time driver. We have also received funding from Strabane, Derry and Omagh councils, Awards for All, DOE and INTERREG cross-border funding. Those additional resources have helped us to be more efficient in our service delivery and have added to our capacity to deliver a professional and caring service to our clients. That is all possible due to the fact that we

are motivated as a charity to develop as an organisation independently from our core funder for the benefit of our clients.

Again, as we have touched on already, if the DOE proposals to move us to a commercial bus licence are introduced, we will lose our charitable ethos and our voluntary directors may not want to continue in their role. Our cherished volunteer car drivers will not be able to operate under the commercial licence.

I will summarise quickly the points that we would like to leave with the Committee on the better use of public and community sector funds. We talked about Departments working together, but this one is within DRD, so we do not have to work with any other Departments for this one. We feel very strongly that DRD should consider combining the rural transport fund service with the urban door-to-door service and deliver it on a not-for-profit basis. The second half of that sentence is the most important bit. We feel very strongly that that would be a win-win situation for DRD and the clients. Combining the two transport services would save DRD money and would provide the rural and urban clients with a better resourced service, provided that it was delivered on a not-for-profit basis. The two services are currently operating in isolation in the same area and are delivered under two different licences, which means that there can be no crossover between the two.

The second point that I would like to leave with you is that DRD should work with other Departments to review procurement procedures to ensure that not-for-profit organisations can bid for statutory transport work. That would save money for the respective Departments within their transport provisions and save DRD money by sharing the cost of community transport back-office costs across Departments. At the minute, DRD foots the bill for all the back-office costs. If the Health and Education Departments were in there, they could share that burden.

DRD should be very aware of the DOE proposals for the future of bus licensing in Northern Ireland. Easilink Community Transport is very concerned that all our good work could be undone by a single decision made by another Department in the near future. Our success in the past and the potential for further efficiencies in local transport are all a result of our charitable and community ethos, delivering transport on a not-for-profit basis and using volunteers when appropriate. Any move to a commercial licence will have a very negative effect on our organisation and on our ability to provide an efficient and caring service to our rural members.

I thank the Committee very much for hearing us out today.

The Chairperson: Thank you for the presentation. You indicate that Easilink is delivering its services at a cost of £12.77 per passenger trip. However, the equivalent cost in the Western Trust, for example, is only £3.60 per passenger trip. If you were successful in taking on additional services from the health trusts or the education boards, could you compete against those significantly lower costs? What are the core elements of value to be derived from providing community transport?

Mr McEldowney: First, I am delighted to hear a figure such as that being quoted, because we have been talking to the Western Trust for about 10 years and we have never been able to find out how much money is spent on transport.

The Chairperson: Well, that is the figure.

Mr McEldowney: It is good to know that. As a charitable organisation that runs 14 minibuses and employs 25 people, we have no intention of saying to the Western Trust that we will provide all their transport, because it runs 200 to 300 vehicles and any amount of —

The Chairperson: Bear in mind the question that I am asking you, Mr McEldowney. If you were successful in taking on additional services for the health trust or the education board, could you compete against those significantly lower costs?

Mr McEldowney: My answer would be very direct. We would not compete. They can achieve the £3 or £4 price because of the thousands of people who are travelling. We would ask them to give us the very uneconomical run where we have one taxi taking one route. That trip could cost £25.

The Chairperson: I am talking about successfully taking on additional services. That would obviously be competing with very significant increases in numbers, etc. It would not be a case of asking you to mop up the rubbish that is left at the end, for want of a better phrase. It would be dealing with the core

customer level on a daily basis additionally. Do you think that you could cut your costs from the significantly high figure of £12.77? I am not saying that you should cut it to £3.60, but could you cut it to a significantly lower figure, given increased passenger numbers and footfall?

Mr McEldowney: We would not want the trust's core business. We want only the non-economical peripheral runs that cost a whole lot more than £3. We would make savings for the trust on the runs that are most inefficient. The trust will run routes that are very inefficient and cost a whole lot more than £3 and £12. We could take those routes on the periphery because we are on that road anyway. It would cost us very little more to lift one more passenger on our way from Plumbridge to Omagh or Strabane.

The Chairperson: I understand that, but if you were able to compete in some way, you could significantly improve your service at that reduced cost to the very people whom you are talking about. At the end of the day, the money comes out of the public purse, so we are talking about value for money. It is not going to be a case of handouts.

Would you expect the Department, were it able to get a thing at a cost of £4 or £5, to pay £12 or £13? I would suggest that the answer to that is no, because the Department will be looking for value for money. We are looking for value for money, as a Committee, in terms of the Assembly and the public purse that has to deliver. We are looking at all these things — health, education and community transport — being joined together in rural areas to improve services to rural communities at a significantly lower cost. However, you seem to be pooh-poohing that.

Mr McEldowney: Absolutely not. We are one of the most efficient community transport operators in Northern Ireland. The average is £17, and we are operating at £12.77. The urban scheme is operating at £18. Imagine an urban scheme where you are travelling a mile or two either side of Omagh; we are travelling 20 miles and 25 miles to Killen, Killeter, Aghabrack and Aghyaran. Our £12.77 is a very competitive and efficient cost per trip when it comes to individual door-to-door transport. We are one of the most efficient operators in the community transport sector, and we compare very favourably with the urban door-to-door scheme.

We have no desire to deliver huge volumes of statutory transport work. However, we feel that we can offer value for money on their less efficient routes where they are lifting one or two people from a very rural area over a long distance with a single vehicle. We are in that area anyway and we can combine that person with a run that we are already doing. That person will add very little to the cost of our transport on that morning. We will take that person in for next to nothing because we are on the route anyway. We are on the road taking the neighbour to the doctor in Strabane, so the person who is going to the school can jump into the same vehicle. So, we can make efficiencies on those least efficient —

The Chairperson: So, you are telling me that the passenger cost is not £12.77 and that that is a bit of a red herring.

Mr McEldowney: Our cost is £12.77. That is the amount of money that DRD gives us, divided by the number of trips that we do. That was published a year ago. Those figures were asked for in Stormont, and they are public information.

The Chairperson: That is not per passenger.

Mr McEldowney: It is; £12.77 is our average cost per trip.

The Chairperson: My second question is: what are the core elements of value to be derived from providing community transport?

Mr McEldowney: In our opinion, more value could be derived if we were combining services. Earlier, Bert made the point that you have three separate vehicles with three separate drivers and three separate tanks of fuel going down the same road at the same time with two or three people in each vehicle. If one vehicle were to lift those dozen people, you would save two tanks of fuel, two hourly rates for a driver, two vehicles, the cost of maintenance for two vehicles and two everything else. So, it is the combining of the services —

The Chairperson: Does that not cut costs?

Mr McEldowney: Absolutely.

The Chairperson: Could it not be a figure that is substantially lower than £12.77?

Mr McEldowney: Provided that we get down the route of combining the services and getting people into —

The Chairperson: So, we have established that you want to increase the footfall, stop duplication and stop, as Mr Wilson suggested, this nonsense of having community transport, the health service bus, the education bus and quite a number of taxis picking up children who are handicapped and what have you and, unfortunately, have to go to different places. You are agreeing that if those things were combined and your passenger numbers were to increase, you could substantially reduce costs. If you do not reduce, the Department will go for whatever is the cheapest option. It has to achieve value for money, under procurement rules and everything else.

Mr McEldowney: Absolutely. I do not think that I argued against that. There is no doubt that combining those services would reduce the cost per trip.

Mr Lynch: Welcome to the Committee. You said that you are integrated from a previous system. How long have you been integrated, and how much saving has been made by that integration?

Mr McEldowney: It was done in two stages. It was not that three organisations came together on the one day. In 2008, what was Easilift Community Transport in Strabane took over the operation of the rural Derry area, which was then covered by Foyle Connect. In April last year, what was then Easilift, covering Strabane and Derry, merged with Rural Link in Omagh. So, there were three previous organisations, but it was done in two stages over three or four years. In each case, we looked at office costs. We moved offices in each of these areas and halved our rent in each. We had a redundancy of a senior person who would have received a manager's salary in the Foyle area. Since then, we have taken any opportunities to be as efficient as we can when people have left the organisation or when recruitment was needed. For example, if a driver on a 37-and-a-half-hour contract left, we replaced him with a driver on a 30-hour contract. We have saved about £40,000 on the payroll with that move, and, in back-office costs, we have saved around another £12,000 a year on moving to cheaper offices.

On top of that, and more difficult to measure, is the fact that we have more backup in each of those areas. For example, if a vehicle or a driver is unavailable on a particular day in Omagh, it is very easy to send a vehicle up the road from Strabane or vice versa. There is far more flexibility with our service delivery and far more crossover between the areas. Our experience has been very positive. We have saved money and we have increased our capacity to deliver the service, so it has been a positive move for us.

Mr Lynch: Chair, that was only half a question.

The Chairperson: You can have the other half now, Seán. I will not count it as number two on this occasion.

Mr Lynch: Just to follow on: how would you make the case for greater integration of community transport in your area, after what you have said about the integration that has already taken place, and you have experienced it and explained it?

Mr McEldowney: In my opinion, bringing organisations together and merging them is not an easy thing to do. It would be very difficult to say that we should have just one, three or five. It is not an easy process. However, where the opportunity arises and where there is a will, it should be pursued. DRD has tried to move the partnerships towards a seven individual partnership model. I have no issue with that, and I think that it is a good idea. However, at some stage, there needs to be a measure of what is manageable. It may be a lot more difficult to manage a community transport operation throughout Northern Ireland, but there is a happy medium. DRD is trying to reduce to seven what were 19, and, in my opinion, the seven areas would be a good level to have. You would still have local representation and local knowledge of the area, and you would be achieving economies of scale by bringing two or three existing organisations together.

Mr McNarry: You seem to be making a lot of sense, and I am worried about that for a start. *[Laughter.]* I appreciate what is being said, the pitch that is being made, and what you have presented as being a not-for-profit operation, but that is the bit that worries me. Although you are not making a profit, I do not know whether you are making a loss. I would like you to tell me — if you can, and if you cannot, perhaps you would write to us — your annual running costs for the operation and, of that sum, how much you pay for insurance cover.

Mr McEldowney: I can give you broad figures, which I hope will suffice. We turnover just over £700,000 a year, and we receive about £500,000 from DRD through the rural transport fund. The difference in that shortfall and funding — the £220,000, £230,000 or £240,000 — is secured through what Kelly touched on in the previous presentation, which is the subsidised fare. We secure other funding, which I touched on in my presentation, from a cocktail of other funders.

With regard to insurance, we have —

Mr McNarry: I want to get clear the difference between your turnover and your running costs. Are you telling me that your accumulated turnover is almost £1.5 million?

Mr McEldowney: No. I am sorry: we spend about £720,000, so our operating costs are about £720,000. To make up that spend, we get about £500,000 from DRD and we generate an income from our clients for the remainder. Also, as a charity that, in my opinion, is well governed by the three directors here and the other 15 elsewhere, we have a reserves policy through which we try to ensure that we put money aside — a modest amount each year — to ensure that we are ready for unforeseen circumstances. We have modest reserves that can cope with three to six months of no funding or any other emergencies.

You asked about insurance. We have vehicle insurance. We have 14 minibuses, and it costs just over £1,000 a vehicle to insure them. Therefore, we are spending around £16,000 to insure our fleet of minibuses, and the public liability and employer's liability costs us about £3,000. Therefore, the total cost for insurance is just under £20,000.

Mr O'Hagan: The not-for-profit bit comes from the fact that we, as directors, do not get paid. We are volunteers. The other volunteers get a travel allowance. We have to make a profit to stay there but, apart from that, we do not put money into any other —

Mr McNarry: I am sure that the Chairman will not allow me to dwell on this much longer, but I have asked only a quarter of a question.

The Chairperson: I am not into quarters, David. The half was pushing it.

Mr McNarry: You make the pitch in your presentation and you emphasise the quality that you bring by being not-for-profit. That is your term of resistance to being a licensed operator. That is what I am trying to get round. Your whole basis for not wanting to be licensed operators is being not-for-profit. Although everything else I have heard makes sense, that bit does not.

Mr McEldowney: If we move to licences, it will not allow our volunteer drivers to drive the vehicles any more because they will become commercial vehicles. Their 10b permit not-for-hire-and-reward licence, which I assume you have, allows them to drive community vehicles as volunteers. If those vehicles become commercial vehicles, they will no longer be able to drive them.

Mr McNarry: That is why I asked you about insurance cover.

Mr McEldowney: The other point is about the volunteer car scheme in which we have 40 or 45 volunteers. If we operate a commercial business, people do not tend to volunteer for such businesses. We feel that we will lose a lot of our value and efficiencies if we move to a purely commercial basis. We would lose the value of our volunteer drivers in particular.

Mr McAleer: You are very welcome. I am very familiar with some of the terrain you talked about earlier, Paddy. You spoke about places such as Aghabrack, the Plum, Glenelly and the Sperrins — they are some of the most beautiful places in Ireland and among the most isolated. I am very familiar with the terrain you cover. The argument for integration is a complete no-brainer.

One of your core suggestions is to combine urban and rural schemes. At an earlier Committee meeting, I shared the example of a case that I spoke to you about whereby the urban transport people could not guarantee a consistent service to take a young fellow with disabilities in the Omagh area out to his place of sheltered employment because it was outside their zone. The rural group — yourselves — who could do it could not go into the town because that was designated as urban. What level of interaction have you had with the Department to date in relation to joining up these services? What kind of response or excuses are you getting as to why the services cannot be joined up?

Mr McEldowney: It is frustrating for us. In our jurisdiction, this applies to Strabane and Omagh. Derry City is serviced by Bridge Accessible Transport through the contract. It is a commercial contract that was tendered for, and the commercial company delivering it in Strabane and Omagh has a contract to deliver, and the membership criteria are key to that.

For the urban door-to-door scheme, a person has to live within the boundary of the town. There is a red line on a map, and you can put your postcode into a website that will tell you whether you are in or out. That distinguishes who you travel with. If you live in a town, you can be a member of only the urban door-to-door scheme. You cannot be a member of the rural scheme, and this has been dictated to us by the DRD rural transport fund as well. It will say to us that our membership comprises the rural area and that we cannot have a member who lives in the town. The urban door-to-door scheme will say that a person living in a town can be a member of its scheme.

Primarily, where a person lives determines which scheme they can apply to. However, Mr McAleer, you touched very well on the point that the scheme to which a person applies may not be the best one to get them where they want to go. The urban scheme is very restricted in that it tends to operate only in the town. The young person you talked about needed to get to Camphill Community, which is outside the town area, and the urban scheme said that the person could be a member of their scheme but that it could only take them round the town and not out to the centre two or three times a week. The call came from you, Mr McAleer, and from the rural transport fund civil servants who asked whether I could help them out. We bent our rules to accommodate that individual.

Mr McAleer: You have been recorded in the Hansard report now.

Mr McEldowney: It is a fact. I would make the point that the urban door-to-door schemes never seem to be forced to bend their rules. They have a commercial contract, and they can say that if it is not in their contract, they are not taking it. They seem to be able to say no to the Department a bit more easily than us. We are grant-funded and are not tied down to saying we must do this or must not do that.

What we would consider to be our community ethos and our flexibility meant that we were probably the best people to transport that person. However, technically and by the letter of the law in the DRD rural transport fund or the urban scheme, that person should not travel in our vehicle. We took the decision to do that because we felt that we were the only option for that young fellow. We committed to take on that work.

We generate an income and charge a fare. However, it is a subsidised equivalent to the Dial-a-Lift fare.

Mr B Wilson: Chair, could I make a quick —

The Chairperson: As long as we do not get into bent rules again.

Mr B Wilson: On the Derverney Road outside Omagh, there are 12 people who, like me, have free bus passes. Translink wiped out the bus run on that road. I wrote to Translink and was told that the run was uneconomical and that it would not go back on its decision. Easilink takes any of the people on that run who want to lift their pension or whatever else they want to do. Other than that, those people were totally without any means of transport, and some of them are of an age that they are not allowed to drive. This is of great benefit to those people.

Mr McAleer: I want to thank Paddy. When I referred to the beautiful terrain of West Tyrone, I omitted to mention Carrickmore. I see that Margaret McMahan gave me a dirty look from the Public Gallery.

The Chairperson: OK. Now that we have got all the local politics out of the way.

Mr Dallat: This is getting very parochial, not that I have any problems with West Tyrone.

Let us change the spokesperson. Mary, you have obviously been in this for a long time, and you appear to have it pretty well sussed out for the present. In planning for the future, how important will be the concept of not-for-profit registers? I have been involved in the credit union movement for 40 years, and that is a term that has transformed the lives of people across Ireland. Credit unions formed themselves into mutuals or co-operatives. I was at a conference in Wales a few months ago when that discussion took place. In planning for the future and meeting the challenges, has there been any discussion on how you might move forward, not just as a model for West Tyrone but for other parts of the North, as a co-operative or mutual society? That would overcome many of the issues you have been asked about today.

Ms Conway: We have not looked at the co-operative or mutual models. Easilink is a company limited by guarantee, which gives directors most protection. Other smaller community groups may just be community associations and may have constitutions. A company limited by guarantee gives our directors more protection. Anyone who employs staff and has a big turnover of money is advised to go down that route. We also have another wing that would allow us to trade, and Paddy might be able to back me up on that. However, we have not pursued that actively.

Mr Dallat: Do you see benefits in allowing your users to buy into the scheme by being subscribers or members of what might be called a co-operative or whatever term you might apply? That would allow the thing to become more cohesive and more of a unit.

Ms Conway: Our members already subscribe. There is a very small fee for joining, which adds value to the service and people appreciate the service they get. That is how our wide variety of members contribute to the running of the organisation. Likewise, at the annual general meeting, there is a good representation from the three geographical areas we serve. We are not fixed in that and are willing to look at all kinds of models.

Mr Dallat: I find this very interesting, and I think that the Committee will probably want to look at it again. There is a framework that is well worth preserving and that should not be wiped out by changes under the section 10b permit thing. It is far too important for that. I just threw out the co-operative thing because I am obsessed by it.

The Chairperson: You are obviously a shareholder, John.

Mr Dallat: No; not for profit.

Ms Conway: From a community and voluntary perspective, that is why people get involved. They may have had benefits themselves somewhere along the line and want to give something back. That is why our volunteer drivers are so crucial to the service that Easilink and other community transport organisations deliver. Changing the licensing agreements would wipe that off the slate. Whatever number of volunteer car drivers we have is replicated through other community transport organisations around the North and the change would ruin that.

The Chairperson: I thank you all for your presentation. It has been very helpful to the Committee and its inquiry. A full report will be made by Hansard and will be part and parcel of the final outcome when it goes to the Assembly.