



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Comprehensive Transport
Delivery Structures: Community Transport
Association Briefing

24 April 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Inquiry into Comprehensive Transport Delivery Structures: Community Transport Association Briefing

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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 Alex Easton
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr David McNarry
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Ms Kellie Armstrong Community Transport Association

The Chairperson: I welcome Ms Kellie Armstrong from the Community Transport Association (CTA). This evidence session forms part of our inquiry and, as such, is being recorded by Hansard. You have 10 minutes in which to make a presentation, after which members will have an opportunity to ask questions.

Ms Kellie Armstrong (Community Transport Association): Thank you, Chairperson. The Community Transport Association is delighted to be able to give evidence to the comprehensive transport delivery structures inquiry. I will quickly go through and reiterate our submission.

Unfortunately, CTA is not able to answer definitively or give further evidence on some of the questions that were posed. For instance, the Committee asked about assessing the current legal status of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHCo) and its relationship with the Department for Regional Development (DRD). The CTA and the community transport sector are not at liberty to know any more details about that other than that which is already in the public domain, which is that NITHCo was established by the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967 and that its functions, along with those that will be carried forward by Transport Northern Ireland, will be changing.

The Committee asked about a comparative analysis of the costs and subsidies to maintain the current and future public transport infrastructure and its service delivery in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Again, looking at the wider picture, there are certain elements of the way in which public transport is funded elsewhere across the UK and in the South with which we cannot make a comparison.

We have a regulated system in Northern Ireland. We have a public transport delivery service through Translink that is funded by government. Other areas of the UK do not have a similar system; the only one that comes close is London. However, when you compare the London landscape and the social geography of the people who live there with Northern Ireland, it is clear that our system is completely different.

Given EU regulations and changes in EU legislation, the community transport system in the Republic of Ireland is significantly different. It no longer has the ability to use non-profit community transport services to deliver transport in certain areas, and the result of that has been an increase in rural isolation and social exclusion. In order to be able to continue to deliver services, community transport organisations in the South have become commercial interests or hire in commercial bodies to deliver a level of service. We work quite closely with them, and we know quite a bit about Meath Accessible Transport Project Limited and Kerry Community Transport Limited and their delivery of services on that basis.

The Committee asked whether the current structures and the Transport NI proposals are best suited for the efficient and effective delivery of public transport legislative and policy objectives. With the limited information that we have about Transport NI, we have taken it from what was to be the public transport agency and what has moved now into Transport NI.

The CTA and the community transport sector know from the pilot in the mid-Ulster area and Dungannon, which has been mentioned, that the Department has engaged a transport planner. They are trialling software there that will help what we have asked for all along, which is an accessible transportation plan. However, having looked at Transport NI, we would like a strong transport planning division being moved into the Department that would not only look to the current public transport system but would consider, on a cross-departmental basis, how transport is being planned across Northern Ireland. We believe that the absence of skilled transport planners or a robust, transparent transport planning process has a substantial impact, and we welcome the fact that a transport planner has now been brought into the Department, albeit on a short-term basis. We hope that that will be brought forward in the future to realise the improvements and efficiencies that can be created through that more skilled base.

You asked about how to optimise the organisational delivery structures to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. There are many reports about public transport, but, unfortunately, very few of them make it to the public domain. There is no comparative investigation of how public money is spent on transport in other Executive Departments, and that needs to be examined and rationalised, based on resource and financial duplication. The pilot aims to do that, but it will be a slow burn. A lot of barriers are created because of legislation and how Departments work in Northern Ireland to how we can effectively bring transport together. To improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery, we consider it a fundamental need to try now to evidence how much money is being spent by the Departments of the Northern Ireland Assembly. We believe that transport is considered an operational detail for many Departments, including Education and Health, and, as they centralise services, access to those services is becoming difficult for people, especially those from rural areas, older people and people with disabilities, and we need to see how further linking of services can create solutions for those people.

We congratulate the Department for the establishment of the integrated transport group. The pilot has been mentioned, and everyone talks about that pilot, but it comes with a bit of a health warning. I sit on that group. There are people around the table with a will to try really hard to get that moved forward, but there are many hurdles for us to jump, which we are working through. No one has walked away from the table, thank goodness. Health and Education are still there, but there are legislative details that we need to work through with the Department of the Environment (DOE) through the licensing that would allow education vehicles — the yellow buses — to be able to pick up the public. As we know, community transport is not allowed to pick up the general public; it has to be specific members. In the same way, the Health Department is limited by its licensing arrangements, but this is the first time that an attempt has really been made, and the Department has to be congratulated on the start of this process. I do not imagine that a report will come out any time soon, but it is a good start.

In our previous submission to the Committee for the inquiry into the better use of public and community sector funds for the delivery of bus transport in Northern Ireland, we confirmed that we would like a 10-year approach that would enable appropriate cross-departmental strategic planning, centred in Transport NI, to lead to the creation of a Northern Ireland integrated accessible transport plan. That approach would identify how any public money is spent on transport, review where and

why people travel, integrate resources and use the most effective suppliers to deliver transport needs for the Northern Ireland community. I am delighted that the software is being considered through the new transport planning function; I believe that it is called Accession. That is an accessible transport planning model that looks at where people want to travel to, when they need to travel there and why they are travelling there, and tries to plan transport to make that happen.

Thank you very much for your time. I have rounded up very quickly for you.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much, Kellie. That was very helpful. We will move straight to questions.

Mr Lynch: Thank you, Kellie. You said that you sit on the group that is involved in the pilot. You seem confident but said that there are many hurdles. Will you explain those hurdles in a little more detail?

Ms Armstrong: We are looking at a very small area in and around Dungannon, and, very recently, we have been looking at the Coalisland area. The Department and Translink have already mapped with the Department of Education what routes are provided by Translink and the education services, particularly in a triangular area around Coalisland. I appreciate that it may seem like a small area, but it is just a start. The community sector and Community Transport have been focusing on the issue whereby, at 8.30 am or 9.00 am, it might look a certain way but that, at 2.00 pm, it will look significantly different. Some of the barriers are: what are the expectations out there? If there is no transport at 2.00 pm, is there a need for transport at 2.00 pm? We need to engage with the community to identify when and where people need transport. Is it an assumption or a reality that people are being excluded or set aside because there is not available transport? That is one of the issues.

As I mentioned, the other issue is, of course, the legislation and the barriers faced because of the DOE's licensing of operators. The Education Department's yellow buses are licensed in the same way that smaller buses for community transport are licensed. They can deliver only services for education purposes or for people who are there to help children in education, and they are not, therefore, permitted to carry members of the general public. So, under the legislation, an empty school bus is not allowed to collect members of the general public. I know that the Department has talked to the DOE about that. Those are just a few of the issues.

Mr Lynch: Can you give us an example of how you are engaging with the community? What way are you going about that?

Ms Armstrong: That is at a very early stage in the integrated transport group, but we are talking about how we will do it. I know that the Department has already gone to some local councils, such as Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council, and will be going to Cookstown District Council. We are now looking at who the community transport passengers are, how we can reach Translink passengers, and how we can talk to the Education Department. We are starting to do that.

Community transport takes a bit of a different view. We just get out there and ask people because our passengers are the community. Unfortunately, we do not have the investment or opportunity outside the Department to gain research. We have been talking to the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) about the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) innovation vouchers and such things. Unfortunately, nobody wants to fund transport research at the moment. However, thankfully, the Charity Commission's public benefit test will allow community transport to examine that area and say, "Today, we are servicing 50% of the population, but that needs to improve" or "Today, we have serviced 90% of the population". It is a difficult one, but the group will work through that as time goes on.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thanks, Kellie. You said that nobody in the group has walked away from the table. I appreciate the difficulties with licensing, particularly with community transport. Are there any glaringly obvious issues that have come to light through the group's work that might have an impact on the integration of community transport in the network?

Ms Armstrong: The Departments represented around the table have not raised any other issues. In fact, a lot of learning is coming forward from that, and it is about getting access to that learning. I think that everyone has a fear that the group will ask for millions of pounds to make this work. We are not looking for that yet. It is all about goodwill. We want to talk to the Education Department and the Health Department about their buses without frightening them off. However, other issues are

emerging. For instance, within the Health Department, social services may have purchased transport for, say, an Alzheimer's day-care centre, and through its procurement of support for people who need day care, there is the provision of transport, but that is not under the spend for transport in the Health Department. So, we are coming up with lots of different organisations and companies that are delivering transport for the Health Department and the Education Department that are not part of the statutory provision. That is starting to emerge.

It is a bit frustrating because it is like a spider's web, and it is about trying to link everything together. We will get there, however, because the will is there. This is not about using a hammer to crack a nut. It is about goodwill and everybody coming together. It will take time, for which I can only apologise, but by taking time, we will do it right.

Mr Dallat: Kellie, thanks very much for your presentation, which I found invigorating. How do you propose to use the skills, knowledge, research, and so on, from the pilot study in the Dungannon area and apply that to a model that fits Northern Ireland?

Ms Armstrong: As I say, the pilot is centred on Dungannon and, very specifically, Coalisland. We are trying not only to establish the operational detail but to look at it from a strategic level. Are there barriers, for example, through licensing that prevent integration of services? Are there barriers through departmental budgetary spend and how things are procured that prevent integration? If we can sort that out and perhaps have an Assembly-wide proposal involving all the Departments, that would be very positive. We could talk to the Education Department and say, "You have an empty bus heading away from that school. How can we best use it?", but that would be a sticking-plaster approach. If we wanted to go Northern Ireland-wide, we need to look at what these barriers are and, at a strategic level, create the ability for Northern Ireland to have a transport planner come in and tell us, "We have all this need: this is how we are going to deliver on it". That is what we hope will happen.

Mr Dallat: Finally, you referred to the absence of skilled transport planners. Would you envisage them being in the Department or being a separate body or entity?

Ms Armstrong: I see it being within the function of Transport NI. We need somebody within to be planning for the Government, and I think that the best place for that is in the Department. I am not going to criticise Translink; it has its own transport planners looking specifically at Translink because that is what they are there to do. I think that Transport NI has a holistic and strategic view for government. If I talk to the Department for Social Development or DETI or whoever, they always tell me that, if I want to talk about transport, I have to go back to DRD, so I think that DRD is the right place for it.

Mr McAleer: I was going to draw on a reference you made earlier to hurdles, but you have touched on that already. The trip that we made to Strathclyde taught us that this can be done; we saw the model in Glasgow. Kellie, I know that it is not strictly a DRD matter, but your submission refers to the 10b permit and how it has enabled community transport solutions. Can you update us as to where that is now with the Department of the Environment, because I am aware that it makes the licensing arrangements.

Ms Armstrong: Officials from the Department of the Environment are going to Brussels on Thursday and Friday this week. They will not necessarily talk about the 10b permit, but they will be talking about cross-border cabotage issues. The bus operators issue will follow that. We hope to have the second version of the straw man discussion paper. The DOE hopes that the straw man paper will be the final one to go to the Minister for consideration and enactment of European legislation.

As far as community transport is concerned, we have negotiated, but we still do not know where we stand. The likelihood is that any community drivers that are paid for—that is, any driver who receives cash payment—will be commercialised. We will still be able to use volunteers, thank goodness, but we will be outside of all procurement. That causes us a few difficulties.

You mentioned Strathclyde. Recently, a number of us visited Hampshire County Council, where community transport is included in the procurement framework rather than being a grant, because we all know that grants are being whittled down. However, because of the licensing, we have been told that we will not be in the procurement system. It is a concerning time for us, but the doors are not closed. We hope that the Department of the Environment can work through some of our issues with their paper, particularly when we talk about the integration of services. We do not want a system

whereby the community sector is willing and able to take people to a bus station but is then prevented from doing so because of legislation.

It is an ongoing process. All I can say at this stage is that I am waiting for the paper. We are all waiting for the paper to see what will come out of it. I know that the Department is taking internal legal advice on the definitions of commercial, non-commercial, profit and non-profit. A knowledge of those definitions will go a long way in helping to understand whether the 10b permit will continue to exist or will have to move into a more commercial framework.

Mr I McCrea: I declare an interest as a member of Cookstown District Council. You mentioned the pilot scheme, and I am slightly disappointed that it is taking place in Dungannon and not in Cookstown, but you said that you intend to speak to the local councils. Have you any idea when that will happen? From speaking to officials on Cookstown council, I know that they would be interested in having that conversation.

Ms Armstrong: I do not have the information here to hand, but it was disclosed at our last meeting. Michael Deery and Sean Johnston from the Department have already made, or tried to make, dates with Cookstown council. One meeting is not due to happen until May or June. They will go to Cookstown. As you say, the pilot is looking at the Dungannon area. If you head north of Dungannon towards Cookstown, you see that it impinges only very slightly on Cookstown. In order to ensure that everybody knows what is going on, the conversation with Cookstown council will happen. However, as far as I know, it will not be the stakeholder group that will visit the council; it will be officials from the Department who are working on the process. They met Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council and they will meet Cookstown District Council. I think that the date will be in May.

The Chairperson: Thank you for your presentation, Kellie.