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Derry/Londonderry Rail Stakeholder survey and Public event

1 Introduction

In the context of the news that cost estimates for Phase II of the Coleraine to Derry/Londonderry rail project were significantly lower than those returned by contractors – the scheme was originally estimated at £20m to £22m, but has risen to an estimated £40m¹ - the Committee for Regional Development (CRD) agreed to conduct an inquiry into the role of the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and Translink in the management of this scheme.²

While the inquiry focuses on aspects of the procurement and project management process, the CRD also wanted to examine the impact this scheme is having on the existing service users and what the potential ramifications of any delays or changes to the planned scheme might have on both them as individuals and on the North West region as a whole.

With this in mind RaISe was commissioned to survey users of the Coleraine to Derry/Londonderry rail service. The aim of this survey was to:

¹ BBC News [online] Translink costing of Coleraine to Londonderry rail project 'a guess'. Available from: <http://nia1.me/2ir>

² NI Assembly [online] Inquiry into the Coleraine to Londonderry Rail Track Phase Two Project. Available from: <http://nia1.me/2i5>

- a) Identify service users experience of the work to date, including Translink's communication; and
- b) Identify service users' views on the importance of the Coleraine to Derry/Londonderry Rail Service, to both them as individuals and the North West as a whole, with particular emphasis on its role in supporting the economy of the North West.

2 Results

A total of 118 responses were collected, 83 were completed online and 35 were collected on the RDC's visit to Derry/Londonderry. As the survey was targeted at service users, all respondents were able to complete the survey.

The RDC also hosted a stakeholder event at the City of Derry Hotel on February 27, 2015. The discussion topics at this event were based on the survey questionnaire therefore data gathered at this event is included in this report.

2.1 Travel behaviour

Respondents were asked a series of questions in order to establish how and why they use the service, including where they embark on their journey, why they make the journey, at what time they usually use the service and how often they use it. The responses received are summarised here:

- More than half of the respondents to the survey travel on the Derry/Londonderry – Coleraine rail service at least once per week, with 35% making multiple journeys (figure one);
- 60% of respondents to the survey begin their journey in Derry/Londonderry, 14% in Belfast and 9% in Coleraine. 16% begin their journey in one of the other stops along the route; and
- 40% of these journeys commence during the morning rush hour, with 51.2% of passengers using the service to get to work (42.7%) or education (8.5%).

Figure 1: Frequency of journeys on Derry/L/Derry rail service

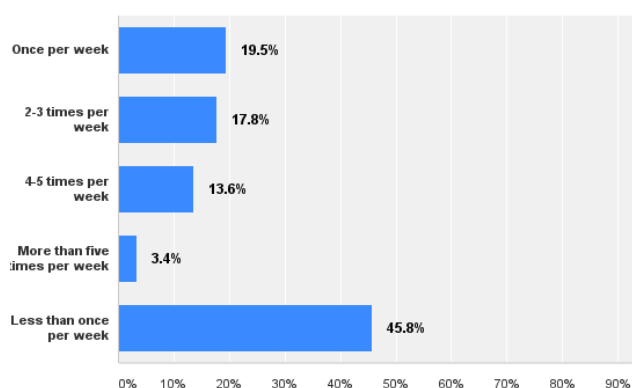


Figure 2: Time at commencement of journey

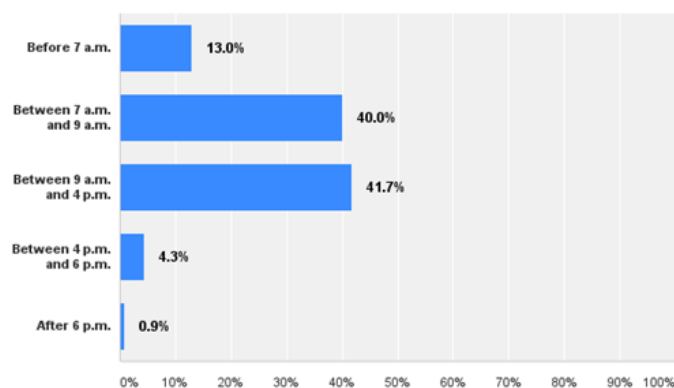
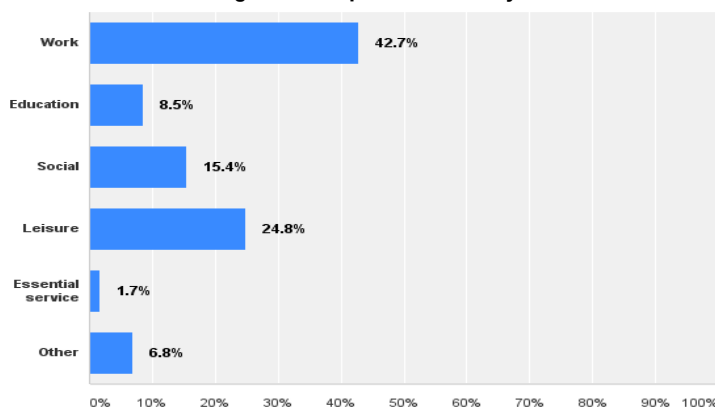


Figure 3: Purpose of Journey



2.2 Users experience of service

Respondents to the survey indicate a high level of satisfaction with the service in terms of punctuality, reliability, seat availability and value for money. However, the majority (64.4%) are either dissatisfied (30.5%) or very dissatisfied (33.9%) with the frequency of service on offer.

Table 1: Attitudes towards key aspects of Coleraine to Derry/Londonderry rail service

	Very satisfied	satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Service frequency	9.3% 11	26.3% 31	30.5% 36	33.9% 40
Punctuality	35.9% 42	51.3% 60	10.3% 12	2.6% 3
Reliability	35.4% 40	53.1% 60	7.1% 8	4.4% 5
Availability of seats	32.2% 37	50.4% 58	13.0% 15	4.3% 5
Value for money	26.1% 30	47.0% 54	20.0% 23	7.0% 8

2.2.1 Service frequency

Respondents were given the opportunity to expand their views on the issues outlined in table 1 and service frequency came up repeatedly:

“The number of trains available on the Derry line is simply unacceptable given the potential of making Derry and the North Coast more accessible.”

“Better frequency would mean a more accessible service making [it] competitive with bus etc. That in turn would attract more custom and therefore enable more competitive fares. At present our current rail timetables are not on par with mainland frequencies/service”.

“There should be an hourly express service [to Belfast] that takes the same time, if not quicker journey than 212 bus service. What's amazing is that demand and use still continues to rise despite less than adequate service.

Imagine what levels of patronage would be if the service was brought up to speed.”

“Commuters want trains to allow them to be in their work at 9 am and to get a train home when they finish at 5 pm. Lot of people aren't using the trains now for this reason.”

The fact that the current service fails to meet the needs of commuters came up repeatedly, with participants suggesting the frequency of service needs to be enhanced to improve access to Belfast where, due to the perceived centralisation of employment opportunities, large numbers of people from the North West must travel in order to access employment. Ms Mary Casey (Into the West) said during the stakeholder event in the City Hotel, Derry on 27 January 2015:

“the bulk of investment and jobs, such as the 500 created recently by PwC for accountants and lawyers, are in the Belfast metropolitan area. We need to get our population of over 200,000 from this region to the jobs in Belfast, if that is where they are going to be. We need fast hourly services, taking one hour or one hour and five minutes, which Mal McCreevy (General Manager Rail Services, Translink) stated he could provide, at peak times to get people to and from their work.”³

That said, there are those who do use the service to commute to Belfast and are positive about the experience. At the stakeholder event a participant called Mr John McBride stated:

“I remember being on that train 25 years ago. It used to go on to Lisburn and Portadown. It took three and a half hours. Now, it is quite reliable and punctual. I can leave the station just after 6.00 am and be in my office by 8.30 am, plus I can get work done on the train, whereas on the coach I cannot really work on my laptop or do much.”

In addition to service frequency, stakeholders also indicated a level of dissatisfaction with service scheduling which they find prevents them getting where they need to be on time, Ms Jean Dunlop commented:

“Not only do we want hourly services, but we want enhanced start and finish times. Do not forget the weekends either. At the moment, the first train from Coleraine will get you into the station here (in Derry City) at 8:33 am, which does not give you enough time to get into Magee (Ulster University Campus) and then to wherever you need to go in Magee. It is the same at night. The last train home tonight for me is at 9:33 pm, and it is 7:33 pm on Saturday and Sunday. It is totally useless, plus the fact that if

³ Hansard [online] Inquiry into the Coleraine to Londonderry Rail Track Phase 2 Project: Stakeholder Event (Table 1). Available from: <http://nia1.me/2j6>

*the service is only every two hours and you are coming here for a meeting, you have a lot of hanging-around time, which is no good.*⁴

The issues of frequency, scheduling and the resulting problems of transfers came up repeatedly in both the survey and stakeholder event. Of particular concern was the issue of transferring onto the Portrush line which also calls at the Ulster University Coleraine Campus. Respondents indicated that arrivals from Derry/Londonderry must wait approximately 40 minutes to transfer, whereas arrivals from Belfast face only a 10 minute wait.

“The two hourly service is very inconvenient made worse by the fact that the connection from Coleraine to the university means you essentially have to wait a minimum of 40 minutes”

The suggestion is that passengers from Derry/Londonderry travelling to the University and indeed those travelling onto Portrush are inconvenienced to such an extent that they choose not to use the rail service. A course rep from the University commented:

“...at Coleraine university I know many students are not happy with the frequency/ waiting times of trains. This is a major issue for us.”

One student commented:

“The fact that it is quicker for me to alight in Coleraine and walk to the University rather than take the rail connection is absurd.”

Similarly it was suggested that the train service as it stands does not facilitate onward connections at Belfast to Dublin:

“The timetable must be adjusted so that the first train from Derry connects with the earliest train to Dublin.”

A solution proposed for this was that the Belfast – Dublin Enterprise service should be extended to Derry/Londonderry:

“We should develop the Enterprise service that goes from Dublin to Belfast right through to Derry [...] There is something like a 12-mile difference between going straight to Derry by bus or whatever and going by train. So, with the right service and the right speed, it is certainly very doable and would open up the whole area.”

The need to provide a public transport system that is designed around the needs of users was highlighted by the Consumer Council’s representative at the Stakeholder event. He stated:

“The Consumer Council's view on all public transport services is that there needs to be a thorough understanding of the who, what, when, where, why

⁴ Hansard [online] Inquiry into the Coleraine to Londonderry Rail Track Phase 2 Project: Stakeholder Event (Table 1). Available from: <http://nia1.me/2j6>

and how of people travelling currently. A public transport system then needs to be built to match those needs, rather than what we currently have, which is a public transport system that forces people to change their needs if they want to use it.”⁵

There was a clear sense among stakeholders and survey respondents that the needs of the service user is not a primary consideration for Translink and that this is something which will have to be addressed. On the other hand, if it were to be addressed the outlook for the rail service was optimistic:

“If you build a proper rail service and have a fast, hourly timetabled rail service, people will indeed come. All the indications, from not just here but across Europe, are that, where there is a decent reliable, comfortable rail service, the people flock to it.” (Eamonn McCann⁶)

Mr Alan Devers of the Headhunters Railway Museum) cited the experience of Coleraine as evidence that an improved service will increase patronage:

“This city does not have the frequency of service that it deserves. It is the second city of Northern Ireland and it does not have an hourly service. Had it an hourly service, more people would use it, just as more people have started to use the train from Coleraine since the hourly service was introduced. It is a chicken-and-egg problem: once you get one, the other comes.”⁷

2.3 Is the rail service essential?

In order to gauge the importance of the rail service to the North West community, respondents were first asked if they could find alternative means of transport. Almost 88% of respondents indicated that they would be able to make their journey without the Coleraine to Derry/Londonderry rail service; with the majority indicating they would drive (54.3%) whilst 43.8% indicated they would use the bus service.

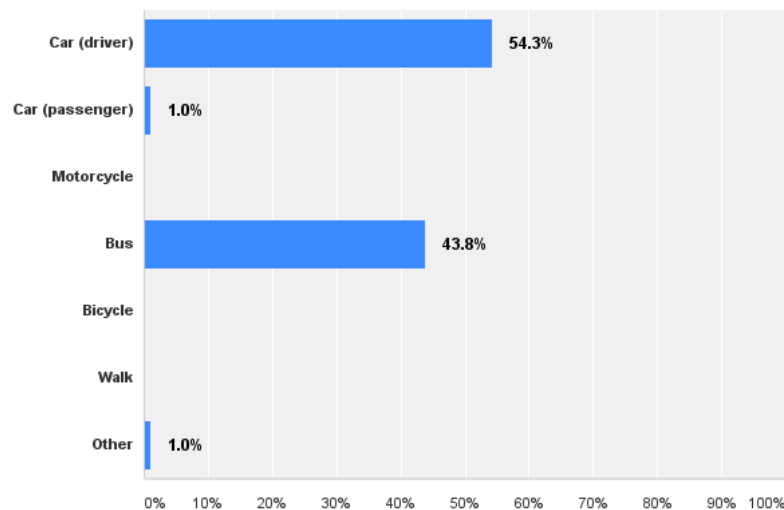
Given that so many could make alternative travel arrangements, question ten was important in order to explain why people choose the train over their own car or the bus. For a large number of those who responded to this question the comfort and relaxation offered by the train compared to driving and/or the bus was a key factor in their choice. The on-board facilities, including toilets and Wi-Fi, were also key attractors.

⁵ Hansard [online] Inquiry into the Coleraine to Londonderry Rail Track Phase 2 Project: Stakeholder Event (Table 1). Available from: <http://nia1.me/2j6>

⁶ PAGE 7 Hansard [online] Inquiry into the Coleraine to Londonderry Rail Track Phase 2 Project: Stakeholder Event (Table 1). Available from: <http://nia1.me/2j6>

⁷ PAGE 2 Hansard [online] Inquiry into the Coleraine to Londonderry Rail Track Phase Two Project: Stakeholder Event (Table 2). Available at: <http://nia1.me/2j9>

Figure 4: How current passengers would travel if no rail service was available



The word cloud in figure 5 highlights the main words used by respondents to explain their use of the train over other modes.

Figure 5: Why do you choose the train? (Word cloud)



What is clear from the responses is that the train offers a unique proposition which is very different to the car and even the bus. Clearly a significant proportion of respondents to the survey can drive, but critically choose to use the train for the types of reason that the car and arguably even the bus cannot offer. Comfort, relaxation and the ability to work or ‘surf’ the web are important factors for people but so too are the speed and frequency which, as things currently stands, appears to be the only significant detractor from this service.

Scott Kennerley from the Consumer Council, speaking to the necessity of the rail service to the North West, made the point that while there are alternatives to the train, the service offers much more than comfort, scenery and the opportunity for passengers to relax, it is indeed an essential part of the public transport mix which will play a critical role in the Executive achieving many of its social, economic and environmental targets:

“[if] there was no rail service, that would not stop people going to Belfast for jobs and education or to access essential services. However, it would have such an impact on the other targets that the Assembly has in relation to sustainable development, emissions and, as is already set out in policy, a

public transport system that aims to be an accessible, affordable, viable alternative to the private car. If you do not have a fit-for-purpose rail service linking the two major cities in the region, that policy cannot be achieved.”

2.4 Experience of works to date

The RDC were keen to find out what, if any, impact there had been on users of the Coleraine to Derry/Londonderry rail service while the track was being upgraded. Firstly they were asked if they had had to make any significant changes to the way they travelled while the work to upgrade the line was underway. This elicited a split response with 54% of respondents indicating the work had not had a significant impact whilst the 46% felt it had. The results did however indicate that those travelling for work or education were most affected by the work while those travelling for leisure or social purposes felt less inconvenienced.

Table 2: level of satisfaction with upgrade scheme to date

	Very satisfied	satisfied	dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
That you have been kept informed about the progress of the project	8.2% 9	47.3% 52	27.3% 30	17.3% 19
That all possible steps have been taken to minimise disruptions to this service	10.1% 11	48.6% 53	25.7% 28	15.6% 17
With the timescale of the project	5.4% 6	27.9% 31	33.3% 37	33.3% 37

A selection of comments on the progress of the scheme are provided below:

“It seems to take a very long time, especially the planning stage. But this is the same with any project, why is so much consultation required? It just adds to the cost and doesn't add any benefit.”

“Keep up the work of upgrading the track, I would like to think that my children could eventually commute from Derry to Belfast within an hour, meaning that they could still live in Derry without moving to Belfast just like other normal train commutes throughout the UK and Ireland”.

“The decision to split the planned upgrade of the line into 3 phases has delayed this essential work and increased costs to the taxpayer”.

“The upgrade of the line was supposed to have been completed by 2013 originally!”

“Project management of this upgrade couldn't get any worse.”

“Updates only available through mainstream media on an ad hoc basis. Procurement, tendering and valuations seem to have been naive at best for the project.”

2.5 Attitudes towards the Derry/Londonderry rail service

Respondents were provided with seven statements on the wider contribution of the Derry/Londonderry rail service and asked to indicate to what extent they either agreed or disagreed with the statement. These statements were designed in such a way as to get respondents to think about the importance, or lack thereof, of the Coleraine to Derry/Londonderry rail service in the wider North West as opposed to their personal experiences which were covered in the previous sections.

In addition to the survey, these statements also formed the basis for discussion at the stakeholder event held in the City of Derry Hotel; therefore highlights from the discussion are included in this report used here to enhance analysis of the survey data.

2.5.1 Survey responses

There was significant agreement that the Derry/Londonderry - Coleraine rail service plays a vital role in the Northwest in terms of providing access to employment, education as well as social and leisure opportunities. From an economic perspective, respondents were almost unanimous in their agreement that the rail service plays a vital role in the local economy and that it actively supports tourism in the region, however, over 70% of respondents feel the service, as things stand, is insufficient to meet the needs of the region. Another issue which may need addressed by Translink and the indeed the DRD is the level of confidence that exists around the future of the service, with a large proportion of respondents clearly unsure of the future of the service.

Table 3: Attitudes of respondents to the Derry/Londonderry rail service

	Strongly agree	agree	disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
The Derry/Londonderry - Coleraine rail service plays a vital role in improving access to employment and education	79.1%	18.2%	0.0%	2.7%	0.0%
The Derry/Londonderry - Coleraine rail service plays a vital role in improving access to social and leisure activities	66.4%	28.2%	2.7%	0.9%	1.8%
The Derry/Londonderry - Coleraine rail service plays a vital role in North West's economy	74.5%	15.5%	4.5%	2.7%	2.7%
The Derry/Londonderry - Coleraine rail service plays is vital to the North West's tourism industry	72.5%	22.9%	0.9%	2.8%	0.9%
In its current state the Derry/Londonderry - Coleraine rail service is sufficient to satisfy the needs of the North West	10.9%	7.3%	30.9%	40.9%	10.0%
The future of the North West is heavily reliant on a modern, efficient, reliable rail service	73.6%	20.9%	1.8%	2.7%	0.9%
I have confidence that the future of the Derry/Londonderry - Coleraine rail service is secure	12.7%	20.9%	28.2%	19.1%	19.1%

2.5.1 Stakeholder event

There were five topics discussed at the stakeholder event in the City Hotel Derry on February 27:

- The role of the L/Derry – Coleraine Railway service in connecting people to employment, education and essential services;
- The role of the L/Derry – Coleraine Railway service in the economy of the North West;
- The role of L/Derry – Coleraine Railway service in the North West’s tourism industry;
- The future of rail services in the North West (Best case); and
- (Worst case) Life in the North West without a (fit-for-purpose) rail service.

The role of the L/Derry – Coleraine Railway service in connecting people to employment, education and essential services:

Access to Belfast is a key issue for the people of the North West, as pointed out by the Consumer Council:

“Northern Ireland is configured in such a way that there are a lot of essential services, employment and education opportunities centred in and around Belfast. So it is essential that there are good efficient public transport services connecting the two cities and regions.”

The unique position of the railway line in linking the four campuses of the Ulster University was pointed out with the suggestion that many students are dependent on public transport to get to class. Already in this report the problems faced by students, in terms of the waiting time to transfer onto the Portrush/University line at Coleraine have been highlighted and during discussion at the stakeholder event Mr Jim McBride pointed out that *“...staff at the University of Ulster also want to use the train, but they cannot because the timings are so unacceptable.”*

Another interesting point was made regarding the future needs of students. One participant pointed to the increasing trend of students to stay at home and travel to university, where in the past more would have stayed away during the week. The suggestion was that this is a potentially lucrative customer base yet the service is not adequate to satisfy their particular needs.

From the point of view of accessing employment participants were keen to emphasise the need to ensure that the train service affords people the opportunity to get to work on time. The obvious advantage of the train in that it is unaffected by congestion and this was put forward as a strong rationale for supporting the train service. Participants discussed problems of delays and bottlenecks experienced on the 212 Belfast to Londonderry bus service and the suggestion was that this will only get worse in the

future. Despite this there was agreement that the train service as it stands takes too long.

One participant briefly spoke of the impact travelling from Belfast to Derry/Londonderry has on him:

“For me, the work/life balance is the most difficult thing that I am trying to manage this year. I regularly do a 13-hour day to do an eight-hour working day. I have my son beside me. I do not see him as much as I would like to. The jobs are not here at the moment in Derry. I work for a great organisation, and I intend to keep working for it in Belfast, but the biggest challenge is the toll that it is taking on me at the moment. I do not know what impact that might have on my health in the long term.”

The role of the L/Derry – Coleraine Railway service in the economy of the North West:

Participants in this part of discussion looked at the role the train service in terms of regional connectivity, with one participant suggesting that the current rail service; “... a tourist trip around Coleraine, through Ballymena and into Belfast” rather than a more direct route is to the detriment of the North West.

“...any businessman or organisation has to think, "What is the connectivity between two cities?" That is one of the bottom lines that he asks. If you say, "Well, actually, we have a small airport which has a couple of flights into it from a few places and a good bus service between the two main cities, but we have a railway line that can only really go one way at one time", I think that whoever he or she might be would kind of scratch their head and say, "Well, that is a strange phenomenon.”

The issue of Derry/Londonderry being neglected was discussed and according to one participant, it was justifiable:

“Derry and this region are always accused of whingeing and so forth. How can you be accused of whingeing if you are at the top of every unwanted economic statistical analysis? Top when it comes to lack of employment, lack of health facilities, lack of this, lack of that. That is not good for the economy of any particular place, no matter where it may be, if it all concentrates in one particular area.”

Mr E McCann pointed out that he felt there is a transport infrastructure deficit in the North West which impacts on inward investment. His suggestion was that government must make a “conscious intervention” in the NW in order for Derry/Londonderry to be able to compete with Belfast which he suggests has an inbuilt advantage over Derry/Londonderry, as is the case in many countries where there is a divide between first and second cities. The consumer council representative intervened on this issue pointing to the fact that government policy – namely *The Regional Development*

Strategy – already acknowledges the importance of Derry/Londonderry as the gateway to the north-west and the economic driver of the region but questioned whether the necessary investment has been put in place to back up this policy.

The role of L/Derry – Coleraine Railway service in the North West’s tourism industry:

An issue that is intrinsically linked to the economy of the North West is tourism and this topic was widely discussed at the stakeholder event. Tourists to Northern Ireland have a tendency to base themselves in one ‘hub’, usually Belfast, in order to take advantage of the fact that you can access most of the region and return to your base on the same day. A tourism business owner (Derry Farm Cottages) pointed out that many of his visitors, who come from all over the world, consider the train journey one of the highlights of their visit. However, he suggested the poor transport infrastructure in the North West restricts the number of visits to Derry/Londonderry from those based in Belfast due to the time taken (2 hours 20 minutes) to get there and it also prevents Derry/Londonderry being used as a ‘*tourist hub*’ as the infrastructure does not afford people the opportunity to get to key tourist attractions as easily as they can from Belfast.

A number of participants recalled how Broadcaster and Writer Michael Palin had described the rail service between Derry/Londonderry and Coleraine as one of ‘*Europe’s Great railway journeys*’ but lamented the lack of promotion, particularly the lack of effort made to get some of the ‘*750,000 annual visitors to the Giants Causeway*’, to make the rail journey from Portrush to Derry/Londonderry to experience the ‘*uniqueness of Derry and the historical significance of the city’s walls*’.

This view was supported by another participant who suggested that Northern Ireland, aside from Belfast and the Giants Causeway, is not promoted to visitors:

“I was in Dublin on Saturday, and I checked the tourist information. It stopped at Belfast; there was nothing beyond Belfast. A lot of people go to the Giant’s Causeway — some three quarters of a million people a year. Of that figure, only a fraction comes to Derry and the north-west. Why? Because of the very poor train service. You have to wait for half an hour at Coleraine for a connection. You will maybe wait another two hours for a train from Derry. A proper rail service would attract more visitors. Translink’s better marketing of rail and bus services in the north-west would also help attract people. We have got a major asset here, and nobody promotes it.”

Throughout the event participants pointed out how the lack of sufficient public transport had restricted access to Derry/Londonderry during its reign as ‘*2013 City of Culture*’:

“There were people coming to Derry and people trying to get out of Derry, and Derry and the whole of Northern Ireland lost out so much. People could not get to Derry for the events because some of them were outside the train

timetable. That also affected people who could not get accommodation in Derry and were also unable to travel by train or bus to accommodation nearby in Coleraine or Limavady or wherever else outside the city. The bus or train connections did not exist and no special effort was made, even though we knew about the City of Culture a year before. Nothing was done; not even an extra bus was available.”

Another participant gave some more detail on the rail provision, or rather the lack of rail provision, during the City of Culture year:

“Translink planned two extra trains for the City of Culture, but neither of those two trains ran. They became buses. So we had no extra trains once for the City of Culture. The trains were overcrowded. People could not physically get on or off them. There were horrendous conditions here. We have the golf coming [the 2018 British Open] to Portrush in a few years’ time. We will need to get ready now”.

The future of rail services in the North West:

There was a great deal of discussion around what the railway was missing so it was important get a sense of what needs to be done to improve the future outlook for the Derry/Londonderry – Coleraine rail service.

First and foremost participants demanded that phase 2 of the upgrade scheme should be implemented as soon as possible so that they have the modern reliable frequent service they have been promised:

“Phase 2 is essential. It has now been delayed for 18 months. Phase 2 would give us an hourly, modern train service”.

The reopening of the Waterside Station was discussed by a number of participants who pointed to the poor condition and facilities of the current station, but also the potential of investing in Northern Ireland’s last historic railway station:

“What we have here is a city with the last surviving railway terminal station in Northern Ireland. The Waterside station is a listed building, and we want to see it put back into purpose as a proper railway station in what is the second largest city in Northern Ireland. Our understanding is that Translink is in negotiations to buy the building and that it is applying for grants to do the building up as an historic terminal building that will serve the modern rail service that we will get once phase 2 is delivered. That will be a priority.”

The issue of car parking provision at railway stations was identified as a problem:

“At the moment, if you want to go for the train during the day, it is pot luck because there are government offices and private apartments there [...] you cannot expect people to use the train every two hours if people park

there all day for the government building or the private apartments. There is very little parking for people using the train.”

Life in the North West without a (fit-for-purpose) rail service:

While the Minister for Regional Development has indicated that he is committed to completing all planned works on the railway, there remains uncertainty among stakeholders, particularly given the current financial climate. This uncertainty has already been demonstrated in the survey, therefore, participants in the stakeholder event were asked to discuss what impact any changes to the planned project would have in the North West. Some of the key issues which arose during this discussion included:

- The role of the railway in realising the Executive’s targets in relation to sustainable development and emissions;
- The demographic profile of the North West was touched upon with participants pointing out some groups, particularly the young and elderly, are less likely to have access to a car and as these their numbers grow problems may arise;
- A related point which came up was the problems people would have accessing specialist health services such as cancer treatment if these services are all to be based in Belfast:

“Quite a lot go in minibuses and/or on the Translink 212. The train is a much more comfortable way to travel. It is easier to access the train and you can get up and stretch. So, there is an advantage in terms of the health benefits, especially in the wake of the Donaldson report today, and, if the services and the provision of hospitals changes, that can put more people towards those specialist services.”