



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Community Transport:
Rural and Community Transport Groups

22 April 2015

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Regional Development

Community Transport: Rural and Community Transport Groups

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Trevor Clarke (Chairperson)

Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Joe Byrne

Mr John Dallat

Mr Declan McAleer

Mr David McNarry

Mr Stephen Moutray

Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Ian Wilson

Mr Paddy McEldowney

Ms Anita Flanagan

Mr Billy Moore

Community Transport Association

Easilink Community Transport

Fermanagh Community Transport

North Coast Community Transport

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I welcome the witnesses from the community transport groups: Paddy McEldowney, Anita Flanagan, Ian Wilson and Billy Moore. I presume that someone is appointed to speak. Is it Ian? For the benefit of members, could you introduce your team and what areas they represent, if you do not mind?

Mr Ian Wilson (Community Transport Association): Certainly, Mr Chair. Anita Flanagan represents Fermanagh Community Transport; Paddy McEldowney represents Easilink Community Transport; and Billy Moore represents North Coast Community Transport.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Do you have a small presentation that you want to make first?

Mr I Wilson: Yes, Mr Chair, I have a brief presentation to set the scene, if that is OK.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Yes, that would be great. That would be helpful.

Mr I Wilson: Chair and Committee members, thank you very much for your invitation to present evidence on the issue of cuts to community transport budgets. I thank all the members of the Committee for supporting the work of the rural community transport partnerships and, more lately, the work of Community Transport Network NI, which is a network of 10 rural community transport providers that came together to lobby for the sustainability of publicly funded community transport services on a not-for-profit basis.

Community transport services, like Dial a Lift, funded by the Department, aim to reduce social and rural isolation across Northern Ireland through the provision of safe, affordable and accessible transport for some of the most vulnerable members of our society. Our productive collaboration with the Department's rural transport fund (RTF) has achieved real, tangible and quantifiable benefits for our members through increased access to services and an improvement in the quality of life for the most disadvantaged individuals from every rural community across Northern Ireland.

Figures released by the Department show that in 2014 the partnership network delivered 243,967 trips across Northern Ireland at an average cost per trip of £14.20 and with an average 13.4 miles per trip. In July 2014, our network commissioned a social-return-on-investment report that highlighted that, for every £1 invested in rural community transport partnerships, £12 of social value was created for our rural communities. The partnerships represented here today are proud of that record and of our long-standing and dynamic partnership with government, which clearly demonstrates the benefits to communities of a grant-funded, not-for-profit community transport network. However, on 11 March 2015, the partnerships were notified by the Department for Regional Development of the scale and scope of public-sector funding cuts to the RTF budget for 2015-16. In real terms, the grant available to the partnerships to deliver Dial a Lift services in rural areas of Northern Ireland has been reduced from £3.6 million, which was the amount of grant available in 2014-15, to £2.4 million for the 2015-16 financial year.

It is important to note that the average levels of funding available from 2010 to 2015 have historically been around £3.5 million per annum, made up of a core grant of approximately £2.75 million, which was supplemented by other in-year moneys obtained by the Department. Testament must be paid at this point to the strenuous efforts made by the Department and its officials to obtain those extra moneys for the rural transport fund year-on-year.

Rural community transport partnerships operate in the real world, and our organisations are not and should not be immune from sector cuts. Furthermore, it is clear that partnerships were expecting reductions in grant for 2015 and 2016. Indeed, all the partners around this table had submitted lower bids for grant as part of the business planning process for 2015-16 in recognition of the worsening fiscal climate for public spending. However, that said, the partnerships were extremely disappointed at the substantial and disproportionate reductions in grant funding available to deliver essential Dial a Lift services from 1 April 2015. In effect and in real terms, the cuts announced equated to a 33% reduction in available funding from 2013 to 2015. The scale and scope of those cuts will have a devastating impact on the most vulnerable and will greatly increase the potential for further social exclusion and isolation throughout all rural areas of Northern Ireland. In real terms, a 33% cut to the RTF budget, as was recently announced, equates to potentially 82,000 essential Dial a Lift journeys to often vulnerable, disabled and rurally isolated individuals being removed from the transport network in rural areas across Northern Ireland.

Of course, since 1 April 2015, all the partnerships have been implementing further efficiency measures to mitigate some of those potential reductions in service. However, we all must recognise that the transport provided by the partnerships through Dial a Lift has now, after a decade of successful operation, in many ways become the thin green line helping to hold together the fabric of rural communities across Northern Ireland. The transport we provide through the RTF is the only option for many of our most disadvantaged members, older people and the disabled. What worries us as providers is the apparent absence of any rural-proofing consideration to the cuts to rural community transport provision. Older people and people with disabilities in rural areas face a double challenge of having many services and amenities centralised in towns — services that they will now be unable to access due to the lack or diminishment of their transport options. Many of our vulnerable members and your constituents in rural areas rely entirely on rural transport services provided by the partnerships to access health care, social activities, community events and shops as well as to visit friends and family. Cutting rural community transport budgets will lead to vulnerable people who live in rural areas losing their only independent access to transport and losing access to essential services.

Furthermore, after the election, we will no doubt see further reductions in Translink's services on unprofitable routes — that is, rural routes — further exacerbating the already dire plight of the most disadvantaged rural dwellers, older people and the disabled. In rural areas, when Translink service availability and frequency is reduced, a viable alternative for those impacted could have been the demand response of transport services provided by the partnerships, but, by reducing the funding for the partnerships, which could potentially provide a more efficient alternative for those impacted by Translink service reductions, that option has now been severely curtailed. Once again, in the wake of those cuts, further social exclusion and rural isolation will quickly follow for our members and your

constituents, who could find, in the months ahead, that they have lost their Translink rural town service and that their local community transport provider can no longer provide a life-line option for travel.

To conclude, as we move forward into a challenging financial year, partnerships across Northern Ireland will endeavour, as much as possible, to protect essential rural transport services within the recent financial constraints imposed upon us and to collectively lobby through our regional network for grant to be restored to maintain vital rural community transport services. Our vulnerable members depend on us. We are depending on you to help us challenge these disproportionate cuts to rural transport services across Northern Ireland and to come up with a viable and urgent intervention on behalf of rural communities in the months ahead.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Thank you, Ian. Before we start, I know that I said at the start of the meeting that we would confine this, but I think that this is more important. The questions should be brief, but I will give a bit of latitude on the number of questions. We all have a hard copy on the costings that the Department has very kindly provided in the tabled papers. Are members content that we copy that and supply it to our friends from the community sector?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I think that it will become clear in a minute why I want to do that.

Reference was made in the past to the Committee in terms of the cuts. One of our members asked the Minister about that, and I think that the suggestion was 25%. However, in looking at the totals in this, which has been provided by the Department, I note that it says that you dropped from £3.6 million to £2.4 million. That is a third. It seems that the Committee was misled on a previous occasion. I know that is not your responsibility, but it is something that we will bear out with Ciaran when he comes up later. That represents a third.

There is also something else that is interesting. I know that four partnerships are represented here today, and I know that I am putting this on you now; I only saw it for the first time. Can you give me any rationale as to why there is a difference in the cuts for each of the partners? CDM, for example, has a 25% cut. I declare an interest as being a representative of South Antrim. South Antrim has been cut by 40%. There is a range from 25% to 40%. Some are in the high 30s. Has the Department given you any rationale for why some were cut more extremely than others?

Mr I Wilson: My colleague Paddy McEldowney will be happy to answer that question.

Mr Paddy McEldowney (Easilink Community Transport): This is something that we have raised with the Department over the last two or three years. We asked the Minister a question in recent weeks to try to clarify that, too. There seems to be a discrepancy. We do not really know whether there is a clear rationale for which partnership gets which level of funding. As I said, we have been trying to work with the Department to get to the bottom of that. At the minute, we put in an annual business plan individually, and we get a response individually to say yea or nay on the level of funding. There does not seem to be a set formula across the board.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): That is the thing that strikes me. Whenever a Minister or an official makes a headline announcement in terms of a cut to a sector, you would presume that everyone is going to be cut equal. You would not have had the chance to calculate that. The first one is 25%. The second one is 25%. The next one is 36%, and then they are 39%, 36%, 36.5%, 40% and 30%, so they are disproportionate. That is not really for you to answer, but, hopefully, that concerns the rest of the Committee as well. It seems to be irregular, and it would be interesting to see the rationale for that.

There is another interesting thing from that. I think that most of the Committee members here represent a rural constituency. Urban has a role to play as well. Obviously, Disability Action is needed, but it received only a 21% cut. As someone who represents a rural constituency, I know that using public transport is much more difficult than it is for someone who lives in an urban area. I am not asking you for a comment on that, but we will want to get into that. Everything seems to be rural-focused; it gets a disproportionate cut. The Department very helpfully provided us with this today. It clearly shows that it is disproportionate against the rural communities.

I will open it to the floor.

Mr Lynch: Ian, you said that you understand that there is a limited budget. Have you looked at where you could make efficiencies in your own organisations, and have you presented those?

Ms Anita Flanagan (Fermanagh Community Transport): I will take that question, Seán, if that is OK. Each partnership uses a mix of paid and volunteer drivers to provide a local service that allows individual rural dwellers who do not have access to private or public transport to access essential services in their community. We have always encouraged members to travel together where possible, but, in the past year, we have made changes to our service to ensure that that happens more. We call that a many-to-one service. So, rather than one person travelling individually, we get a number of people to travel in a vehicle together. Providing a many-to-one service is a more cost-effective way of delivering the Dial a Lift service. When we can identify travel patterns to a particular destination, we encourage other people to travel at a similar time. We have also been looking at some of the Translink services that are going to be cut or have been cut and have been encouraging the affected people to travel on the many-to-ones as well to try to combat the isolation of those passengers.

Each partnership also provides a not-for-profit group hire service to our local community groups, allowing those groups to offer a range of activities and opportunities to their rural members. That service contributes towards the financial burden of running vehicles, and income from that is apportioned appropriately towards tax, insurance and maintenance, therefore reducing the cost to the Department for the Dial a Lift service. For example, if a vehicle costs £10,000 a year and 30% of the work done on that is for community groups, only £7,000 of the cost of that vehicle is apportioned to Dial a Lift.

We have created efficiencies throughout the partnerships, with a mix of staff restructuring, redundancies and reorganisation. A number of the partnerships here have merged on the advice of the Department. We have created efficiencies. We have not seen the full extent of those efficiencies yet because they have only been in place for a number of years. We have raised our fares since 1 April. We consulted our members, and 98% of them said that they were happy with us raising fares. That is the first fare increase to the Dial a Lift service since its launch in 2009. We always work together as partnerships where possible to purchase goods and services in bulk to try to keep our costs to a minimum. Do not forget that all our organisations are charities and not-for-profit organisations, and our aim is to put as much of our money to front-line services as possible.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Anita, can I just stop you there? Maybe you are finished. There will be many more questions, but, if you could make your answers a wee bit briefer, it would allow us to ask more questions. We are limited for time. I do not mean to be rude when I say that, because it is important that we hear from you, but if we could keep them fairly succinct and to the question. Before you came in I suggested that members ask two questions each, but, given the importance of it, we are going to open that up a bit more, but if the answers are too long, we are going to run into difficulty. Seán.

Mr Lynch: I think we can pass it to other members. Thanks, Anita.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Thank you, Seán. I am just going to ask one, because I was trying to get my thoughts together. Seán Lynch actually asked a question, which we have a copy of. The answer gave a breakdown of the number of trips, the average mileage and the cost per trip. Can anyone explain the rationale, or has the Department raised any concerns about why there is such a variation in the cost of each of your groups? Again, for the benefit of members of the public: for the rural transport, we have a range from £10.01 per trip to the dearest provider at £33.61 a trip. Has the Department even asked for the rationale as to why there is such a variation in that?

Mr McEldowney: We have worked on that over a number of years, and we do work very closely with the Department. There are two issues that affect greatly the cost per trip. The first is that there is a critical mass. If you are not delivering that many trips, you still have to have a vehicle on the road, fuel it and pay a driver's wage, so there is a level of activity that you need to get to in order to become efficient. Then, as Anita mentioned briefly, when you have a critical mass of members and people wanting to travel, the key is encouraging people to travel collectively. If you are running about providing one-to-one transport right across a large geographical area, transport is a very expensive business. You have to try to encourage people to travel collectively. I think that those partnerships that have developed more many-to-one trips have a lower cost per trip, but, again, keep in mind that you need that critical mass, too. If the number of trips is low, it is going to tend to be more expensive as well.

Mr Ó hOisín: I was thinking about fuel. We are all very aware of it, and I am sure that it is a major cost factor in any transport scenario. Fuel is now 30p cheaper than it was this time last year or 18 months ago. Is that a factor in any savings? Have you saved anything from that?

Mr McEldowney: The highest cost we have is our drivers' wages, particularly with regard to operational costs. Fuel costs represent about half of that. In Easilink's case, our drivers' wages might cost close to £200,000, and we spend about £90,000 on fuel. For our organisation, saving 10%, 15% or 20% on fuel is a saving of about £10,000 or £15,000. We will absolutely take that and try to provide more trips with it, but we have been cut to approximately £180,000, so a 10%, 12% or 15% saving on fuel does not really negate a 33% cut in your overall budget, but you will take that 10% when you get it.

Ms A Flanagan: As well as that, as Ian alluded to, each of the organisations here had put in a lower bid for funding this year, and one of the reasons for the lower bid was the efficiencies and lower fuel costs.

Mr Ó hOisín: OK. I have talked to you all on many occasions. In an ideal world, what would be the most effective and efficient way of funding community transport?

Mr McEldowney: It is very difficult to give a straight answer and say that this is the only way, but I will give our opinion, and we presented it again to the Minister recently. We feel that the cost per trip is the best way, but there is a wee caveat with that. It cannot be applied on a blanket basis across the board. There may be room for some manoeuvring there, but it should not be a difference of double the cost or triple the cost. We would start with cost per trip and work from there. I think that should be the key. Again, you want your money to follow the service activity. You have to pay for trips, so that is the best way to encourage the money to be converted from grant funding into people getting lifted.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Anita, you said you all made a voluntary reduction, and that has come up twice now. Taking Fermanagh as an example, what sort of reduction did you suggest?

Ms A Flanagan: We put in a bid of £80,000 less for the current year.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): What is that as a percentage, approximately?

Ms A Flanagan: Off the top of my head, it is 17%. Our funding last year was £575,000, and we put in for £80,000 less than that. We thought that we were helping the Department to make its efficiencies.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Effectively, then, you finished up second worst.

Ms A Flanagan: Yes.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Does anybody else have figures off the top of their head for their partnership?

Mr Billy Moore (North Coast Community Transport): Off the top of my head, North Coast's bid this year was £40,000 less. That equates to around a 9% reduction in the bid. Also, North Coast was promising an additional 3,000 trips but ended up getting a 36.5% cut, equating to £241,000. That is damning to our service, to be honest.

Mr McNarry: You are very welcome. After discussion last week, if I may say so, Chairman, I speak for all the Committee when I say that these cuts are absolutely disgraceful. What length of time did you have or was taken in discussions and negotiations between you and the departmental officials on the cuts?

Mr McEldowney: My understanding is that, before Christmas, there is usually an annual presentation of a business plan to be then presented with a letter of offer in advance of the new year starting. We were instructed to get a business case to the Department by 18 or 19 December with a view to getting a letter of offer by the end of January or early February. It is not a laughing matter, but the letter of offer arrived on 1 April. We had been planning for different scenarios in the case of a cut of 10% or 20%, and, on 11 March, we were instructed that the overall budget had been reduced to £2.4 million,

so we knew that it was going to be dire. We each got our letters of offer on 1 April, the first day of the new year.

Mr McNarry: Non-negotiable.

Mr McEldowney: That would be the case in any year. You are told, "There is your letter of offer. Sign it or don't sign it".

Mr McNarry: I think that sums it up, does it not?

I was very interested in what Ian was saying in his presentation. Have you had discussions with the Department on the potential of your organisations filling gaps in the services neglected by Translink and those that are likely to be removed in rural areas? Has that been or would it be part of a business plan?

Mr I Wilson: We would dearly love to engage with the Department on this issue, Mr McNarry, because we feel that, with the likely further reductions in Translink services in rural areas, there will be a gap there that we can fill at the moment, but we need to position ourselves into a place where we can actively achieve some sort of positive result for those rural dwellers. We would welcome at a very early stage an intervention by the Department involving the partnerships, other stakeholders and MLAs to try to effect some sort of emergency intervention in terms of funding that could perhaps be put in place to alleviate those difficulties now before it happens two months from now.

Mr McNarry: I can see the sense in that. I will finish now, but, on the back of that, I wonder if the Committee could look ASAP at being a channel for that intervention. A very interesting case is being made, and we all know how our rural areas will be affected by Translink walking away. I hope that we can come back to that quickly; the Committee should do that.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I am sure that members will agree to that. There is always one question in the room, and I will ask it because I was one of the ones who asked it about Translink. At the end of each year, what reserves will you carry over? Do you have any reserves?

Mr Moore: All the partnerships have reserves policies and reserves. We were advised by the Department in 2009-2010 to ensure that we all had reserves to cover our liabilities. It is also —

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Sorry, Billy — what liabilities? Let us be clear about what liabilities the organisations have.

Mr Moore: I will give the North Coast figures. In November 2014, the redundancy liability alone in North Coast was sitting at £91,000, but, more than that, the leasing liability of the vehicles was sitting at £290,000. We revise our reserves and forward those to the Department on an annual basis. They change because bus replacement means that you need more buses. There are more payments, and so there are more liabilities. It may drop from £290,000 next year, but, in the following year, it could go back up to £270,000 for leasing liabilities. Having reserves has also been encouraged by the Department and is part of the Department's terms and conditions. It is supported by NICVA and the Charity Commission as being good governance, bearing in mind that we have to protect our voluntary boards as well. We need to have reserves. Yes, we have reserves, but I do not think that, at this stage, any of the partnerships will have the level of reserves that is stated in their policies. We have not reached that level yet.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I am being reminded that even DFP suggests that community organisations should hold reserves. We have talked about Translink, which is a very large organisation that holds a considerable amount, and the Minister and his officials defended the amount that it holds on the basis of its operating costs. The community sector should be no different. Your response to David was interesting, and I will take you up on that. If you got your letter offer on 1 April, which is the first day of the new financial year, and given that people will have booked the service two weeks before that for that week —

Mr Moore: I think that I know the point that you are getting to, Chair. I forgot to mention that we are using our reserves to fund the service because our first-quarter payment has yet to be received.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Billy, it seems as if you are reading my mind, because that is what I was wondering. Given that you are working up to the end of March, you are not in a position to know how much the Department will fund you on 1 April. I am wondering how you work effectively with the community to book trips going forward and how you are going to pay for that.

Ms A Flanagan: We use our reserves as cash flow.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Is that how you have done it historically?

Ms A Flanagan: Yes. In recent years, we have been paid our grant in arrears.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): You get paid in arrears: how far in arrears?

Ms A Flanagan: Up to a quarter. We have been asked to apply for our grant a quarter in arrears, and then you receive it a couple of weeks after that, so we need to have a quarter's money in our account

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): That is interesting, too.

Mr Dallat: I am not sure if the members are aware that the Minister answered a question on community transport yesterday in the Assembly. Either he has a serious numeracy problem or I do. Since I know Billy best, I will put this to him: is it 11% or 33%? If it is 33%, what are the implications in real life?

Mr Moore: As far as we are concerned, John, historically, from 2010 until last year, we were averaging about £3.5 million. The Department will say the core fund is £2.75 million, but the service is a £3.5 million or £3.6 million service. This year, we have been reduced to £2.4 million. In my book, that is 33% off the service. I touched on the impact. Potentially, you are talking about 82,000 trips across the Province. In your area, John, the north coast, you are talking about potentially 18,000 trips lost — to the most vulnerable, I might add.

Mr Dallat: In your opinion, is there any other organisation that could meet the needs of the members who you are supplying the service to? I am mindful, from living in the area, that you cater for people with various disabilities and other problems that prevent them from using Translink, even if a Translink service existed.

Mr Moore: I am convinced at this stage that no one else could deliver the service better. The main reason for that is the involvement of volunteers. We have 60 options on the north coast to deliver transport, so we turn nothing away. We try to deliver as much as we can, but that is because we have 40 volunteer car drivers using their own cars to help us. The flexibility within North Coast Community Transport, and, indeed, the rest of the partnerships, means that we try to cater for almost every call that comes in. One of our big fears is potential tendering, and the volunteering element would be excluded if that was to happen. That would be disastrous for our type of service.

Mr Dallat: This Government, who, hopefully, are going out of business, have always said that greater use should be made of volunteers. Here we have an example of an incredible use of volunteers but who have been given a budget that will make an absolute nonsense of it. Is that not disgraceful?

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): It is twofold for me, John, because I am actually listening to what Billy said. They have made a disproportionate cut, which will make it virtually impossible. However, if it is the ambition of departmental officials to tender the service out, you are not going to tender for volunteers, you are going to tender for paid employees. That effectively means that the cost of the service, if there is a service, is going to go up.

We really need to drill into the Department to find out what is going on and what its vision is, because the two things do not sit with me. If you are getting someone working basically for free, you are certainly not going to go out to tender and get people to do that on a voluntary basis. That is something that we should examine. I will leave you that one, John, for Ciaran.

Ms A Flanagan: Not only will you lose the volunteers if the service is tendered, but the people who are most vulnerable and isolated, and furthest away from the main hub of the contracted operator, might not receive a service or would not be a priority.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I might disagree with you, Anita, in that they may, but the Department will have to pay much more to provide the service, and that is what is worrying me. We are in difficult times. You came to the table as willing partners making your own reductions, but if it is the vision of departmental officials to put that service out to tender, surely to goodness they will be considering the people in rural constituencies. If they are considering putting the service out to tender, then it is not going to be nearly as cost-effective. You got a cut of one third. I can imagine that the total budget you got last year would more than double if they went to tender.

Ms A Flanagan: At least double. I will give you an example from my area, which is 25 miles from our office in Enniskillen, and we have volunteers who live there. The local health centre is five miles down the road, so rather than sending a vehicle 25 miles to bring somebody five miles, we use our volunteers. The cost is minimal, and there is the added benefit of knowing the person who is picking you up.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I think we will explore that.

Mr Dallat: I think Anita is saying is that many of their clients have serious, complex issues which could not be catered for by contracting the service out to some commercial organisation or whatever. First of all, people probably would not travel, because they need to know the people who are taking them; they need to feel secure. It is far more than that and I cannot adequately explain, it but I am aware of it because I know, through Billy, what they do.

Mr Moutray: The questions that I wish to raise have been covered. I just want to reiterate what other members said. I am familiar with it because the Down Armagh Rural Transport (DART) Partnership office in Lurgan is next door to my constituency office. Given the volume of people who are transported about, it will have an impact on the most weak and needy in our society if this is withdrawn. It will also impact on the many volunteers. It gives a lot of retired people a purpose in their life to go out and work on this. The relationships that have been built up will never be replaced. Surely the common-sense approach from the Department would have been to hold this for one year to see what the impact was going to be on Translink services and then come back and look at it. It is just unbelievable.

Mr McAleer: Stephen has touched on what I was going to ask you. You will be aware that Translink has a number of routes out for consultation. Many of those are in rural areas. One area that I am thinking of is the Sperrins, which I, Cathal and others represent. Hopefully, these services will not be cut, but, in the event of them being trimmed, scaled back or whatever, do you think that that will put added pressure on you to deliver services?

Mr McEldowney: It certainly will. We have had examples in recent years of an odd route already having been cut. Two or three years ago, a route from Glenmornan and Artigarvan into Derry was cut, but, to be fair, Translink consulted with us. There were only two or three people using the service regularly. We committed to signing them up as members and trying to look after them as best we could. There are examples in the past where we have done that, but they are one-off, small examples. If somebody comes and tells me that eight routes in west Tyrone are going off, we certainly do not have the resources to pick up any of that demand. Unless we have an existing many-to-one service in that area and those people are prepared to fit around our very limited timetable, we certainly would not be able to replace a Translink route and deliver service five days a week in Gortin. It would be, "You get a Tuesday morning," but that might not suit. We might be able to offer a very limited replacement service. These people will qualify for our service. They live in rural areas and do not have access to their own transport, so they will meet the criteria to join. However, we will not have the resources to deliver any level of service beyond maybe once a week. It will not be replacing like with like. We do not have the resources to replicate the Translink routes that will be pulled off.

Ms A Flanagan: On top of Translink services being pulled, we are facing extra demand from the likes of health services and educational services because they are pulling their budgets or closing or moving day centres. We are going to get more demand that way as well. We think that there is a greater need for more cross-departmental work. Health and Education should come in with DRD and put some money into its pot. If they did, we might be able to deliver better services for the people in rural areas.

Mr McAleer: I do not really have another question, but my point is that many of us around here represent rural areas. Lots of the communities that we represent are very vulnerable, isolated communities. What we are proposing to axe in this budget will further increase people's sense of isolation and vulnerability. I just want to make that point.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): The things that gets me about it, Declan, is that, if these folks had come looking more money, we would have had to have been honest with them. However, they came as honest brokers making a genuine reduction themselves. That is the bit that I am finding difficulty with. They are coming to the table as honest brokers making a genuine reduction themselves, and then the Department is slashing it by twice as much again. I have a difficulty with that.

Mr McNarry: If I may say so, it is also compliments to the Committee because we have picked up on this issue. This was just going to be swept under the table and let go by in a hard-luck story. However, our communities have come to us to say that these people need saved. It is not often that I ask for ourselves to be complimented, but we should be. We back you, so do not let go.

Ms A Flanagan: We appreciate that.

Mr Byrne: Like the rest of the Committee, I am very much in favour of what the community transport partnerships have done and the service that they have provided. I will ask two comparative questions about you and Translink. It is almost David and Goliath. Do you guys get any capital grants towards the purchase of new vehicles?

Ms A Flanagan: No.

Mr McEldowney: We have not done in recent years. The last time that we did was about six or seven years ago. Those vehicles have lived their life. When they were replaced recently, that was done through revenue funding, with us putting down a deposit out of our reserves and then paying for ongoing running costs through the years.

Mr Byrne: So there is no capital replacement programme.

Mr McEldowney: Not in the last five or six years.

Mr Byrne: Secondly, do you get fuel rebate?

Ms A Flanagan: No.

Mr Byrne: What would be the quantum of a fuel rebate? What would it be worth to you if you could get that on similar lines as Translink?

Mr McEldowney: I am not familiar with what the percentage is on the fuel rebate, but, as I said earlier, we spend £90,000 on fuel, so whatever the rebate is —

Mr Byrne: Chairman, we will have to find out what the comparison is. Obviously, you are being handicapped by having no capital grant towards new vehicles.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): It is a 43p per litre reduction.

Mr Byrne: It is a massive change.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): It is more than one third, so that takes your £90,000 down to £60,000.

Mr McEldowney: In a year like we are facing, that would be an absolute godsend.

Mr Byrne: Lastly, is it your opinion that this Department is out to shaft the community transport partnerships?

Mr McEldowney: Definitely not, because the Department has been very supportive up to now. This is the first time that we have been hit hard. For five years, it has been supporting us and finding money

right, left and centre. This year, it has been a shock and more than we anticipated, but historically the Department has been very supportive of rural community transport.

Mr McAleer: I want to make just a very brief point. I picked up on the comment that Anita made about the importance of cross-departmental work. That was a very ironic comment. We carried out a lengthy inquiry into this very subject and made a whole series of recommendations, one of which is what you are after proposing. It is an indictment of the Department that there has not been more of that report actioned. It is something that we, as a Committee, should be keeping on its agenda very firmly.

Mr Ó hOisín: A report has been released about the investment in public transport — £1.1 billion since 2002 — but these folk operate on a shoestring and give a sterling service. There is a complete dichotomy between the funding and the delivery.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Agreed.

Mr Lynch: I have just a quick one. I talked to you about this, Anita. Did you reckon that the figure that the Department gave for administration costs was different than the reality?

Ms A Flanagan: Yes. Based on the response that you received on the administration side, a lot of the partnerships seem to be spending 45% to 50% of their budget on administration staffing costs. The question that was clearly asked was what is the spend on administration staff, not drivers. We do not know where the Department got its figures from but in our organisation it is in and around 20% or 22%. I asked the rest of the partnerships, and most of them have come back with similar figures. We may need to look at that response again and get a more accurate figure.

Mr Moore: Our accountant has identified that the answer that came from the Department actually covered all staffing costs, including drivers, but the question asked was about back-office staffing costs.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): The way that the Department has answered that makes it read badly.

Ms A Flanagan: We received a letter of offer stating how much of the grant we were allowed to spend on back-office administration costs. That figure was £124,000, which was 21% of our budget, not 45%.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Members are content that we have asked all the questions. We do not normally do this, but we will bring in the Department, and, if you want to stay in the Public Gallery, we may call you back if something arises. This is one of these ones where the Department can say what it likes when people have gone. If you would like to take a seat in the Public Gallery, we may bring you back to clarify any of the issues.