



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

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

9 January 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

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

Witnesses:

Ms Kellie Armstrong	Community Transport Association
Mr Ian Wilson	Community Transport Association
Mr Stephen Wood	Community Transport Association

The Chairperson: I welcome to the meeting Stephen Wood, Bob Parks, Ian Wilson and Kellie Armstrong. You are all very welcome. You have 10 minutes in which to make a presentation, after which you should leave yourself open for members' questions.

Ms Kellie Armstrong (Community Transport Association): Thank you very much, Chairperson. First, I apologise that Bob Parks is not with us. Unfortunately, he slipped on the ice and cracked his head this morning, so he is away to the hospital. However, Stephen Wood and Ian Wilson are with me today. I want to rattle through our presentation quite quickly and try to keep it below the 10-minute mark, because I appreciate that you have questions.

The Community Transport Association (CTA) is a national charity that provides advice and support for community organisations across Northern Ireland. Community transport (CT) exists to meet the travel and social needs of people to whom those would otherwise be denied, providing accessible and affordable transport to achieve social inclusion. Community transport is, however, a generic term covering the wide range of access solutions usually developed to cover specifically identified transport needs, typically run by a local community for local community neighbourhoods on a not-for-profit basis. Community transport is concerned with meeting the community's identified access need rather than running scheduled routes or operating for profit.

We have over 3,000 volunteers in Northern Ireland, and we try our best to meet the community's needs by using a mix of minibuses and volunteers' own cars. Ten per cent of Community Transport Association members receive funding from the Department for Regional Development (DRD), and they deliver the Dial-a-Lift project, which provides transport for people, particularly older people and

those with disabilities in rural areas. These are referred to as rural community transport partnerships, which I will refer to as RCTPs in the presentation.

In answering the inquiry, we looked at the first question of assessing public and community bus transport requirements. Public transport is limited to Translink service provision, but due to the commercially sensitive nature of its business, we do not have access to information about Translink. Therefore, we, unfortunately, cannot provide evidence to the Committee about Translink. I will talk about the money side of things in a moment.

Community transport has approximately 700 vehicles in action across Northern Ireland. That includes minibuses, people carriers and volunteers' own cars. We deliver transport, using those vehicles, for local health services such as GPs, dentists and pharmacies; for education, recreation and social care; and for people to go to church or to get shopping. We provide a linking service with Translink to enable rurally isolated people to use the public transport network.

As regards bus transport infrastructure costs, we can only comment, of course, on the community transport side of things. If you look at what funding is made available, you see that DRD provides £3.7 million a year through the rural transport fund. Approximately £1 million of that budget is provided to Translink's rural division. The rest, £2.7 million, is provided to the RCTP network and CTA, which provides specific support services for the rural transport fund. The subsidy for the community transport organisation equates to about 60% of the cost of running the Dial-a-Lift service. The rest of that money is made up through the collection of non-profit passenger fares, donations, fundraising and volunteer input. I mentioned that we have 3,000 volunteers, and they contribute approximately £2 million of in-kind benefit for the dial-a-lift services. Obviously, volunteers provide services without any salary costs.

At present — although this is not exactly tested because we have not promoted the Dial-a-Lift service — community transport has to refuse about 5% of all requests for transport on the basis that we do not have the resources to do the work. We just do not have the vehicles or the drivers.

Most of our requests for transport are health-related and are from people requesting access to hospitals. At the moment, we receive no resources from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Very small community grants are provided through local health trusts to provide some transport, but not for hospital appointments. Therefore, when we looked at the infrastructure costs, the CT sector and CTA called for an integrated accessible transport strategy to combine all expenditure on transport and provide a central planning division, preferably within DRD, to take forward the better use of public money for transport.

When we looked at the interrelationships in the delivery of public and community bus operations, we thought that we need to better define public transport. In our response document, we stated that community transport is not allowed to provide services for the general public. Under the section 10b permit, we can only provide services to our members or those we are constituted to help. So, if public transport is limited to Translink, it is a bit difficult to consider a way forward for how that interrelationship works. There are other public transport providers out there.

There are some local partnership arrangements between community transport and Translink. We are working with Translink in several different ways to try to link people through to its services. We are working with DRD, Transport NI and the mid-Ulster pilot to establish whether there is a possibility of integrating services for better public transport provision. We have discussed with Transport NI whether community transport could use Translink depots to provide people with linking services. However, to be honest, if there are costs attached to that, the community transport sector could not afford to pay them. We have found that there is a lack of commitment. Other Departments have said that it is not within their strategic remit to consider transport, so there are no other opportunities for us to have interrelationships with other Departments to provide transport solutions.

We asked the Committee to examine how much money is spent on transport across the whole of government, how it is purchased, whether efficiencies could be created by considering other transport functions already being delivered through other Departments, and whether there could be a coming together of that. We think that there should be an expansion of the public transport reform function within Transport NI to look, in that planning division, at where people wish to travel; how they currently travel; why they need to travel at a particular time; the best mode to get them there; where links between modes can be made; and how efficiencies could be generated. We also think that consideration should be given to how transport is tendered and contracted and whether that is the best way forward. At the moment, the community transport sector is excluded from all tenders and

contracts on the basis that we are not allowed to act commercially. We would very much welcome the provision by DRD of appropriate transport planning for all Departments to integrate the services. We welcome local community transport plans and want the Committee to push those forward to ensure that the needs of local communities are considered. We also asked for cross-departmental agreement to allow the sharing of resources. In our paper, we have given a few examples, such as health or education minibuses being used for community access needs during periods of downtime.

We looked at best practice in the provision of integrated public and community transport options. It is a bit difficult because it is very segmented at the moment. Local arrangements have been developed that show that community transport links passengers to the public transport network. However, Translink's journey planner information does not include information for passengers to show that community transport could get them to its services. There needs to be an integrated, accessible transport strategy and plan that enables the better integration of services. We provided examples of strategies used in Devon and Torbay and by the Olympic Delivery Authority where that came together. The mid-Ulster local transport plan pilot may be a step in the right direction to achieving a cross-departmental transport strategy, but, already, there appears to be internal departmental barriers that may prevent that from going forward.

We then looked at the future of the provision of public and community bus options. In our response, we provided some idea of a work programme to go forward during the current term of government, up to 2015, that would look at the strategy and how we could take that forward. From 2015 to 2020, there would be the development of a plan, with that plan being implemented in 2020 with cross-departmental consideration and all resources being pooled.

I have some concerns from within the sector and from CTA that the transport policy prioritisation framework that DRD is taking forward reviews the current priorities and will not significantly enable innovation expenditure to be released for new strategies or better ways of thinking for the future. Although the framework is certainly a good process, what it is gathering for consideration is quite limited. We reiterate the need for cross-departmental identification of public transport needs and a pooling of resources to enable effective and efficient solutions to be realised.

In conclusion, CTA's vision is of a fairer society where everyone, irrespective of where they live or their individual circumstances, has the mobility and accessible transport services that they need to live full and active lives. The Community Transport Association's aim is to identify and help the passenger more so than the provision of vehicles and on-the-ground transport solutions. We will work with everyone and welcome the opportunity to respond to the Committee inquiry. Indeed, we asked the Committee a number of our own questions. We asked for the development of an integrated, accessible transport plan and strategy incorporating all Departments and utilising all available resources and modes of transport, and that can be led by DRD. We ask that the community transport sector is not excluded from the process, because our ability to work within local communities to identify transport and access gaps is vital to ensuring that the public transport network can deliver access for all. We ask that an appropriate investment is made to provide information and to educate the community on the alternatives to car use and about the available public transport options, including community transport, health transport, education transport, private transport and taxis. We ask for appropriate financial support to be made available to transport suppliers, including the community transport sector, to ensure that the access needs of the community can be met where conventional transport is not appropriate or available for the individual. We ask for the transport sector to be provided with appropriate and financially supported resources such as passenger transport advisory bodies, including CTA and the Federation of Passenger Transport on the private side, to ensure that the health and safety of passengers, value for money and quality of standards are maintained for the community and the Department. We also ask for all Departments to be challenged on their position regarding transport, including their budget spend and their commitment to enabling a more efficient approach by working in partnership to share resources.

Finally, thank you very much for allowing us this opportunity. At the moment, the Community Transport Association and the community transport sector are open to all partnership working. However, our one caveat is that we do not know where we will be in a year's time. The Department of the Environment (DOE) is carrying out a review of operator licensing, and that review may not see community transport continuing in its current form in Northern Ireland. We are working with DOE officials to try to see that the legislation, which will not be going out to consultation, allows us still to meet community need. However, it is a concern for us. Although we would very much appreciate being involved in the strategy and the plan as it goes forward, we hope that we will be here to be able to provide that advice, depending on the DOE outcome. Thank you.

The Chairperson: Thank you for the presentation, Kellie. I will start with a couple of questions. At your conference in August 2012, you stated that the community transport sector has the knowledge to identify specific local transport needs and skills. You specified the need for an efficient integrated transport service. Has your organisation conducted a needs analysis? If so, what conclusions arose from it? During the same conference, you had a round-table discussion and you posed three questions, which I will now put to you. Is there a joined-up approach? Are there any policy barriers to sharing resources and better planning? And who is monitoring departmental partnership working?

Ms Armstrong: I will go back to your first point about the needs analysis. CTA, as an organisation, works within local communities. We work with local authorities across the UK. Indeed, in Northern Ireland, we have worked with the Department for Regional Development. Each of the individual community transport organisations is made up of voluntary boards from within their communities. It is those voluntary boards and the input of communities that identify where transport is needed and where the gaps are. That is an ongoing and continuous process. DRD has done some customer analysis of people who use community transport. The knowledge that we have is because our people are in the community, and it is our community that brings forward what they need. We have done some work within each of the individual community transport organisations to look at where the needs are. Are they in health or education? Is it a more general need, such as getting to shops, visiting relatives or going to church? We are limited by the current funding to ensure that DRD's Dial-a-Lift service is delivered, for instance. We would very much like to do so much more. There has not yet been investment in a formal production of papers on a needs analysis. I know that the Consumer Council is reviewing the Dial-a-Lift process across Northern Ireland. I expect the report on that to be out before the summer.

Community transport is as it says: it is community transport. As far as a joined-up approach among ourselves is concerned, we all work together. For example, we share vehicles. If a church has a vehicle that is sitting all day not being used, a community transport organisation will go in and ask, "Can we go in and borrow that for better use within the community?" We try to work with Translink. We have met the Federation of Passenger Transport sporadically over the years. We work with health providers on the ground in local areas to see where we can go forward. We have had meetings with different community organisations where transport issues have come up. We have an active input to the Patient and Client Council. We work with the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), and so on. Community transport always seems to push the door open a wee bit more.

You asked about the policy barriers that are there. At the moment, the Department for Regional Development's rural transport fund limits the activities of the community transport operators that are funded to provide Dial-a-Lift and small group travel. That is Monday to Friday from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm, and it is restricted to very local bits and pieces. To be honest, the biggest policy barrier that we will have is the DOE legislation that is coming forward. We do not know whether, in the future, we will be able to deliver what we are doing now.

Who is monitoring the Department? The community and voluntary sector works with the Department. We have quite a strong partnership with DRD. We work with anybody we can. However, as for monitoring the Department, that is for the Department and yourselves.

Mr Stephen Wood (Community Transport Association): I will come in on the needs analysis. My background is as a professional transport planner. A detailed needs analysis has not been done. However, given the amount of travel that is undertaken from the rural areas by people who do not have cars or access to conventional public transport in the form of Translink's services, which clearly cannot reach the rural areas, and given the amount of people with particular travel difficulties, whether disabilities or whatever, it is absolutely clear to me that those needs are relatively huge and are not being provided for. Although clearly there could be a needs analysis based on census information and surveys, and so on, that work has not been done. Rather, what the Community Transport Association members do is identify needs on a kind of word-of-mouth and contact basis. However, from my point of view, that is only the tip of the iceberg.

The Chairperson: Kellie, you said that you do try to work with Translink. That sounded to me like a statement made somewhat in frustration. Is it a frustrating exercise?

Ms Armstrong: It is not actually. What I meant by that is that we try to work with Translink in whatever way we can. The Community Transport Association does not deliver routes. We have an agreement with Translink — it may be this that creates part of our frustration — whereby we encourage community members to travel together. We may get 15 or 16 people onto a minibus on a

regular basis. For example, on a certain day of the week, they may all be heading into the nearest town or village to go to the chiropody or podiatrist clinic. Once we fill that bus and can show for a period of three months that that route is achievable and economically viable, we hand it over to Translink. We have not got to that stage yet because people still want their individual travel needs met.

We work with Translink: it comes along to the community transport managers' forum; we lease vehicles from it; it provides depot parking; it helps us with maintenance; and we can access fuel from it, which we pay for. We do all that but, to be honest, with the strategic plan, we do not know how they plan their routes or make a decision on the routes that will be withdrawn. We know that it is down to economics. However, we sometimes see difficulties where the local community could have a service, but we do not have the economic proof that it would work for Translink. That can be a bit frustrating. However, Translink has always been quite professional with us. It understands that we have a very different remit. We try to fill its need by providing passengers to the network to travel further afield across Northern Ireland.

To be honest: it is sometimes the community that causes us the frustration because people do not want to use public transport; that can be difficult.

The Chairperson: There is a heavy subsidy for rural transport. Transport in rural areas will never be profitable. Is there no consultation when Translink decides to withdraw a route? Is there no negotiation to try to secure that route? The route may well serve a very good purpose within the rural community. How do you find Translink in such scenarios?

Mr Ian Wilson (Community Transport Association): Over the past decade, a number of routes in my area have been proven not to be economically viable. There has been some engagement with the local community prior to those routes being withdrawn, but it might not have been sufficient as a consultation exercise. Translink generally engages with the community at a level. My experience of local engagement with Translink is that it is a professional relationship. It provides us with a number of important operational aids such as maintenance, use of depots, washing, etc. The will is there from Translink to engage with local communities. It is often a very frustrating exercise for Translink when it has to withdraw routes, and, obviously, there is the attendant flak that goes along with that. However, we, as community transport partnerships, are not actually involved in that process.

The Chairperson: Is there consultation about withdrawing a service? Is there consultation about how, between community transport providers and Translink, a service could be maintained for the betterment of a rural community?

Ms Armstrong: Under the 10b permit, CTA cannot deliver routes and collect the general public. We can collect only those people who sign up as members to use us. We tend to find out that the route is gone when the community finds out. There is not that type of consultation. We will fill the gap if we have the resources.

The Chairperson: Should there be that type of consultation?

Ms Armstrong: There should, because it gives us a bit of an idea that there could be an area in which there are people — it may be only a few people — along a rural road who will be left isolated. Perhaps that would be more helpful. As far as I am aware, there is not a formal, written-down consultation process for the removal of routes or the adoption of routes. So, we are not sure about that.

Mr Lynch: Thank you for the presentation. I come from and represent a rural community in Fermanagh. It has been suggested that the local transport services and community transport services should come under the one funding stream. Would you agree with that? Would you, as an organisation, be prepared to work with it?

Ms Armstrong: I am not sure what funding stream that would be. At the moment, Rural Lift for South West Fermanagh and FAST Rural Transport receive money from the rural transport fund. Enniskillen has the door-to-door system. At the moment, community transport is excluded from door-to-door. It is a commercially tendered contract that we are not allowed to bid for unless we become commercial. I have to say that it would be very helpful if it was under the one stream. We deal with the needs of passengers on the basis of passengers. It would be a good use of use of resources.

Mr Lynch: What I am talking about is under the Health and Education Departments.

Ms Armstrong: I know that the mid-Ulster pilot has looked at that. I was not aware that it was being taken forward in Fermanagh. It is very welcome, because the better use of resources means that more people in the community can get access, and we will of course work with that. The Departments of Health and Education work under the section 10b permit, as does the Community Transport Association, so we would work with anybody, as long as the community and individuals' transport needs are being met. We will work with anybody to make sure that is done.

Mr Lynch: Can you estimate the potential savings if we had a localised integrated transport system?

Ms Armstrong: How long is a piece of string? I am not too sure; it is difficult to say. If we knew what the budget was initially, how much the Health Department, the Education Department and DRD were all spending on public transport, we could get all of that together. There is bound to be duplication there. I mentioned before that I thought there would be a £20 million saving if there was an integration of the use of education vehicles in the evenings and weekends during their downtime, but as to the opportunity that we have for a saving, it will run into millions, but I cannot say exactly how many.

Mr Dallat: Thanks for the presentation. I come from a rural area, and sometimes I think that public transport is a bit like education in that it has not been reviewed since 1947. In the meantime, rural communities and the people who live in them, irrespective of age, effectively do not have a public transport system outside school buses. Pubs in my area are either closed or are going to close because today we respect the laws on drinking and driving and do not do it, and there is no other way. Public community transport, in effect, does not match the needs of the public, other than, perhaps, people who are going to have their feet treated, or things like that. That is easy, because there is a timetable for that, but, outside that, do you agree with me that there is an urgent need to reassess the whole thing in the interests of that rural economy and of all of the people who live there? Effectively, apart from walking the streets or the roads at night with armbands on, they do not have any transport.

Mr Wood: I will answer that as a transport planner. The issue is that, clearly, rural public transport is very expensive to provide. The issue for the Assembly and the Executive is about the extent of subsidy that they want to provide for public transport services. Obviously, there are various ways, and we all welcome the fact that that box is being opened and being looked at. In Education and Health, there are various resources out there, including vehicles. There is undoubtedly a better and more efficient way of doing it, but the reality is that it costs money and, like everything else, priorities have to be set. Rural public transport is quite different from urban public transport and the likes of the Metro services and the trams, or whatever, which can be run on a commercial basis.

Mr Dallat: "Commercially sensitive" is the term that Translink uses incessantly when trying to avoid answering questions that might be helpful. Do you think there is an abuse of that term?

Mr Wood: Sorry, will you repeat that?

Mr Dallat: The term "commercially sensitive" is in your report, but I recognise it because it is one that I frequently get in response to tabled questions on the viability of public transport. They simply do not tell you because they see it as commercially sensitive. Have you any ideas about how we can begin to extract the information that we need from Translink without it hiding behind the term "commercially sensitive", which it probably has a rubber stamp for?

Mr Wood: The normal way of tackling all that is to create a strategic transport plan for the whole of a province and an area and to investigate what standards are required and how much that would cost to supply, in ballpark terms, using industry standard costings. Then, once that transport plan across all modes, urban and rural, has been agreed by the Assembly or whatever, that is the funding that is available and those are the services that one tries to deliver. We have not done that for some time. That, as I understand it, is what the public transport authority coming from public transport reform is set to try to address.

Mr Dallat: Who should do that? Are you capable of doing that? Are you willing?

Ms Armstrong: We already do that for the rural transport fund. It determines how much money is available through grants to those 10% of the community transport groups. It is monitored to the nth

degree: we know exactly how much money we are getting, and we have to prove how we are spending it efficiently. I am not going to say that we are as efficient as we can be; we are always trying to improve that. It is very open and clear. All the community transport audited accounts are publicly available because we are charities and we have to be mindful of the community that we serve. We have that system in place for the rural transport fund with DRD. We receive an amount of money, we are told exactly how it is going to be spent and what it can be spent on, and we deliver services on that basis.

Mr Dickson: Apologies for being a little late back into the room. You are very welcome. Thank you for your presentation, which I have read. When local government is reformed, hopefully next year, it will have a community planning role. How do you see yourselves and Translink fitting into that community planning role?

Ms Armstrong: At the moment, I am very concerned about it. So far, we have been told that the Northern Ireland public transport authority will consider the public transport network, including the main routes and the high-speed frequency routes. As far as we are aware, there will be no funding for local community plans and local transport plans. If a community identifies a gap in access, I believe that the assumption at the moment is that it will look to its community transport organisation, whether that is the church, the school or a specific community transport organisation, to try to fill that gap. There will be no funding for it. Community transport organisations will, of course, be there. We will try to identify whether there is a bus sitting round the corner and how many volunteer car drivers we can recruit. We will try to meet need, but to be honest, it is not going to be subsidised or financially supported. We are concerned, because it is one of those gaps that local government does not have a remit for.

Mr Dickson: Councils are going to have that remit.

Ms Armstrong: They are. We have asked the councils whether we can explain who we are, what we can do and what we can help them with. They are unsure of their future, so they are not talking to us on that basis.

Mr Dickson: Can you briefly expand on the issues that you will have with the licensing arrangements with DOE?

Ms Armstrong: DOE is going through a review of the operator licensing system, including a community operator's permit — a section 10b permit. The section 10b permit needs to be modernised; we agree with DOE completely on that. We are very concerned because the current paper states that the rural community transport partnerships that receive funding from DRD will be made commercial. We will lose our volunteers, because volunteers will not be able to work under a commercial licence. Other community church groups, and so on, would be very restricted in what they could do.

We prefer an alternative option that is closer to the GB model but, to date, we have been told that that may not be possible because Northern Ireland has a regulated transport system and across the water does not. Basically, something considerably different will happen in Northern Ireland. We do not know whether we are going to be here in a year's time. There will always be community transport. Ian's organisation has been in existence for over 40 years. The community reacts to what the community needs. Unfortunately, we will go back a step. It is a difficult one, and we are very concerned. EU regulations are being considered, which means it does not have to put this through as primary legislation. On that basis, it will not be going out to consultation; it is something that will happen quite quickly. We hope that we can have input and that it will have some sort of partnership working with the community and voluntary sector to take it forward. We can just wait to see about that.

Mr Wood: I will return very quickly to your previous question about community planning. It is absolutely imperative that that planning is based on the needs of people rather than the existing services. The actual need can far outweigh what is addressed by existing services.

Mr McAleer: You are very welcome. As one of the MLAs from a rural area, I can very much appreciate the role that you are fulfilling. I think your submission states that your volunteers provide £2 million per annum of in-kind services. As someone who works in the voluntary sector, I can appreciate that. I just renewed my MiDAS certificate at the beginning of the year.

I find it incredible that, outside DRD, none of the Departments has to consider how people access services. Do you think that it would be helpful if all Departments were required to transport-proof their policies?

Ms Armstrong: I agree with that 100%; that is exactly what we want to happen. You will hear later from our colleagues from the Strabane area, who have had particular issues. I will be quick, but I want to give you one specific example. There are lifelong learning courses that are fantastic for adults with learning disabilities to be able to attend, but nobody considers how they get to those courses. Once they are over the age of 19, they fall out of the Department of Education's transport provision. When they are planning those courses, nobody has to consider how someone who cannot use a car will get to them. We think that should be a core objective of Northern Ireland transport or the public transport authority in DRD. They should take that forward and decide how to transport-proof all the different things. For example, the health service should not arrange a hospital appointment for somebody who lives 35 miles away, at a time when they cannot possibly get public transport. A bit of more clever joined-up thinking on that would be much more helpful for the community. It might cause a few more problems for transport, because it would have to start earlier or finish later, but it is what the community needs.

As I said earlier, we have not reviewed this in quite a while. We need to consider who our travelling community is, where they want to travel, where they need to travel to, what times they need to go there, how much it is going to cost and whether there is a duplication of resources that could be shared.

Before Departments start to spend public money developing courses or services, they should consider how people will get to them. We have that in the community and voluntary sector, and I always say to people who are applying for grants or money that they should consider how people will get to the service they are developing. If people cannot access a service, it will fall on its face.

We absolutely want to see that going forward. All Departments should consider how people get there and the public transport way of getting there.

Mr Wood: Without weakening Kellie's point, I want to qualify that. Clearly, some thought has been given, but not enough. Too often, there is an assumption that people will either come by car or that Translink will run a service. Not enough thought is given to people's detailed issues and their needs. Undoubtedly, that is where those people fall through the gap. The numbers are very significant.

Mr McNarry: You make a very compelling case in your report. I can see the gaps that you are filling, but I am worried about the extent of the gaps that have been highlighted. Are you able to demonstrate how wide the gaps are? Is an audit available? More importantly, are you able to demonstrate how they can be closed?

In your briefing paper, you stated that you are looking for an appropriate financial report to be made available to:

"ensure the access needs of the Community can be met where conventional transport is not appropriate or available for the individual" .

I say "hear, hear" to that, but that is quite a sweeping statement. How do we close the gaps?

Additionally, to what extent do you feel that Translink is falling short? With the particular predicaments that Translink has, do you think that its ability to service what it is already doing will be reduced, with the result that more gaps will be created? Should the Committee consider, alongside your compelling report, that Translink needs to improve its game? I am anxious about what we have getting worse and about nobody plugging the gaps.

Mr Wood: I will try to start to answer that. At our seminar in August, I put up a couple of graphics to try to illustrate the difference in mobility between people who have cars and people who are dependent on public transport. I cannot remember the exact figures, but people who have cars maybe make two or three times as many journeys as people who do not have cars. If you want to, straightaway, you could say that is a gap. Even people who live in urban areas where there is good public transport are constrained by where the services go and the cost of using those services. That means that they do not have as active lives as people who have cars. That is, unfortunately, a 21st century phenomenon, and that is the context that I would set for this.

We do not have a formal audit of where the gaps are. You could begin with household surveys and by talking to people in rural areas or people who have particular mobility difficulties.

Mr McNarry: Do you think that, perhaps, that information is what is lacking? That would enable you to get your head around the full extent of the problem.

Mr Wood: Undoubtedly. The transport planning process as normally exists includes not only surveys of where people are going to and from by car and by public transport but household surveys that ask where those people have travelled to by foot and other surveys about what their needs might be that are unfulfilled. We could set that baseline. Possibly, you would not need to do that across the Province. All you would need is a sample to allow you to understand the scale.

As I said, if you were to try to compare people with and without cars, you would see that there is a huge gap. There is another scale for people who have particular difficulties in using current public transport.

The Translink services that we have now are much more accessible than they were in the past. A big move has been made over the past 10 or 15 years to make public transport low-step and whatever to allow people with wheelchairs to use it. It is, potentially, a much greater resource for a much wider range of people than before. However, geographically, it does not necessarily get close to where people live. Therefore, those decisions need to be made, and that is why we have Door-2-Door and Dial a Lift, in some respects, to fill those gaps.

I am convinced that the gaps are enormous, and decisions have to be made to prioritise to what degree we want to close those gaps. Elsewhere in Europe and Britain, those are hard decisions that must be taken. There is statutory provision, and the Departments of Education and Health, in part and at least, take people to statutory services. However, there are other journeys that people would like to make that they are, undoubtedly, not making. People self-regulate: when they cannot make a journey because they do not have a relative to take them, they just give up.

Mr McNarry: Just on that, Chair —

The Chairperson: Very briefly, David, please.

Mr McNarry: How close are you to Translink when it decides what needs to be done, what is not being done, what it is going to do and what you can do to close those gaps? Are you in that dialogue? Do you work together on that?

Ms Armstrong: There have been some very small movements forward, such as the connection to Altnagelvin Area Hospital in the west. However, there has been very little dialogue on that basis and in having that type of planning. At the moment, transport planning resides in Translink for Translink. The wider Northern Ireland transport strategy and plan is not there. We hope that DRD will take that forward, and that is part of the issue.

Different groups, including the Patient and Client Council, IMTAC and the Consumer Council, have identified some gaps, but that is where other Departments say that transport is not their statutory responsibility, and, therefore, it falls into the silo. There are quite a lot of gaps that we know of, which as Stephen said, are enormous. Community transport cannot fill them all; we just do not have the resources. We do not have enough volunteers and never will. That is why we need to integrate, work together and share resources to get this sorted out for people in Northern Ireland.

Mr McNarry: Do you mean integrate with Translink?

Ms Armstrong: Translink, the Department of Education, the Department of Health, private operators, taxis and whoever provides transport out there all need to be together. There is enough work for everybody, so nobody needs to be worried about toes being stepped on here. It is about the people on the ground. We particularly need to meet the needs of an ageing population because people are less likely to drive when they are in their 80s.

The Chairperson: What specific barriers would prevent the mid-Ulster plan being taken forward?

Ms Armstrong: We are dealing with a mix of Departments here, so if Education and Health do not want to come to the table, that is the first barrier. Education has said that its vehicles — the yellow buses — operate under a particular permit, which is allowed by DOE, that enables it to deliver education services. Those buses are not allowed to collect members of the general public. It says that it cannot collect a fare, but I am not sure whether that is completely true. Health's vehicles are used for health purposes. Community transport providers do what we do. Translink has its main routes. So, there are a few internal departmental barriers there. I know that the mid-Ulster pilot group is trying to overcome those barriers and talk to DOE and different people about new regulation or trying a new system for a short time to let that pilot go forward. However, there are barriers there that are created by the different Departments.

The Chairperson: OK. Thanks very much, Kellie, Ian and Stephen, for the presentation. The session has been recorded for Hansard, as I said, and this session has been very helpful to the Committee.