

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM IOMPAR AGUS CUMARSÁID

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Dé Máirt, 13 Nollaig 2022

Tuesday, 13 December 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 7 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 7 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Cathal Crowe,	Jerry Buttimer.
Emer Higgins,*	
Michael Lowry,	
Darren O'Rourke,	
Ruairí Ó Murchú,	
Duncan Smith.	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputy Joe Carey

Deputy Kieran O'Donnell sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Provision of Bus Services in Dublin: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: Deputy Higgins will be substituting for Deputy Carey and Senator Seery Kearney will substitute for Senator Buttimer. The purpose of today's meeting is for the joint committee to resume our discussion of the provision of bus services in Dublin. We are joined once again by representatives from the National Transport Authority, NTA, Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland. I do not know which is worse and whether we are competing more with the vote of confidence in the Dáil Chamber or the World Cup match between Argentina and Croatia. We are all clashing at the same time. We would hope to be the main event, certainly with the witnesses.

From the NTA I welcome Ms Anne Graham, CEO, and Mr. Tim Gaston, director of public transport. From Dublin Bus I welcome Mr. Billy Hann, who was appointed chief executive on 1 December. I congratulate him on his appointment. He is joined by Ms Andrea Keane, acting chief executive, chief financing officer and company secretary, and Mr. Ciarán Rogan, chief customer officer. From Go-Ahead Ireland I welcome Mr. Andrew Edwards, managing director, and Mr. James Caffrey, finance director. All the witnesses are very welcome. I thank them for coming in. We put them on notice that we would be coming back to this issue before Christmas. Nevertheless, 7 o'clock in the evening is the only time slot we could get. It is awful both for the witnesses and members but that is just the way it is.

I will read a note on privilege. Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. If their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to any identified person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks and it is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. Members are also reminded of the constitutional requirement that they must be physically present within the confines of the Leinster House complex in order to participate in public meetings. Reluctantly, I will not permit a member to participate if they are not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will be asked to leave the meeting. In this regard, I ask any members participating via MS Teams to confirm that they are on the Leinster House campus prior to making a contribution. If attending in the committee room, members are asked to exercise personal responsibility to protect themselves and others from the risk of contracting Covid-19. I was jocose initially, but this is a very important issue for the people of greater Dublin. We will address issues with regard to national bus services with the National Transport Authority, NTA. However, we are here tonight because it is an issue for people in their daily lives and, more particularly, during the Christmas period. We hope it will shed light on improvements made since the witnesses were here on 8 November. We are public representatives. We get this issue on a daily basis. Even though I am a Deputy in Limerick, I still get representations on this issue. I call on Ms Graham to make her opening statement on behalf of the NTA.

Ms Anne Graham: I thank the Chairperson and members of the committee for the invitation to attend. I understand the committee wishes to focus again upon the provision of bus services in Dublin. To assist me in dealing with their subsequent questions I am joined by Tim

Gaston, director of public transport services with the authority.

The remit of the NTA is to regulate and develop the provision of integrated public transport services, that is, bus, rail, light rail and taxi, by public and private operators in the State; to secure the development and implementation of an integrated transport system within the greater Dublin area and to contribute to the effective integration of transport and land-use planning throughout the State. The authority is responsible for the provision of an integrated and accessible public transport system. BusConnects and Connecting Ireland are key public transport programmes where the authority, in association with transport operators and local authorities, has planned networks to allow the continued economic and social development of our cities, towns and rural areas. The services are planned to allow residents and visitors the choice of sustainable, low-carbon-emission transport for some or all of their journeys. The authority also provides services if a public service obligation exists, following the withdrawal of a commercial licensed service, if the funding to do so is available.

With regard to public service contracts, the authority is responsible for securing the provision of public bus services through two specified mechanisms. The first is public service contracts with operators such as Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland, where services would not otherwise be provided on a commercial basis and the second is the licensing of public bus services, which are operated on a commercial basis. Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland are contracted by the authority to deliver bus services in Dublin. The NTA contracts with Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland are available on the NTA website.

Along with a number of customer service metrics, the key performance metrics for both operators are as follows: lost kilometres which is a measure of the contracted service kilometres that were not operated and punctuality is measured for each stop along the route and is measured differently for low-frequency routes compared to high-frequency routes. Low-frequency bus routes are defined as services that operate less than five times per hour on a weekday, outside of peak periods.

The NTA continues to meet with operators on a very regular basis to review performance. The reports on transport operator performances are regularly published on our website and an annual performance report is produced, with the latest being available for 2021. We reported last month that operators were facing difficulties of recruiting and retaining drivers in their companies at a time of full employment in the country, which had resulted in a higher-than-normal cancellation of services. Both operators and the NTA have taken a number of steps to seek to address the current critical shortage of drivers including running recruitment campaigns, meeting with the Road Safety Authority, RSA, to secure improved throughput of driver testing; reducing some service frequency; delaying the introduction of phases of the BusConnects network redesign and reassigning resources to better match the demand.

Thanks to the efforts of both operators, driver recruitment has increased and we are now seeing a much-improved service delivery and the level of cancellations has significantly reduced. It is expected that both operators will be very close to meeting their contractual targets of lost kilometres in this current period. The NTA will continue to work with operators to match available resources to the demand for services.

The impact of congestion on punctuality has intensified in recent weeks and this can result in curtailments or cancellation of services when services are running very late. On the busiest bus routes, bus lanes are only in place for less than one third of the corridor. This means that for most of the journey, buses are competing for space with general traffic. Car traffic congestion

across Dublin has increased to levels higher than the 2019 average. This level of congestion slows bus journeys and adds further unpredictability into the journey time.

In order to meet the timetable frequency contracted, operators have to build in more running time in routes and will have to add more drivers and fleet into the route just to provide the same level of service. Therefore, additional funding that may be available to the authority in 2023 for additional services may have to be assigned to address congestion issues, rather than additional coverage and frequency above the current levels to meet the growing demand for services.

Car congestion costs money to the authority with regard to the additional drivers and fleet that have to be assigned to maintain timetabled frequencies, as well as costing passengers for their lost productive time because their journeys on buses are longer. The only solution to this continues to be the reduction in the number of cars on the road and the delivery of the core bus corridor projects as part of BusConnects which will offer full priority to the bus service along 16 key corridors in Dublin city.

Despite the challenges being faced by operators public transport throughout Ireland is carrying more passengers than ever before with recent weeks' levels being over 105% of 2019 which was a record year. Most developed economies have not seen a return to 2019 levels of public transport usage and are typically carrying between 70% and 85% of pre-Covid levels. However, most regions, including Ireland, are experiencing increased levels of traffic congestion.

The authority is aware of occasional issues with the real-time passenger information, RTPI, displays where buses were not being tracked accurately or were identified as running when, in fact, they may have been cancelled. When a service is cancelled, the real-time information should be updated by the operator so that the bus no longer appears on the RTPI Displays or the mobile app. However, on occasion, the RTPI displays do not receive, or do not correctly process, the cancellation notification. In that scenario, because the displays are not receiving real-time updates they revert to the scheduled timetable for that bus when, in fact, the bus is not operating. This results in the bus not appearing at a stop when the displays say it should.

The authority had become aware of a software bug that was also impacting the accuracy of the RTPI information. This has been fixed and the indications from live monitoring is that this has improved the quality of the information. Work will continue with the bus operators to drive further improvements in the real-time information, with the key intervention being to match the timetables to the available resources in the operators, thereby reducing cancellations.

I trust we can answer any queries that arise.

Chairman: I call on Mr. Hann to make his opening statement on behalf of Dublin Bus.

Mr. Billy Hann: Thank you, Chairman, for the invitation to appear before the Joint Committee on Transport and Communications. I look forward to today's engagement. I am joined by Ms Andrea Keane, chief financial officer and company secretary and Mr. Ciarán Rogan, chief customer officer. I thank the members of the committee for their engagement in recent weeks. I know both Ms Keane and Mr. Rogan have ensured all queries from the last committee meeting have been fully responded to and I hope this shows how seriously we are taking recent challenges. I assure the committee that Dublin Bus has been working, and is continuing to work, to deliver improved service levels for all customers.

Today is my 13th day as chief executive of Dublin Bus. The performance and reliability of services has been my main focus during this time. I have visited depots, met employees and

seen first-hand the skill and dedication they bring to their roles. I look forward to welcoming the committee to the Broadstone depot in the new year. Companies like Dublin Bus need both a programme of work and a purpose. We are fortunate, despite a highly changeable operating environment, that our purpose is clear. We exist to provide safe, high-quality, sustainable public transport services to the people of the greater Dublin area. The journey to school, work or to see a loved one all matter to us. We are facing challenges, which I will address today, but it is important to acknowledge that the story of Dublin Bus is a largely a successful one.

The company has seen customer demand return strongly with customer numbers expected to reach 122 million by the end of 2022. Customer demand is now exceeding pre-Covid years. We are currently carrying, on average, 460,000 people per day from Monday to Friday. Dublin Bus, with ten 24-hour routes introduced over the last two years, is the only all-day and all-night operator of public transport services in the country. Free WiFi, USB charging points, audio announcements and a 100% fully accessible fleet are now standard. We are here, however, because our services have on occasion fallen below our own high standards.

My opening statement will focus on the issues raised at the last committee hearing, namely, service performance and reliability, driver recruitment and RTPI reliability. In doing this, I will focus on the measures taken since the last committee hearing and update members on the very significant programme of work under way to return services to the standard the people of the greater Dublin area expect. There has been a very significant focus in recent months on the performance of public transport and some strong criticism of recent service delivery by Dublin Bus and other public transport operators. At all times, our focus is on providing customers with safe, comfortable and efficient journeys and putting the customer at the centre of everything we do. They inform all of our work.

We operate 7,000 trips a day with more than 460,000 people using our services on the average weekday. This is greater than the combined population of the cities of Cork, Limerick and Galway. The committee will see that the vast majority of our services operate on time and on schedule. Through these services Dublin Bus provides critical support to the social and economic life of the city.

The recent pace of network expansion, however, has placed significant pressure on the company as we seek to deliver additional services and also provide our network of contracted services. We are actively managing the current challenges through a combination of measures: additional overtime working where possible within strict driver hour regulations; adjustment to service provision in order to have the least adverse impact on customers; strong focus on improved customer information services; an extensive recruitment campaign; and the resolution of technical challenges facing the real-time passenger information, RTPI, systems. There is no doubt that we have found this challenging, and I apologise to any customers who have had a poor customer experience when using our services in recent months. I am confident that improvements seen in recent weeks can be maintained as we build towards 2023. We must also recognise that there are challenges beyond our control which we must navigate in an economy operating at practically full employment.

Dublin Bus is currently running the biggest recruitment drive in the history of the organisation. It is a campaign that has seen 319 drivers recruited since January 2022, with 39 added since our last appearance before this committee, but we are not standing still. We know we need to exhaust every possible recruitment avenue. I am pleased to report the company has taken several additional steps to boost driver numbers including: an additional recruitment open day, which is the third this year; recruitment roadshows at all major shopping centres across Dublin,

new recruitment audio announcements on all Dublin Bus services; new recruitment scrolls on our buses' digital information system; a refreshed social and traditional media campaign; and engagement with the Department of Transport on exploring non-EU and EEA labour markets. Recruitment remains one of the biggest challenges facing the organisation and we anticipate it will be the second quarter before we hit the required driver numbers. We very much regret the impact this is having on our customers. All our employees are working hard to minimise the effect of driver recruitment challenges.

This brings me to the final item I want to address today, which is the current status of RTPI and its reliability. RTPI is about providing information on schedules to customers in a timely manner and enhancing their customer experience while using public bus transport. As the committee will be aware, the three main real-time information systems are on-street signs, the Dublin Bus app and the Transport for Ireland app. Dublin Bus operations and technical development teams have been closely monitoring the performance of all RTPI systems. Since we last met with the committee, further technical errors have been resolved with a software delivery on 1 December 2022. Since then, the company has undertaken the largest on-street survey in the history of the organisation. This has meant monitoring thousands of trips and cross-checking them against our technical systems. Our surveys have found that RTPI is operating at nearly 98% accuracy and many of the technical challenges with RTPI have been resolved. In addition to our own monitoring, the NTA has conducted independent surveys of all RTPI channels. We do all of this work with one goal in mind, which is to improve Dublin Bus services for our customers, partners and all people who use them across the greater Dublin area.

We are facing challenges today but our steadfast commitment to deliver for the people of the greater Dublin area will never waiver. We are working night and day to ensure we overcome RTPI, recruitment and service performance challenges. As we carry out this work I assure the committee of a few things. Dublin Bus is a well-positioned and resilient business with a clear purpose. The company is making significant progress in the recruitment of drivers. We continue to welcome new drivers every month once they have completed their professional training at our training school. Our technical team, in conjunction with the NTA, continues to monitor the performance of RTPI to ensure it provides the level of reliability expected by the travelling public. We are communicating openly with customers, the committee and all stakeholders to get and share feedback on our progress.

Although we know that overcoming recent challenges will not be simple or straightforward, I assure the committee members that Dublin Bus will be relentless in its endeavours to resolve these issues through the extremely capable and dedicated employees in our organisation. As stated earlier we look forward to showing the committee members at first hand our operations and provide the committee with an opportunity for additional discussions on these matters during a visit to the Broadstone depot. I thank the committee members and the Chairman for their time.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Hann. We will now hear from Mr. Edwards on behalf of Go-Ahead Ireland. I must highlight that we may have to suspend the meeting for a short period if a vote is called in the Dáil. I would ask the witnesses to bear patience with us if that happens.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: I thank the Chairman for inviting my colleague James Caffrey and me back to the committee to provide an update on the services provided by Go-Ahead Ireland. When we presented to the committee in early November, we outlined the challenges that were impacting our services such as staff shortages and traffic congestion along our routes. Prior to our appearance in November, we as an individual operator and partner to other providers in the

sector recognised the challenges we faced and most importantly, the impact on our customers. We had launched and were operating a successful recruitment campaign. We had drivers in our training school and were undertaking systems improvements to enhance our services.

As part of these overall efforts, it should also be noted that we continually engaged constructively with elected local representatives, valuing their guidance regarding the challenges faced by individual customers. During our last discussion with the committee, we not only apologised for service impacts but also committed to continuing our tangible improvement efforts across all our services.

Overall, we had committed to service improvements across our network by the end of the year and I am pleased to report that we are not only meeting these targets, but also getting close to our NTA reliability target. Regarding recruitment, we continue to have strong numbers of people joining us and we are processing and interviewing between 40 and 50 applicants each week. By the end of the year, subject to paperwork coming through, we will be very close to having our target number of drivers available to drive. In addition, we will have around 70 drivers in the training school to support our attrition and get us ready for future BusConnects phases.

With regard to specific service updates, a selection of routes had been identified as experiencing issues. In line with our overall network improvements, we have seen local uplifts across our services. It should be noted, however, that certain routes still experience day-to-day disruptions, which we acknowledge and are continuously working to address.

As previously noted, prior to 2020 and throughout the pandemic, Go-Ahead Ireland consistently met the service requirements under our agreed contractual obligations. Through the hard work, dedication and commitment of all of my colleagues, whom I would like to commend and thank for the work they do, we are addressing the issues experienced by customers over the past six months. We are focused on regaining the trust of the customer and providing the highest level of services, and this work will continue into 2023.

Looking to the future, while we are continuing our efforts, there are external factors beyond our control that we believe committee members should be aware of in order to inform their own efforts on behalf of the public. While we have new drivers entering service on a weekly basis, the external backlog in acquiring essential paperwork for commercial drivers remains. The wait has reduced and I would like to thank the relevant agencies for their efforts. It is, however, still an issue. This means that we have drivers who are trained and fully ready to enter service but are prohibited from doing so because they do not have a specific document, which is within the system, but the physical card is not processed and posted. This is impacting Go-Ahead Ireland and many other operators across the industry, all of which face the same challenges.

Congestion has been a challenge in recent months. Our operations team actively monitors traffic conditions and is in constant contact with our driver colleagues to provide real-time updates. We have also been working closely with Dublin City Council to support traffic light priority for public transport. While we appreciate that many of these daily issues can be unpredictable, we believe that bus priority enforcement is something that should be looked at to ease overall congestion and improve safety.

As I stated, our efforts are ongoing and will continue, but we have noted a marked improvement in performance on most of our routes and an overall drop in customer contacts. In our

previous discussion with the committee, we noted that some members had visited our depot to see at first hand the work of our team. I further welcome anyone who wishes to engage with us in the future.

Now that we are in a stronger position, we can look forward with confidence to making changes to our timetables towards the middle of January, and to the planned expansion of bus services as BusConnects continues to roll out. We are in the process of expanding our existing depot to cater for the many new orbital bus routes envisaged for 2023 and beyond. We are supporting the upgrade to orbital bus services in Dublin, which is crucial to the achievement of our key sustainability and climate goals. We are also looking forward to our first electric buses, which are expected in 2024-25

While we are focused on ongoing improvement, we would ask the committee to be mindful of external factors. As such, any support to streamline the paperwork processes mentioned for new drivers would be very beneficial for us, other operators and, most importantly, the customers.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak here again and welcome any questions.

Chairman: First on the rota to speak is Deputy Cathal Crowe who is substituting for his colleague, Senator Gerry Horkan. The Deputy has ten minutes.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the witnesses for coming here. I believe that all problems are relative so a bus arriving late in Dublin would be manna from heaven to someone in the west of Ireland where there might only be a morning and late-evening bus service with no service in between. I respect that all members represent their communities. It is frustrating for everyone in an urban or rural environment to wait for a bus service only for it not to arrive or to show up late. I am sure that members representing Dublin constituencies will speak about their experiences of bus services. Some of what I will say in the latter part of my time slot will relate more to NTA issues that happen outside of Dublin.

I have listened to all of the witnesses speak about real-time tracking systems, but nobody has mentioned Google Maps. I have largely given up using RTPI and other applications to track when the next bus is coming, as I have found that Google Maps is nearly always reliable. It guides one to the nearest bus stop, shows where one can board a bus and get off, and states how many steps it will take to reach the next stop. It is pretty accurate. Why is there a focus on indigenously developed apps when we could apply the Google widget and put it onto these apps rather than relying on technology that does not work well? Perhaps Mr. Hann can answer my question.

Mr. Billy Hann: At the moment, we have a Dublin Bus app and an NTA or Transport for Ireland app. The idea is to move from having two apps to one app, which is due to be replaced sometime in the near future.

The reality is that if apps like Flightradar24, Uber or Google Maps were examined in the same prolific way in which our apps are examined on a daily basis - some 460,000 customers use our apps each day; that is the level of scrutiny they get - issues and problems would be found with those apps too.

Ms Anne Graham: The data used by Google with regard to scheduled bus services, including the real-time data, are delivered from our own application programming interface, API. Google takes that data from ourselves. We believe that our role is to provide integrated infor-

mation. We gather the information together. We do not mind if another entity, such as Google, uses our data and spreads them around. It is our role to make sure the data are accurate, which is what we focus on with our operators.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I was not aware of that. Is consideration being given to refining these systems? I am sure this issue has already been spoken to. Google is a vast organisation. God only knows where the headquarters of its maps division is located. Google has a base in Dublin city. The NTA has its headquarters here too. The reason I ask for the NTA to join up with Google is that when a person standing on the street waiting for a bus gives up on one app, he or she inevitably uses Google Maps. Therefore, it would be worthwhile for the NTA to join forces with Google so that we do not have three systems running. It would be better to have one system where everyone speaks to each other.

Ms Anne Graham: There are two categories of data. The NTA is the source of the first category of data - where the bus stops are located and the schedules or timetables. Google can only receive those data from us. We are the source of those data. The real-time data come from us as well. We publish it out. Google would not be able to generate that kind of data because the data are generated by the automatic vehicle location systems on the buses. Our role is to ensure the data are correct and accurate. Then they can be published in many different forms. We believe we still should have an integrated app.

Chairman: Why?

Ms Anne Graham: The NTA, as a public body, has an obligation under our Act to publish information on public transport, including information on schedules. We consider the real-time app to be part of that. We believe it is important that we provide an integrated app for customers because we put the data together not just from our contracted services but also from our licensed services and, hopefully, other services that we can integrate with it.

Chairman: What can the NTA provide with its in-house real-time app that an organisation like Google Maps, which gets the correct data from the NTA, cannot provide?

Ms Anne Graham: There is no difference. We do not provide anything different in terms of publication but we still feel that it is important that we, as a public body, provide an app with the information because Google-----

Chairman: Ms Graham will appreciate that there have been ghost buses and delayed times when the NTA's software was used.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes, but we also know that we update our data on a very regular basis. We cannot guarantee how often Google updates the data. We have an obligation to ensure the data are correct.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: The green and yellow livery looks very nice but I want to know how much it has cost. The buses are the same under the bonnet and the seat configurations are pretty much the same. How much has the colour change cost Ireland Inc. and the various bodies that the NTA represents here today?

Ms Anne Graham: It does not really cost anything-----

Deputy Cathal Crowe: It must cost something.

Ms Anne Graham: -----because when we purchase new buses, the fleet is bought with the

new livery in place.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: A lot of the 2017 and 2018 buses have been rebranded.

Ms Anne Graham: The buses that we contract with Dublin Bus will be repainted on, I think, a four-year cycle. We only wait for that four-year cycle to repaint the buses.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: There has to be some cost. Could the committee be told what the cost is?

Ms Anne Graham: We can get that cost but it is a cost that would have happened anyway because we need to refresh the livery.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: During the summer months, my colleague, Senator Mary Fitzpatrick, and some other colleagues in Fianna Fáil commissioned a public survey on antisocial behaviour. The issue is out there and has been in the media. What does the NTA propose to do in that regard?

When I met Mr. Hann's counterpart in Bus Éireann, I asked if Bus Éireann would consider installing a bicycle rack system on the front of its buses. Racks have been installed on buses across the United States. Bus companies have embraced the idea in many European countries, such as Germany, Belgium and France. Today I travelled from County Clare on the train and the bike, and I got to the Dáil. I pass many people on the commuting circuit each day who get about on e-scooters or bikes as part of an integrated multi-modal transport system. Unfortunately, one cannot really bring one's bike on board Dublin Bus services and there is no rack on the front of its buses. Does Dublin Bus plan to introduce bike racks on its buses?

Mr. Billy Hann: I will ask my colleague, Mr. Rogan, to answer the question about bicycle racks and give an update.

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: I thank the Deputy for his question. The suggestion has been made to us frequently in recent times, primarily because visitors are aware that there are bicycle racks elsewhere. I think Canada is the country where buses with bicycle racks are most prevalent.

Dublin Bus has examined the different systems that are available in various countries. There are many issues to be ironed out and finalised around things like liability, the safety of such systems, insurance implications, etc. Not least, we have to consider how various vehicle types would be affected if it were decided to introduce bicycle racks or attachments to the existing fleet. It is a complex issue. It is one that has a degree of interest, particularly in areas which are reliant on tourism. The response that we have given in the past is that this is not an issue which Dublin Bus, in itself, can tackle or address. There are very many stakeholders that would want to be involved and, from the point of view of Dublin Bus, would have to be engaged.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: On antisocial behaviour, has Dublin Bus immediate plans for the Christmas season or beyond to make its buses safe for drivers and passengers?

Mr. Billy Hann: The safety and security of employees and customers is of paramount importance to Dublin Bus. The number of antisocial behaviour events is quite small, at about 700 per annum, compared with the number of passengers we carry, which is approximately 122 million. We take every single one of the antisocial events incredibly seriously and work with An Garda Síochána to investigate any of the issues, if that is what is required.

We have a very strong antisocial behaviour framework within the organisation. It is a

multilayered framework that allows us to provide the security and protection required for our staff and customers. It includes bus driver training and protection and communication between the driver and the central control area such that if a driver has an issue or concern, he or she can communicate, via voice communication, with the central control area. Central control can actually send out a mobile inspector to assist the bus driver if required. The driver can call the Garda to seek assistance if required. In addition, we have an extensive employee engagement programme for working with the communities to try to address, from an educational perspective, some of the antisocial behaviour issues we encounter. In addition, our buses have 14 CCTV cameras, with 11 on the inside and three on the outside. We sit on multi-stakeholder forums, including the NTA, to discuss antisocial behaviour and any mitigation measures that can be implemented.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I just have one more question. I hope the other members can draw out this topic also. I thank the drivers. I do not often use the bus but believe the drivers are incredibly helpful. I have said in the past to Ms Graham, when she has been at committee meetings, that taking a bus or other form of public transport can sometimes be confusing to someone who does not use it the whole time. A passenger might wonder where to put the Leap card or what to do. I had my dad in Dublin recently and it was probably a decade since he had used Dublin Bus. There is not a great amount of information. Similarly, if somebody came down to the west and tried to use one of our Local Link systems, there could be a bit of confusion. Some information at the stops would be beneficial.

My last question is for Ms Graham. I am going outside Dublin for this one because Dublin will never elect me. The 343 bus service goes from Limerick past Shannon Airport and on to Ennis. It is an extremely populated corridor in County Clare. The population along the corridor has risen significantly in the past year. I welcome the fact that the NTA has increased the number of services – the double-decker services – but we need a higher frequency because far too often, people arrive at the bus stop for the 343 only to find it full. Sometimes it does not arrive at all. I would like to know whether the NTA has a more frequent service in mind because that is what Bus Éireann and the service users want.

Ms Graham might also tell me whether the NTA has plans to develop the Ennis town bus service. We have seen towns such as Dundalk pass us out. The project has been in planning for many years. We want to hear some good news at long last for the residents of Ennis, which is Munster's largest town without city status. It deserves a bus service. I hope Ms Graham can give us some good news today.

Ms Anne Graham: On the 343 service, we have got a report from Bus Éireann. As a result of the growth in passenger demand across the country, some services are reaching capacity and are in fact leaving people behind right across the country. Therefore, Bus Éireann has identified several services where additional high-capacity vehicles are required or where additional service frequency is needed. This is before we even get to what we want to deliver through Connecting Ireland. This is just an immediate problem. The 343 route has been identified as one of the problematic ones. We are working with Bus Éireann to determine how we can rectify the problem where there is more demand than we can currently cater for. I cannot give the Deputy any indication of when it can be resolved but we certainly need to address it as soon as possible, with additional fleet, drivers or service frequency. It will take priority, even over providing additional services in other parts of the country.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: That is great. It is reassuring.

Ms Anne Graham: My colleague might talk about the Ennis town service.

Mr. Tim Gaston: At the minute, we are working on five town services. Ennis is one of those. On the timing, it will be as soon as we can get the service plan finished. The service planning team is meeting some of the council officials and councillors next week, if not this week, to put the finishing touches to the town service. The next stage will entail specification, going to the market, procuring an operator and getting the service up and running.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: It will be in 2023.

Mr. Tim Gaston: It is unlikely to be 2023 but I hope it will be in 2024. We have made a commitment to the Department of Transport in this regard. Its sustainable mobility plan commits to delivery before 2025. It is one of five services we are working on. In fact, we are working on more than five. There is a minimum of five. Ennis is one of them, along with Carlow, Portlaoise, Mullingar and Letterkenny. The process of specification has to be gone through. The routes and frequency need to be right. This has nearly been achieved. We will get out to the market during 2023 and proceed from there as quickly as we can get an operator. We will probably provide the operator with the vehicles. One of the challenges we are facing is that we want the service to be an electric-vehicle service. We do not want to be using diesel vehicles. Providing somewhere to charge the vehicles could become a challenge. We are talking to the local authority about providing charging infrastructure so there will be somewhere that the vehicles can be charged overnight.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: I thank the Chair for the latitude and the representatives for all the answers. We all want electric vehicles on the roads, but please do not let that be the barrier to the town having a service.

Mr. Tim Gaston: It will not. In Carlow, we are going to start with diesel vehicles. The contract allows for a swap-out during the lifetime of the contract. That is the approach.

Deputy Cathal Crowe: There should be a similar approach in Ennis. It is a sensible one.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank the representatives for their opening statements. Could I deal with the staffing issue concerning Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead Ireland? Since the last time the representatives were here to discuss this matter, there has been significant progress. That is welcome. How many drivers does Go-Ahead Ireland need to meet its current contracted routes? Does it have a figure for the end of 2023? I am conscious of the potential consequences of an enduring shortage. How many drivers are employed? Some indication has been given as to what the recruitment process entails. Mr. Edwards has flagged some pinch points. I would like the Dublin Bus representatives to answer the same questions.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We are in a much better position than in November. Not only that, we are actively preparing for our expansion going into 2023. We have hired 50 people since we last met the committee members, and we are currently 25 drivers short of where we need to be.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: For current contracts?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Yes. We also have 27 people who are currently awaiting paperwork from authorities and who are what we call "post-test". In addition, we have 98 people in our training school. We have seen a vastly reduced attrition rate since we last met the committee, which is really positive. This has involved great work by our colleagues. We have seen the rate halve since we last gave an update. We have a target of 405 drivers for our outer Dublin

metropolitan area contract right now. We are 25 short.

On the question of looking towards the end of 2023, I will let Mr. Gaston talk about BusConnects as a whole. Based on the projections when we first considered some of the phases coming in for 2023, we would need an additional 120 drivers. At this very moment, when you add the number we have, plus those in our training school, we have the best part of 470.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank Mr. Edwards. Could the Dublin Bus representatives answer the same questions?

Mr. Billy Hann: As we said in our opening statement, we have recruited 319 staff in 2022 and an additional 39 bus drivers since the last committee meeting. We are short 120 to deliver on our current network. We need an additional 90 bus drivers to deliver on phase 5 of our BusConnects programme. All in all, by the end of 2023 we will need 280 staff, which includes retirements. We have very detailed resource planning that determines the numbers going out of the organisation and the number we need to come in to deliver on our current network services and the BusConnects programme. It is important to note that, from an applications point of view, bearing in mind that we put an incredible amount of work into the recruitment process-----

Chairman: Unfortunately, there is a vote in the Dáil. It will take time for us to get to the Chamber, so we will have to suspend. We will adjourn the meeting for approximately 25 minutes for a vote in the Dáil Chamber. We will be back here by 8.15 p.m. I apologise for the interruption.

Sitting suspended at 7.50 p.m. and resumed at 8.12 p.m.

Chairman: We will continue with our deliberation on bus services in Dublin. Deputy O'Rourke had the floor and may continue.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I apologise to the witnesses for that interruption. What are the barriers to recruitment as Mr. Hann sees them? An issue has been identified around essential paperwork.

Chairman: Before Deputy O'Rourke continues, Mr. Hann might conclude his point on the total numbers Dublin Bus will have by the end of 2023. He was just about to give that number before the committee suspended.

Mr. Billy Hann: The total numbers by the end of 2023 will be 280 staff.

Chairman: That is the number that will be needed.

Mr. Billy Hann: Yes. That is the additional number of staff who will be needed by the end of 2023.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: That is a significant number, which is why I am asking that question. There are pinch points and recruitment and capacity challenges at the minute at a time when the services are expanding. Will we ever get ahead of it? What is Mr. Hann's sense of what next year will look like in terms of recruitment? Are there immediate issues he could ask the committee to raise in terms of trying to move things as quickly as possible?

Mr. Billy Hann: I thank Deputy O'Rourke for the question. I would be confident we will reach those numbers. The recruitment plan we put in place, which is quite extensive, resulted in the recruitment of 219 staff this year to date. As for the requirements going forward, we

are recruiting all the time. We have plans in place and we track them on a weekly basis to see whether we are matching them.

We have 229 applications at the moment. That is on the back end of the extensive recruitment campaign, including the open days. We had one last Saturday on O'Connell Street, which I attended myself. It was extremely well-attended. It was very encouraging to see the number of people who are actually interested in making applications to be bus drivers in Dublin Bus. I would be confident that we will make that number. Staff retention is not an issue for Dublin Bus. We are-----

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Are there measures Mr. Hann could ask the committee to raise that could improve the delivery of those numbers?

Mr. Billy Hann: There are two elements but I think we have them in hand. One is the very positive engagement with the Road Safety Authority, RSA, regarding its processes. We meet its representatives on a regular basis every two weeks. We give them a good idea of what numbers are coming down the road. We work very closely on that.

In addition to that, we have been working very closely with the NTA, and the Department on non-EU and non-EEA members. That is being pushed along at the moment. That will help us with regard to international employees.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I saw a media report. That is not resolved yet but it is an issue.

Mr. Billy Hann: That is correct.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I thank Mr. Hann very much. What is the NTA's plan for public transport for the city for Christmas? We have seen already that Christmas parties are back on. There are issues with the availability of taxis and public transport options, whatever they might look like. Is there a plan for Christmas from the NTA?

Ms Anne Graham: There certainly is, particularly in Dublin. We are very much aware of the shortages that are being experienced at this peak time, as has always been the case in terms of taxi services. However, we have additional services operating on bus, Luas and Irish Rail. I would point the Deputy and other members to the Transport for Ireland website, which gives the full detail of that.

From the point of view of buses, a full Nightlink service will operate on a number of routes. Starting tomorrow night, they have been extended to operate from Wednesday, 14 December to Saturday, 17 December and then from Wednesday, 21 December to Friday, 23 December.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Did Ms Graham say from Wednesday, 14 December?

Ms Anne Graham: The extended service will operate from Wednesday, 14 December to Saturday, 17 December, from Wednesday, 21 December to Friday, 23 December and on Friday, 30 December and Saturday, 31 December. There are normally Nightlink services on Friday and Saturday but these have been extended now into Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Chairman: Are they running 24 hours?

Ms Anne Graham: No. They run at intervals of every 30 minutes up until 4 a.m. There are 24-hour services in addition to that. We now have ten 24-hour services operating right across the city.

Chairman: What is the full Nightlink service?

Ms Anne Graham: The original Nightlink night-time service on Dublin Bus services generally tended to operate on a Friday and Saturday night throughout the year.

Chairman: Until what time?

Ms Anne Graham: It was until 3.30 a.m. It now operates until 4 a.m. on a half-hourly basis.

Chairman: How will the service differ?

Ms Anne Graham: It is operating on two extra nights, namely, Wednesday and Thursday, from this week.

Chairman: That is as well as Friday and Saturday.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes. As well as that, the 24-hour bus services are now on ten routes throughout the city.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Those are not new, are they?

Ms Anne Graham: Two are new on the G spine from 16 October. They have been put in place.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: They are not new for Christmas, however.

Ms Anne Graham: No, they are not new for Christmas. They continue to operate; the Deputy is correct in that regard. Luas then will operate additional daytime trams across Christmas in addition to night Luas services on Friday, 9, December, Saturday, 10 December, Friday, 16 December, Saturday, 17 December and Saturday, 31 December.

Chairman: In layman's terms, what will be the difference between the current service and what is in place over Christmas?

Ms Anne Graham: It will be running later by approximately two hours. Irish Rail also has a number of late night services operating on Friday and Saturday nights throughout December. There is quite a list of them. It is better to just look at our website and Irish Rail's website.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Are people aware of them? Are they well used? Could they be used better?

Ms Anne Graham: They are well used.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The shortage of taxis is really becoming a prominent issue and we are not yet really into the busiest time, which will probably be this weekend.

Ms Anne Graham: We take every opportunity to publish information and inform customers they are there, including in the media. Obviously, we will continue to do that. Additional services are now available. We would ask any customers who are going out and travelling across the city at night-time to consider public transport as an option rather than having to potentially wait for a taxi.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: We can come back to it later but it would be appropriate to examine the nature of the taxi service and industry. Measures were taken during the year, in-

cluding changes in tariffs and extending the ten-year rule. It is important to keep the system under review to see how those incentives are working and responding.

Ms Anne Graham: I can give an update. There is a lot of information in the media that is not quite correct. Many of the app providers, including Uber, are saying there is a 30% shortage of drivers. That is a 30% shortage in terms of who makes themselves available to use the app because there is a cost to the drivers about being associated with an app. They have to pay a 15% commission on that. Naturally, at times of high demand they tend to not associate with the app but take their bookings off the street.

From our perspective, the overall numbers are down on 2019, which was a high, but there is only a 7% decrease in driver's licences nationally compared to pre-Covid 2020 and 5.2% fewer taxi drivers available that are or have the potential to operate in the Dublin area. Naturally, the drivers can choose when they want to operate. We cannot contract them to operate at night time so our only means is to incentivise them through the fare changes that we introduced on 1 September. We will need to see whether that has an impact.

Chairman: Does that require them to use the app?

Ms Anne Graham: No. That is the maximum fare as well.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Does the NTA monitor that? Does it know how many taxi drivers are out on Saturday night?

Ms Anne Graham: Our compliance teams have been out and have monitored and checked to see how many drivers are out. They reckon it is in the high 80s or 90% of those that are licensed. It is not necessarily that they are out at night but they are operating.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: What about the busy or high-demand times?

Ms Anne Graham: We do not have counts, as such. It is anecdotal.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: Is that surveys and so on?

Ms Anne Graham: We can only do that by survey and it is usually after the event but we track it. Again, it is information the driver gives to us rather than us being able to count on the street. From previous surveys, 56% of drivers said they make themselves available to work at night time and 44% said they do not.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The final issue is the planned expansion of public bus services next year. We hear the recruitment challenges are being addressed to a significant degree. Where does it leave the NTA's plans for the expansion of BusConnects? The opening statement referred to reducing some service frequency in response to the driver shortage and the delay of introduction of phases of the BusConnects network redesign. How are these lining up?

What is NTA proposing about shifting spend from network expansion to addressing congestion? Has a formal proposal gone to the Government?

Ms Anne Graham: No formal proposal has gone to the Government because we continually work with our operators to respond to where they have to put in additional running time to deliver the service that they are contracted to deliver. We know that at other times, it does add in cost to the provision of those services. That work is ongoing. We will work with Dublin Bus and Go Ahead to see what additional running time needs to be put in in respect of the services

they are operating.

On top of that, we want to deliver the next phases of BusConnects. We are all working together to deliver that. It is dependent on driver recruitment getting to the levels both operators have indicated to be able to deliver all the phases that we are scheduled to deliver next year. We will pause delivery until we get to the point where at each stage we have sufficient drivers to deliver the expansion of services through BusConnects. That is our plan. Mr. Gaston may have some more detail.

Mr. Tim Gaston: We had planned to do phase 5 this year too, which is the southern orbital routes but clearly with the position that the operators find themselves in with drivers, we had to make a decision not to bring that phase on board. With our plans for next year, we are fairly clear that we will deliver phase 5A as we call it, which is Go Ahead for the W4 and W6 routes. That is the W61 and the W62 . Phase 5B is the southern orbital routes, which involves both operators, and we are looking at a May-June timeline. The remainder of the year is less clear. It depends largely on driver availability. As Ms Graham said, the other issue is the degree of congestion and the amount of resource that we have to switch from doing expansions to simply being able to maintain the pattern of service we are providing at the moment. There are a number of areas, both in the Bus Éireann territory that has been identified and also in Dublin when we are aware that we are at or reaching capacity in areas where we would like to put in additional capacity. There is a balance to be struck. While we are keen to get the BusConnects network redesign rolled out, that has to come after the day job, if you like. We have to make sure we deliver the standard scheduled services. The second half of the year is less clear but in the first half we plan to do those two phases of BusConnects. We will certainly do one further phase. We just have to see how the year pans out. We might get two or even three phases but I think that is unlikely.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: The NTA's opening statement identified a new pattern with a stronger rebound in public transport use. I presume that is linked to the lower fares, and I told the Minister previously that is useful evidence for the affordability of public transport and its use, but also increased congestion. Is that the result of an increased population and more people on the move anyway? They seem a bit contradictory. I presume it is not the buses causing the congestion; it is private cars.

Mr. Tim Gaston: Traffic congestion can be car congestion, HGVs, vans and all sorts of other vehicles as well. We will see what the surveys show shortly. The surveys have just been completed on the canal cordon and other traffic. Certainly the sense we have, and other data we look at shows, that we have a higher level of traffic congestion in the streets than we had in 2019 but we are carrying more passengers as well, as was mentioned in the opening statement. We are now at record levels. Interestingly, that is not in the morning or evening peak, Monday to Friday. While we still have a peak, it is not as high as we experienced because workers are not coming into the office five days a week so that market has reduced. That means that Irish Rail in the Dublin area is operating at approximately 80% of pre-Covid levels. The bus and Luas have come in and delivered between the peaks, in the evenings and particularly at weekends. We are carrying significantly more passengers at weekends than we previously would have. That is encouraging because that is people who are using public transport for leisure purposes. We now have a higher number of people using public transport for leisure than for going to work. That includes shopping, visiting friends or granny, going to matches and so on. There has definitely been a change in how people use it which for us is very encouraging. It is a more even spread of passenger demand.

As the Deputy said, fare reductions have certainly played into that, particularly in the student market. We are aware that more students in many areas are travelling from home rather than staying at college because of the cost of accommodation. That has played into it as well. The economy is doing well and when an economy is doing well, people travel more and they have more in their pocket to go out in the evenings and to travel. It has all led toward that growth, which happened suddenly. We did not anticipate the second half of this year being at the levels that we are at.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: I suppose reducing the fares is a giant experiment. The NTA is tracking all of that and it will inform future policy and expansion and where it goes. I presume the case the NTA makes to the Government relates to our climate obligations, the modal shift and the number of people in different age brackets that we want to get into public and active travel.

Ms Anne Graham: I will respond to this. We have seen from the experiment this year that fares and fare levels drive passenger numbers. What we are concerned about now is that if we do any further development of this, as in further lowering or further extension of discounts, we do not have the capacity to cater for it. We are finding that we have to deal with capacity issues in the network. If we make any changes now to further reduce fares, it would make this situation worse and make the customer experience worse. Long-term, we would like to be able to retain a reasonable fare level.

There is a lot of debate about free fares and we have done some research on their impact. We found that in many places where they have been put in place, they does not reduce the use of the car mode but transfer people who would walk and cycle onto public transport. Overall sustainable transport use does not necessarily rise in association with free fares. It has been a very good experiment to see the response when fares were lowered. At present we do not propose any further lowering of fares.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: However, the NTA would like to see them maintained at the current level. The commitment is only until the end of next year.

Ms Anne Graham: That is right. What we want with regard to fares in particular, and we have spoken about this previously at the committee, is to have step-change rail fares starting with the short-hop zone. We would like to see work done on this. We are putting together an implementation plan. We want it to be revenue neutral so it would not cost the State any money. For the first time it would provide a much fairer structure across regional bus and regional rail.

Deputy Darren O'Rourke: When the NTA came before the committee previously, Ms Graham spoke about potentially going with a proposal to the Government in this regard before the end of the year.

Ms Anne Graham: We have just completed the work. We are finalising the document. We have initially briefed Department of Transport officials. We want to do further briefings before we publish a final implementation plan on fares.

Chairman: I want to go back to the issue of taxis. Approximately two weeks ago I had to book a taxi through one of the taxi companies. The taxi was an hour late the following morning. I was late for my appointment. It was at a peak time between 8 a.m. and 8.30 a.m. I have made inquiries and anecdotally it appears that taxi drivers are not using the apps at particular times. My short journey was probably a relatively low fare. They go for long journey fares and

that is fine. We have a system that does not function. Even from the point of view of safety, if someone using an app to book a taxi is left waiting because the taxi does not turn up, there is a problem.

If taxi drivers do not use the app, does this not tell us there is an insufficient supply of taxis? If they are not using the app, it means there is plenty of other work at a particular point in time. Many of the people waiting on the sidewalk for taxis booked them on the apps. The companies are not telling them that the taxi drivers have switched off the apps. They are being told a taxi will be there but it does not arrive. Then people phone the company. The simple deduction is that the profile of how taxi drivers work means many of them no longer work long hours. We all take taxis. They are not working night shifts in the way they used to. Many of them have left the sector. This is anecdotal and I cannot prove it. I do not want to be unfair in any way to taxi drivers because they provide a great service and I find them fantastic to use. If taxi drivers are not using the app does it not de facto state there are not sufficient taxis or taxi drivers out at particular times of the day or night? Does this not prove there are insufficient taxis and taxi drivers in the system at present in Dublin?

Ms Anne Graham: Not necessarily. Taxi drivers can choose whether to take the booking from the dispatch operator. The arrangement between the dispatch operator and the taxi is between themselves. It is a commercial arrangement. They are commercial operators. We have looked to see what is the number of taxis *per capita* in Ireland.

Chairman: I am speaking about Dublin.

Ms Anne Graham: Nationally it is 3.7 small public service vehicles, SPSV, per 1,000 of population. This far exceeds the rate in most European countries.

Chairman: The question is-----

Ms Anne Graham: Only in the UK, which has 4.4 SPSVs per 1,000 of population, is there a greater level of supply.

Chairman: The question I would ask is-----

Ms Anne Graham: In Dublin-----

Chairman: Is this taxi drivers or taxi cars?

Ms Anne Graham: It is SPSVs. It is vehicles. The supply of SPSV services in Dublin is also very high by international city standards at 7.4 SPSVs per 1,000 of population. Cities of comparable size, such as Oslo, Hamburg, Vienna, Seville and Brussels, have rates of between 0.6 and 1.9.

Chairman: The question then is about the patterns. A city may have a higher SPSV rate per 1,000 of population but if they do not work at peak hours or they are being quite selective when they work we may have a system where the average in real terms might be much lower than 3.7.

Ms Anne Graham: It may be at peak times. In terms of the survey work we did earlier in the year, taxi drivers indicated to us that more than half of them operate at night-time peak hours. This is at different times and would not necessarily be every day. All that is in our power as a regulator is to incentivise them to work. The only means we have to incentivise them is through what they charge as a maximum fare at those peak hours.

Chairman: I use taxi drivers to go from here to Heuston Station when I am under time pressure. I always ask them whether they work at night. Nine times out of ten they no longer work at night. If I asked this question of them four years ago, most of them would have said they worked at night. Their patterns have changed. Ms Graham said the NTA wants its own passenger information system. I ask that empirical work be done in this area. There is clearly a problem. Buses, the Luas and trains do not cover all of the gaps in a 24-hour service.

Ms Anne Graham: We have put in place a driver recruitment campaign. We have been recruiting to try to get more drivers into the system. There is no cap on the number of drivers or vehicles in Ireland. We are not setting a cap, which is something other countries have done. The driver recruitment campaign we ran was very successful.

Chairman: How many have come into the system and since when?

Ms Anne Graham: Just over 1,000 new driver licences came into the system this year. We are seeing the driver recruitment campaign having an impact.

Chairman: We are facing into the Christmas period. Generally the view is that it will be chaotic with regard to taxi drivers. I will move on to buses next. Something is not working with regard to taxis. If taxi drivers are switching off apps and can pick up fares on the street then by definition there is a problem with the system. In most cases, the consumer relies on the app. For security reasons, if young people are coming out a restaurant, they will go on the app.

Ms Anne Graham: They do not have to rely on the dispatch operator's app for security. We have delivered a driver checking app, which has been in operation for a number of years. It can also provide customers using it with the driver and vehicle identity. It can be used to email or contact a friend if a customer is travelling in a particular vehicle, from a safety point of view.

Chairman: That is a separate issue again. I accept that. I ask the NTA to go back and examine the figures for the taxi industry again, particularly for those peak periods early in the morning, late at night and on the weekend. I am not saying-----

Ms Anne Graham: With any kind of commercial system,-----

Chairman: I am a doubting Thomas when it comes to the figures.

Ms Anne Graham: With any commercial system, the market generally tends to regulate itself. If there is demand there, people will go and meet that demand. If they want to operate in the market, they will provide that service. We are not limiting their access to the system. There is a requirement to have a wheelchair accessible vehicle for those coming into the market but grants are being provided to assist people coming into the market.

Chairman: Where does the NTA stand on increasing the age of vehicles to 15?

Ms Anne Graham: That is being extended as a temporary measure.

Chairman: Until when?

Ms Anne Graham: It is being extended for a number of years and then it will roll back. That has been done. We have taken many actions to try to retain-----

Chairman: Is the NTA continuing to recruit taxi drivers?

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Chairman: It is something that we will probably discuss again in the new year.

Ms Anne Graham: No problem.

Chairman: I want to move on to the issue of the buses. I will start with the representatives of Go-Ahead. I have a couple of key questions. Am I correct that Go-Ahead has recruited 27 drivers? How many drivers has Go-Ahead recruited since the representatives were here last?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We have recruited 50 new people.

Chairman: The company is still short 25.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Yes.

Chairman: A total of 75 were required. Is it correct that by the end of the year, Go-Ahead hopes to have four or five in place?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Yes. That is the plan with the recruitment tracker.

Chairman: There are 27 drivers awaiting sign-off. Are they to be signed off by the RSA?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Yes.

Chairman: Is that regarded as a delay? Will the sign-offs be completed quickly?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: They are at various stages of the application process. We wait between ten and 25 days for sign-off. All the applications are coming through the process.

Chairman: With the recruitment of the 50 and the 27, by the end of the year or thereabouts Go-Ahead should have the extra 75 staff?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Apologies; there is a bit of confusion as to the way it is done. What we are saying is that we are 25 short, but we have recruited 50 people over the past five to six weeks.

Chairman: How many staff have been lost?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We are losing one a week now, on average.

Chairman: What was the company losing prior to that?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: At times, the numbers were higher than that - perhaps two to three and sometimes even four a week.

Chairman: I want to focus on the figures. Go-Ahead has hired 50 people. How do we get to the figure of 405?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: The best way to put it is that we have 380 staff at the moment, we are 25 short and there are 27 people waiting on passes.

Chairman: Training passes.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We also have 98 people in our school going through training currently. There are 80 in training to work in the outer Dublin metropolitan area, ODMA, and others on a different contract. Apologies, that is where the 98 comes from.

Chairman: The figure of 380 has been mentioned. Where does the 405 figure come from?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Sorry?

Chairman: There are 380 staff at the moment.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We are 25 short.

Chairman: That brings us up to the figure of 405. If Go-Ahead gets to that number, will the current service be able to operate within the requirements of the NTA?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Yes.

Chairman: Is the company currently operating within the requirements of the NTA?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We are just shy of it. More than 97% of services are operating.

Chairman: Are any routes not operating properly at the moment?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: It is a moveable feast. It depends on what happens on a particular day. At the moment,-----

Chairman: People have contacted me to tell me they are utterly frustrated with elements of Go-Ahead's service. Let us get to the core of it. What routes is Mr. Andrews unhappy with at the moment?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Am I unhappy with? I would have to come back to the committee directly on that.

Chairman: Which routes is the company getting complaints about?

Deputy Emer Higgins: What about the L51 and L52?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Yes, we are getting complaints about the L52 at times. Significant improvements have been made there, but I accept that there is still some work to do. The 18 route is another one that we get complaints about. We are working to focus on that as well.

Chairman: I will let Deputy Higgins comment on that later. Go-Ahead Ireland was fined €885,000 by the NTA for not meeting targets. Has the company been fined any money since then?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We do not have the deduction figures for the most recent quarter. However, we expect that the next set of figures published will reflect the challenges that we were facing during the period that we talked about last time we were here.

Chairman: That was a political answer Will a fine be imposed by the NTA, Ms Graham?

Ms Anne Graham: Neither operator gets paid for the kilometres that they do not operate. We do not consider that a fine, as such; it is just that they do not get paid. It is a deduction.

Chairman: We spoke about the €1.5 million for Dublin Bus and the €885,000 for Go-Ahead Ireland.

Ms Anne Graham: That was for quarter 1 and quarter 2.

Chairman: Was that about lost kilometres?

Ms Anne Graham: It was about lost kilometres and punctuality.

Chairman: Does NTA expect any deductions for punctuality in the next round?

Ms Anne Graham: We do, but we want to assess the impact that car congestion is having on punctuality, because-----

Chairman: Mr. Edwards has made that clear in his statement.

Ms Anne Graham: The incentivisation is around encouraging operators to perform better, particularly on things that are within their control. Given the way car congestion has increased, it is not necessarily within the operators' control. We have to do an assessment on both the lost kilometres for quarter 3 and ultimately for quarter 4.

Chairman: Was car congestion taken into account for the €1.5 million and €885,000 reductions?

Ms Anne Graham: No, because there was not the same level of congestion.

Chairman: Is that new?

Ms Anne Graham: It is something that happened in quarter 3.

Chairman: When will those figures be finalised?

Ms Anne Graham: It will be number of-----

Mr. Tim Gaston: Quite soon; we are working on it at the minute.

Chairman: Turning to Dublin Bus, if I am correct, 39 people have been recruited since the representatives were last here and the company is short 120. I ask for the timeframe within which those 120 will be put in place.

Mr. Billy Hann: I might refer to my colleague, Ms Keane.

Ms Andrea Keane: As the Chair correctly stated, we have recruited 39 people since our last visit and we are still 120 short. We expect it will be the end of quarter 1, which will probably be March, before we have fully bridged that gap, but we will see incremental improvements, as we saw with the 39 released into service. In terms of our recruitment process and where we stand currently, we can send the information in a more comprehensible format to the committee. We have 229 live applications at the moment, which are being progressed through the system. It is important that I reiterate, as I did last time, that safety is our key priority. Not all of the 229 applicants will commence employment with the company. Looking at our trends on how many of the applicants will take up work, it will probably be one third of them or slightly in excess of that if the current trends hold. The more positive news for customers on recruitment is that the winter recruitment campaign is continuing apace. While there are 229 live applications at the moment, more than 500 pre-registered for the open day to which Mr. Hann referred to earlier. Not everybody was able to turn up on the day, but they have emailed applications to us. These are being worked through as well. We still estimate it will be the end of March before we have the 120 addressed, but there will be incremental improvements for customers in January, February and March as we bridge the gap.

Chairman: Does Dublin Bus have any difficulty recruiting now?

Ms Andrea Keane: The recent open days have been very successful. As we said, we have 229 applications in. However, we are very conscious that it is still a challenging market to recruit in. We are looking at a variety of areas. We have our winter campaign and a special campaign for people who are home for Christmas who may wish to stay home and look at these jobs.

Chairman: When the representatives from Dublin Bus were before us previously, it was stated that the predominant difficulty was the recruitment of staff. Is that still the case?

Ms Andrea Keane: Yes, that is still the challenge. I stated on our previous visit that it was going to probably be the end of quarter 1 before we bridged the gap.

Chairman: That has not changed.

Ms Andrea Keane: Correct.

Chairman: Is the recruitment of staff still the major challenge for Go-Ahead Ireland or has the position eased?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We are still seeing significant applications coming in. However, as Ms Keane and Mr. Hann said, we need to keep being creative and finding new ways. At this moment, we have a good pipeline of applicants that keep coming through.

Chairman: Dublin Bus has 130 routes and Go-Ahead Ireland has 30 routes. Is Dublin Bus operating within the target set down by the NTA?

Ms Andrea Keane: Similar to the last time, unfortunately, we are not operating our full network of services at the moment. We are prioritising the low-frequency routes in order to try to allocate the resources to have the least possible adverse impact on our customers.

Chairman: Which routes are not running at the moment?

Ms Andrea Keane: All routes are operating, so there is no route that is left without a service. We have to unfortunately make judgment calls in terms of the level of service we can do. There is no route left without a service.

Chairman: Are there any specific contingency plans in place between now and into the new year for the busy time of Christmas?

Mr. Billy Hann: Perhaps I will ask Mr. Rogan to come in on that.

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: The specific contingency plan is the numbers of drivers who came into the system over the past number of weeks, as Ms Graham indicated. Between Nightlink, which is about a dozen services, we are operating-----

Chairman: Are Nightlink services all operated by Dublin Bus?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: Yes. That is a dozen services.

Chairman: What services are those?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: We will forward on the list. Basically, there is no area of Dublin or no main arterial route that is not served. Basically, every part of Dublin is served by Nightlink.

Chairman: In terms of contingency planning-----

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: We are confident we are well covered with the driver numbers we have in the system at the moment.

Chairman: What percentage of its contracted services is Dublin Bus operating? It is operating all of the routes, but what percentage of the agreed frequencies is it operating?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: In reference to lost kilometres, the target within the contract is 98% of all kilometres. We are currently doing in excess of 95%.

Chairman: What is the position with Go-Ahead Ireland?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Our target is 98% and we are in excess of 97% at the moment.

Chairman: I will go to the other thing that came up last time, which is the real time passenger information. How is that system working for Go-Ahead Ireland? Does it have any ghost buses or delays? How is its real time passenger information system working at the bus stop, on the apps and so forth?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: I cannot comment too much on it because it is not our system, rather, it is the NTA's system.

Chairman: There are new routes. I want to know about Go-Ahead Ireland's routes and how it views it?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We have not had much feedback on this. We have a process in place whereby if the control room knows a service will be curtailed, it will then put it into the system. At times, unfortunately, something may happen at a particular moment in time, so the next customer along the route-----

Chairman: That is still happening.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: That will happen at times because, unfortunately, things happen, such as a bus may have a mechanical fault or something such as that.

Chairman: I ask representatives from Dublin Bus the same question - whoever wants to deal with it. This was a key issue last time.

Mr. Billy Hann: I might just give it a high level statement and then I will bring in Mr. Rogan. We absolutely understand the importance of the RTPI app. As I said, it is important that they get the information. As a user of the bus, I would 100% support that. Our staff are continuously looking at information coming from Twitter and customer complaints and examining the performance of the system against complaints. We are constantly reviewing and monitoring the performance of that system with a view to improving it. As stated earlier, there was a software patch put in on-----

Chairman: Did that have to do with the Dublin Bus's own real-time system?

Mr. Billy Hann: Correct. That system also feeds the NTA's system, so it is an important element of-----

Chairman: Was the software within Dublin Bus's system?

Mr. Billy Hann: Correct.

Chairman: Is that rectified?

Mr. Billy Hann: Yes. All indications so far since 1 December are that it was a very positive implementation. In addition, as I said, we have done an extensive survey - the biggest in the company's history - where we examined thousands of routes against the actual performance of the RTPI system and we recorded an accuracy of 98%.

Chairman: When did Dublin Bus do that survey?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: The surveys are ongoing. They would have commenced almost the week following the last attendance here.

Chairman: Has there been a marked improvement?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: There has been an improvement. As Mr. Hann said, 98% is the current accuracy level. The NTA would have a target set for us of 96%, so we are in excess of that. That is also partially a result of the software fixes that were put in place, which helped to deliver what they were meant to. In addition, we took a look at the processes by which we are recording journeys that may not be operating, be curtailed or diverted for whatever reason and we have seen some improvements in that as well. We are continuing the level of surveys that we have done over the past numbers of weeks. We have surveyed roughly 3,500 individual journeys in-house with our own staff. That entails people standing at a bus stop for several hours, watching the buses coming, checking the information on the screen and on the app and validating that the information is correct. We will continue doing that for the time being until we are absolutely sure.

Chairman: Is that on Dublin Bus's system or the NTA's system?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: It would be on both systems because we cross-check against each other.

Chairman: I will go full circle back to Ms Graham because these were the issues. Can she tell me about the NTA's system and whether it found that bug? I think she brought it up in her opening statement. Where are things at on that? What is her view on the RTPI system at the moment and how it is working?

Ms Anne Graham: The bug was on the automatic vehicle location system that is operated on the Dublin Bus that generates the data that goes into the real-time system. There has been a huge focus both in the NTA and in Dublin Bus on-----

Chairman: When NTA was looking at the issues with real time passenger information previously, was it primarily a Dublin Bus rather than a Go-Ahead issue?

Ms Anne Graham: It was primarily a Dublin Bus issue. There were some small issues, naturally enough, but it was primarily on the main-----

Chairman: I have two questions. Can Ms Graham tell us about how the real-time system is working for customers? How has the NTA found the level of punctuality with both operators, Go-Ahead and Dublin bus?

Ms Anne Graham: Punctuality is a different issue. In terms of the real time passenger information, we have seen a huge improvement in the accuracy of the information that is on the

screens. That is because of the focus that we have seen from both operators on ensuring that when a service is not operating it gets cancelled so that it does not appear on the screen and operate as a ghost bus. It is a system that needs constant review and focus. It is now such an important system for the customer. It is getting a huge amount of focus now and will continue to do so, as Mr. Rogan said, until we get it.

Chairman: Ms Graham spoke about the full Nightlink service. What work will the NTA be doing as the regulator of the area to see that the bus operators are able to meet the demand over the Christmas period? The last thing we want is that in the week of Christmas people will be stuck in the city and be unable to get home or get into the city to go to functions. What work will the NTA be doing as the regulator in the area?

Ms Anne Graham: The system is operated at the operator level. The operators see what is happening on the ground and have the freedom to put in auxiliary services, if they have the resources available, where they see that demand is outstripping the number of buses available. We ask for the operators to be as adaptable as they can and to have some contingency in place to be able to meet some of the increased demand. However, it is hard to judge that because you do not know how many people will be in town on any particular night. With our operators, we try to plan as best we can but we need to have some flexibility during the night to respond if some issue arises.

Chairman: The NTA has discussed this with both operators.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Chairman: I have a final question on the metrics. Mr. Hann said that both operators are set to have covered 98% of their kilometres. Dublin Bus has done 95% and Go-Ahead Ireland has done 97%. What did they do previously? I want to discover if there has been an improvement? Maybe this is something I should ask Ms Graham. Has there been an improvement?

Ms Anne Graham: There certainly has.

Chairman: What was the metric? That will tell a multitude.

Ms Anne Graham: I will check and see.

Chairman: What do Mr. Hann and Mr. Edwards have to say to the Dublin public who are bus users and to people up from the country about the service they can expect over the Christmas period and beyond?

Mr. Billy Hann: As we said earlier, we apologise for any recent failures in our service and it is important to recognise that. From the festive season point of view, there is a good story to tell. We have more services now than we had prior to the pandemic in 2019. We are one of the only public transport providers that will be providing a 24-hour service over the festive season. There is a positive story for our customers that we will be supporting them and getting them home throughout the festive season, in accordance with the schedule that has been put on our website for same.

Chairman: Does Go-Ahead Ireland provide a 24-hour service?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: No, we do not.

Chairman: It is not contracted to do that.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: No.

Chairman: What does Mr. Edwards wish to say to Go-Ahead Ireland's customers?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We apologised the last time, and we have seen continuous improvements since we were previously before the committee. As our drivers come out of our training school, we will continue to use those additional colleagues to help with our resilience as we go through the Christmas period.

Chairman: Has Ms Graham found those figures?

Ms Anne Graham: At its worst, which was only for a short period, Dublin Bus lost about 7.5% of its kilometres.

Chairman: That would bring it down to about 91.5%.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Chairman: What about Go-Ahead Ireland?

Ms Anne Graham: Go-Ahead Ireland, unfortunately, had lost kilometres, at a short peak, of 15%.

Chairman: It was down at 73%.

Ms Anne Graham: We responded to that by reducing the number of services-----

Chairman: I apologise. It was at 83%. When were those peaks?

Ms Anne Graham: In September.

Chairman: So we have seen a considerable improvement.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Chairman: Ms Graham spoke about curtailing the service. Is she putting it on the record that if the current contracts are not fit for purpose and running at the efficiency stated in them, the NTA will not move on to the next phase of the roll-out of new services?

Ms Anne Graham: Is this BusConnects?

Chairman: Yes.

Ms Anne Graham: No. We want to ensure that what we are operating currently is to contractual standards before we would move to put additional phases of BusConnects in place.

Chairman: Has the NTA put that to Government yet?

Ms Anne Graham: It would be normal that you would not make the system worse by adding in services. We may have to put in additional services to meet the growing demand or to meet the-----

Chairman: But the NTA will not expand and set up new routes until the existing routes are fully functioning.

Ms Anne Graham: That is our intention.

Chairman: When will BusConnects in Limerick be rolled out?

Ms Anne Graham: We hope to go out and consult on the new BusConnects network in the first quarter of the new year. I cannot give an exact date but-----

Chairman: I ask that consultation takes place. There cannot be enough consultation done. This is a hugely sensitive issue for people. I ask that the NTA be open to as many consultations as possible.

Ms Anne Graham: As the Chair may know, we had three rounds of public consultation in respect of BusConnects Dublin. That was extensive. We did not necessarily need as extensive a consultation process in Cork but where we need to do more we are open-----

Chairman: When will the first period of consultation take place in Limerick?

Ms Anne Graham: It will be some time in the first quarter of next year.

Chairman: Will it be towards the end of the first quarter?

Ms Anne Graham: I cannot give an exact date. It could be earlier than that but I am not sure yet. I will let the Chair know when I have a date.

Chairman: Deputy Ó Murchú is giving leave to Deputy Higgins.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I appreciate that. I thank the witnesses for being here. I extend a special welcome to Mr. Hann, who is here in his new capacity. I congratulate him on his new role.

It has been interesting to hear the update on the recruitment of drivers. It was only a month ago when Mr. Edwards sat here and told me that there was going to be additional drivers in the coming four weeks and that as a result of that we would see improvements in local services, such as the 175 to Citywest, the 76 in Clondalkin, the 18 in Palmerstown and the L51 and L52 in Lucan. While those services are still not up to scratch, there are anecdotal reports that there have been improvements. We look forward not just to the 50 new drivers that Go-Ahead Ireland has on board but also to the 98 drivers in its training school and the 27 who are due to start in the coming weeks. Once they come on board, I hope we will see dramatic improvements in those services and that we will see them working on time and on schedule.

The C spine, which is a Dublin Bus route I spoke about last time, is still having capacity issues at peak times. Mr. Hann has said that not all office workers are back. That gives me a little bit of cause for concern because people are going back to the office more on a gradual and phased basis. If you cannot get on your C spine bus now, what will it be like when they are all back?

I will focus on Newcastle, which is a big village that is growing into a town. We have had a massive amount of housing developments and new businesses come on stream there. As a result, we have more people looking to use the 68 bus route. Public transport has not kept pace with the development in Newcastle. What was already an inadequate service once per hour has become even worse because now it is completely and utterly unreliable. I will give our guests five examples of that. On 1 December, the 5.30 p.m., 6.15 p.m. and 6.45 p.m. buses from the city centre - three buses in a row during peak period - did not show. Commuters were significantly impacted, including a pregnant lady who told me she had to get a taxi, which cost €48, to get home after waiting around for hours on end. A taxi was also the solution for a student

who contacted me a couple of weeks later to say they had given up waiting in the rain for the bus that was due to their bus stop at 7.05 p.m. That student pointed out that there is only one bus between 5.30 p.m. and 6.50 p.m., which is interesting when you look at the fact that those are the key commuting times for students and workers. A taxi was not an option yesterday for a schoolchild from Newcastle who attends school in Clondalkin. The bus that was due at 4.15 p.m. did not show up and neither did the next one. As a result, the child was left stranded. Many workers in Greenogue have completely given up on waiting for the 68 bus and now use an hourly private bus to get them to the Red Cow Luas stop. They can travel into town from there. Healthcare workers and the families of people with disabilities in Peamount Hospital are continually impacted by what has become a completely unreliable service.

People are late for work, students are missing lectures, kids are missing classes and commuters are missing precious hours with their kids before bedtime. That is not good enough. Why has this route not been prioritised by Dublin Bus? I understand that there are shortages and that drivers do not always show up for work for various reasons, for example, sickness and leave, but why is this service, which only runs once per hour, not a prioritised route? If the real-time information we have heard about is 98% accurate, then it must only be Newcastle that is not accurate. The facts of the past month, which is only the time since the organisations were last before the committee, speak for themselves.

The 68X service, which I raised at our previous meeting, was withdrawn without any notice to the commuters using that rush-time service. The NTA informed me that this happened because it did a survey and felt there was low demand on the route but that it would consider the matter again. How is demand checked on a route when this is the service that we have currently? An hourly bus service is failing to show.

Sticking with Newcastle, the long-promised W6 orbital route, which will be serviced by Go-Ahead, will be delivered in two parts - the W61 and the W62 - instead of as a single connected route. This is because a bridge that was built in, I believe, the 1800s is hindering progress and means that two buses cannot pass at the same time. I suggested an alternative route but was told "No" by the NTA, so I have two new suggestions. Can the W62 terminate at Hazelhatch instead of Newcastle? This would link Newcastle to Hazelhatch train station. This route is the key infrastructure that the people of Newcastle have been waiting on for years. The current bus service into Newcastle village is so unreliable that the least we can do is give them a service to Hazelhatch train station. If that is not doable, could the W62 route travel in a loop? This would present the option of facilitating the orbital route. That these buses will not be regular means that they will not meet on the bridge, so that should not be an issue.

I welcome the 12 new off-peak train services through Adamstown and Hazelhatch that will start shortly, but there is a significant shortfall in weekend services. This matter is raised with me time and again. More people are using the train line, and this is great. Even more will use it once Kishoge rail station is open as well. I believe that will be next year, but I have been told that before.

I concur with what has been said about taxis. It is becoming increasingly difficult to get a taxi. FREE NOW has predicted a shortage this winter. I have two questions for the NTA. Is it time for us to consider Uber, which is being utilised in many other cities around the world? I used it this summer while on holidays and was intrigued to see how it worked. It seemed to work well. My second question relates to the statistic that Ms Graham provided of 7.4 SPSVs per thousand people in our capital city being a good ratio and how there might be an issue with taxi drivers not being available to work all day every day. Is it time to start considering some-

thing innovative, for example, waiving VRT for taxis that come on stream if drivers promise to operate through local or industrial taxi companies that provide 24-7 service to people?

Chairman: To whom was the Deputy's first question directed?

Deputy Emer Higgins: I would like to hear from Dublin Bus and the NTA about Newcastle and I would like to hear from the NTA regarding weekend train services, Uber and VRT.

Before they do, though, I would like to make a final point. After the organisations' previous meeting with us, the National Bus and Rail Union, NBRU, contacted parliamentary representatives and stated in very clear language that it felt that the NTA had set unachievable demands on Dublin Bus. What is the NTA's response? The same letter referred to family-friendly policies for workers, the review of rosters, time behind the wheel and facilitation of holidays. Does Mr. Hann believe that these matters have an impact on the ability to recruit and retain staff?

Chairman: We will start with Mr. Hann. The Deputy can go back and forth, as she has asked many questions and we will need to break them down.

Mr. Billy Hann: Before I ask Mr. Rogan to address the details regarding Newcastle, I thank members for their warm welcome. It was appreciated. The feedback they are providing about issues is valuable to us. We take it on board, as we do information from customers, and we investigate it in an effort to make our performance better.

Regarding family-friendly policies, I reached out to the union membership recently to organise a meeting as soon as possible – it may happen this side of Christmas or it may not – to discuss with them whatever issues and problems they have. I will sit down with our HR team and the union membership to see what all of the latter's issues are, including family-friendly policies, and discuss them. I may be able to provide the committee with feedback afterwards, if that is okay.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Yes.

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: Regarding the 68, 68A and 68X, which was removed in May on the grounds of passenger numbers, it is difficult to address the Deputy's specific queries on the dates in December and so on, but I will happily take all of the details away and perform a service review for the days in question. Judging from what the Deputy has said, we need a detailed demand pattern review of what is happening. We will do that in conjunction with the NTA. We will take the details of the 68 and 68A services that the Deputy mentioned and see what is necessary. We will take into account what is meant to happen in a future phase of BusConnects.

Dropped services are not acceptable and we apologise to people who were badly affected on what was a rainy night. We will aspire to do better. I am actually surprised that that number of journeys was dropped that night. It is not a high-frequency service, so there should not have been so many. The situation is well worth a detailed review. I will revert to the committee.

Deputy Emer Higgins: How will Dublin Bus undertake its demand pattern review, how will we find out its results and how will we see them in action?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: To some extent, we will examine current and previous levels of demand, the degree of development in the wider area recently and correspondence to us from local residents. We will also probably lean heavily on the Deputy and other elected representatives to feed back information.

Deputy Emer Higgins: That sounds fantastic. The people of Newcastle would be thrilled if we could get a more reliable and frequent bus service that met the area's demands. It does not seem too much of an expectation for people who live in the area to be able to get to and from school and work as promised. I appreciate the witnesses working with me on trying to make that happen.

My question on the orbital route in Newcastle was for the NTA.

Ms Anne Graham: I will ask Mr. Gaston to address it.

Mr. Tim Gaston: We will examine the Deputy's suggestion on Hazelhatch station. I cannot remember the details, but I believe we considered such a route in the design's early stages and there was a good reason for ruling it out. I apologise, as I cannot remember exactly what that was, but we will examine the matter again and revert to the Deputy on the matter.

The Deputy mentioned a loop. Now or afterwards, she might send me the detail of where she believes it could be.

We were acutely aware of the bridge when we designed the W6. We believed there might be a way of managing traffic across it to allow buses to run in both directions, but in discussions with the local authority and following closer examination of the idea, we realised that that would not work. A great deal of land would need to be taken up and there is a steep fall-away on the land immediately approaching the bridge. Getting to the point where buses could pass on the bridge would be a big job.

Deputy Emer Higgins: To be clear, the bridge would facilitate one bus. The issue is with buses passing one another on it.

Mr. Tim Gaston: A bus passing anything – a truck, a car or another bus – on that bridge would create a circumstance in which one or the other had to reverse, and that is not a good place to be.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Could we work with the local authority on trying to do something better in terms of traffic management?

Mr. Tim Gaston: Traffic management is a possibility, but it is a long stretch of land. There are properties on one side and a field on the other. We are examining the matter, though, and if there is an alternative way of providing the service, be it through the loop or via Hazelhatch as the Deputy suggested-----

Deputy Emer Higgins: The loop would go over that bridge.

Mr. Tim Gaston: Would it?

Deputy Emer Higgins: The issue with the bridge that was communicated to me through the NTA had to do with buses passing one another. It is not, though. It is any bus passing-----

Mr. Tim Gaston: It is not just bus-on-bus traffic. As I understand it, the issue is buses passing other vehicles.

Deputy Emer Higgins: It is late in the day to be deciding on that as this was looked at in 2016. In my submission in 2016, I pointed out that this bridge was going to be a major hurdle.

Mr. Tim Gaston: It was worked on with the local authority and we reluctantly came to the

conclusion that we could not run the service through it. That is why we are where we are. As for trains, the new timetable came in successfully on Sunday. On having more trains at weekends, we are in discussions with Irish Rail on a number of places where we would like to see increased frequencies at weekends. Those lines are one of those options. Trains are relatively expensive to run, as members will understand. Getting buses to run is far cheaper. However we will be looking at that and are in discussions with Irish Rail at the minute about recruiting more drivers. It is not short of drivers but will need to increase the numbers through its training school to accommodate the sort of changes we might want to bring in. At the earliest it will be very late next year, probably into 2024, by the time we get an additional tranche of train drivers through and into the network. We are looking at a number of areas, not just Dublin but nationally to see where we can get more traffic onto the train network.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Will Ms Graham update us about taxis?

Ms Anne Graham: In regard to the Uber model which is currently operated by Uber as a despatch operator. It uses licensed drivers and licensed vehicles. Deputy Higgins is suggesting using unlicensed drivers and unlicensed vehicles similar to those services being operated in other countries. Our suggestion, and this will be a decision for the Government, was that we do not believe you can increase the overall number of drivers based on having a regulated service operating alongside an unregulated service. We believe it is appropriate for this country to have a service where the driver is regulated, checked, Garda vetted and licensed and that the vehicle is also checked and licensed. The other issue is that we also regulate the fares. We set a maximum fare. Members might have read that in other countries in which Uber operates, they can charge surge pricing. You can imagine what level of surge would apply in these peak demand times at Christmas. There would not be a regulated, maximum fare in that kind of model. We do not believe it would necessarily add to the fleet by much and it could actually undermine the regulated system. It could draw from the regulated system overall. We found that in other jurisdictions, even in some of the American systems, they have moved away from the very open environment into a more regulated environment, which we have been able to maintain.

Deputy Emer Higgins: On the regulated environment, in regard to looking at something innovative or even thinking of how many taxis are coming towards the end of their lifetime, how can we encourage more operators and get more vehicles on the road? I acknowledge there was an extension but to an extent, that is kicking the can down the road. Should we look at VRT to encourage people to become taxi drivers? Do we need to start looking at a 24-7 model as well?

Ms Anne Graham: That is what we have done. We ran a successful driver recruitment campaign. There is a big increase in the number of drivers applying to do the entry tests. We have already seen more than 1,000 new licensed drivers coming into the industry this year. There is a recovery in the number of people coming forward to operate as taxi drivers.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Are there still big delays in the paperwork being processed by the RSA and the Garda on that?

Ms Anne Graham: There are delays. It takes a number of months to go through the vetting procedures. In a way you would want that to be the case. You would want to ensure that drivers are fully vetted by An Garda Síochána before they operate a public service licence. The other aspect to consider is the grant-aiding of vehicles. There are significant grants available for wheelchair-accessible vehicles. The Minister has just approved a grant for electric vehicles including a scrappage scheme. That will be launched shortly. We use other incentives to en-

courage an improvement in the fleet and to encourage an increase in the number of drivers.

Deputy Emer Higgins: Do you set unachievable demands for Dublin Bus?

Ms Anne Graham: I do not believe we set unachievable targets. This has been a difficult year in regard to working through Covid-19 and coming out of Covid-19. It was difficult for all of us to predict what the response would be post Covid-19 in regard to the number of people operating within the system but also the demand for services. When we reflect back, we had some issues throughout the summer period and a greatly increased demand for services in September, which we welcome and is great to see. It was hard to respond very quickly to that. We are in a much better place now. We want to ensure that our operators are able to achieve their targets. We work with them to assist them where we can to meet those targets. We do not set unachievable targets.

Deputy Emer Higgins: I thank all the witnesses.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I thank the witnesses for being here. Where else would they want to be on a Tuesday evening?

Chairman: What is the score in the game?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is over. Argentina won three-nil, but that is not why I was away. I had to do an Irish-language interview, very badly I might add.

Chairman: I suspect it is the piece of information the witnesses are most-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am very sure RTÉ News notifications told them long before I did, even though they were engrossed in the questioning.

To start with Ms Graham, she spoke about the taxis and I would back her completely on the necessity of maintaining a regulated system. It is not possible to operate a hybrid system. We have stated previously that is part of the race to the bottom. She spoke about the recruitment drive. We all spoke about the difficulties in getting new people into the taxi business. It involves a big outlay of money and things like that mitigate against them. Is there anything we can do to improve that and ensure that we have a proper pipeline?

Ms Anne Graham: I do not think it is a big outlay. It is €250 for a driver licence for five years.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: If you are starting out as a taxi driver, it is obviously involves the car. On the particular type of car, what is the story with the grant schemes?

Ms Anne Graham: A person who is new to the industry has to provide a wheelchair-accessible vehicle, either taxi or hackney. There are grants available to assist with providing a vehicle that is wheelchair-accessible. Many things are in place to encourage new entrants into the market. We do not believe cost is the barrier.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The NTA considers grant schemes to be fit for purpose at present. In regard to numbers, what sort of numbers have responded to this recruitment drive?

Ms Anne Graham: I will get back on that to the Deputy. All I have available at the moment is that more than 1,000 new licensed drivers have come into industry in 2022, as well as an increased number of renewals. A total of 1,129 new SPSV licences have been granted by

An Garda Síochána in the past 12 months. That is an increase of 119 compared with the same period last year. Of those newly added SPSV licences, 63% relate to new applications to drive in Dublin. The majority are Dublin-based. Throughout 2022, the number of SPSV driver entry tests has increased steadily each month. Since the campaign in July, there was a 61% increase over the previous month in regard to the number of applications. The following month that figure was 71%, and 88% in the next month. Those are big increases in the number of people applying to do the driver entry tests. The testing completed has increased each month also, particularly since we did the recruitment campaign. The number booked for driver entry tests is also increasing compared with 2019. We are seeing positive responses to the driver recruitment campaign.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: When we dealt with this issue previously we were afraid of the cliff edge. That can was obviously kicked down the road. Ms Graham is fairly sure that there is a decent pipeline or throughput we will get to and that we are dealing with a system that is sustainable.

There is then that wider issue where one will hear stories of there being no taxis available, which may be on Friday and Saturday nights, or at particular hours.

Ms Anne Graham: It is very hard to design a system to meet that very intense peak at the Christmas period. What would those drivers be doing for the rest of the year? Would they just be operating for those few hours in the Christmas period? As I said before, we want to encourage and incentivise drivers to do those later hours. We did that through the fare change by having a higher increase for those evening hours compared to the daytime hours. If that is something we need to do further, we will certainly review that at the next fare review, which we do every two years.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The NTA appeared before the committee before, where we had an element of chaos as people were pointing out the ghost services which were appearing on the app and the buses themselves not appearing. I received the NTA's opening statements but I have missed most of the committee's proceedings, so my apologies if I am about to go through everything again. From the little I heard, the numbers have improved on all services but nobody is overly concerned about the throughput of bus drivers, if we are talking about Dublin Bus or Go-Ahead Ireland. We may be in a better place and the system has largely been fixed, but are there still problems with it?

Ms Anne Graham: Are we talking about the real-time passenger information, RTPI, system?

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Yes.

Ms Anne Graham: There have been some bug fixes on the automatic vehicle location, AVL, system and that has certainly improved the accuracy.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Just to get it clear in my head, real-time passenger information was fed in real-time by Dublin Bus's system. What did Ms Graham call that again?

Ms Anne Graham: The AVL, automatic vehicle location system.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What was it doing?

Ms Anne Graham: It tracks the bus and feeds back where the bus is relative to where it

should be on its schedule. It does a prediction of the time it is going to take to get to the next-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: The problem then was in the AVL and that information was then being transferred to the RTPI-----

Ms Anne Graham: There were inaccuracies in some of those predictions. Am I right in saying that Mr. Rogan?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: I will mention the two lines by which the system works. Every bus has a vehicle location system which will generate the location of the bus on a map, as against where it is meant to be. That information is then fed into the Dublin Bus and the Transport for Ireland, TFI, apps, the system which runs the street signs. They basically do a prediction as to when the bus will arrive at a given stop. There were software fixes within the AVL system. There have also been software fixes within Dublin Bus, the TFI app and the street signs. Essentially there are three or four separate systems working and dependent upon each other.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I get that and there will always be glitches but I do not fully understand how it happened in that one is getting a direct feed from the bus. What was actually happening with the bus then?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: For a ghost bus to occur, there could be-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This question is prompted by my own curiosity, and my apologies to our guests for this.

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: ----- a software bug, or that the prediction algorithm is incorrect, or it could be that the information being fed from the bus location is incorrect. There has been a series of fixes between September, October and November, until 1 December, on all the systems which has improved the accuracy and the way the systems has worked together.

Errors can also occur if, for example, a journey is cancelled and that information - which is fed in manually by a Dublin Bus or Go-Ahead Ireland controller, I presume - is not processed in a timely fashion, that would then generate incorrect information. Both the manual processes have been improved together with software fixes.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That makes sense which I can understand. At the end of the day the AVL system is literally just GPS co-ordinates which are coming from a bus.

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: There is then a clever piece of maths which calculates, depending on where the bus is-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I get that it predicts-----

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: ----- in crossing the streets to how long it will take to get to the passengers.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Initially, it was not that clever but it has been fixed to be somewhat more clever now.

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: It was not as clever as it should have been, no.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is fixed now and is being constantly refined and reviewed. It will be spectacular, then, by the end of Christmas.

On the numbers to deal with the Christmas period, from the little that I have heard, is Dublin Bus in a better situation than it was previously?

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: Yes. The additional drivers we have put in place are contributing to our ability to run the additional Nitelink services, the service that will run until 4 a.m., and also the ten 24-hour services which exist and which we have basically added since 2019. The number of routes here has gone from two to ten. Where auxiliary buses are required, or where we have capacity issues, we will add those. The additional drivers who are in the system have certainly contributed towards making that a more robust product.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I assume the same is the case for Go-Ahead Ireland.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Yes. We are seeing drivers coming out of our training school every week and as more come out, we have seen significant improvements since November. That will continue as we go into the Christmas period.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Mr. Edwards was talking about workforce planning, visas for foreign workers, and all of the rest of it. Bus drivers were one of those groups he talked about. At this point, are the companies reasonably happy that there is a sufficient pipeline there?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We have said already that we have seen a strong pipeline of people coming through. There is a good pool of applicants at this moment in time.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Has Go-Ahead Ireland a sufficient number of drivers and all that is required to offer the service right now?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Right now, we are 25 drivers short of where we need to be, but we have 27 drivers waiting on Certificate of Professional Competence, CPC, cards and on paperwork to come out of the system. When these drivers arrive, they will go into service. We constantly have more drivers coming through our school each week.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: What is the timeline on that?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: It is fluid because sometimes the cards come back within ten days and sometimes they take 15 or 20 plus days. It is quite hard to plan it in that respect. We look at around 20 to 25 days, from passing their test to their going live. Each week we have more drivers coming out who have passed their test so our post-test pool of drivers waiting for paperwork grows.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: From best to worst case scenario, when will Go-Ahead Ireland have-----

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We are aiming, subject to all these circumstances working in the best possible way, at early January to be in a much stronger position with drivers.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There will be difficulties, then, across Christmas.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Right now, our colleagues are working very hard and we cover much of the shortfall through what we call work rest days and overtime. Colleagues are really working and helping-----

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: This is the baling twine to keep the engine going solution. I know, and needs must, and all of that. Nobody will complain as long as the service is there.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: My apologies but I do not understand the reference.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am talking about where baling twine is used to keep the engine going.

Chairman: That is allowed.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is probably my own engine I am talking about.

Chairman: It is a useful device. I have one quick question. Does either Go-Ahead Ireland or Dublin Bus bring in foreign drivers, such as South African and non-EU drivers?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: No.

Chairman: The company then does not feel the need.

Mr. Billy Hann: With the leave of the Chair, I will comment on that from a Dublin Bus perspective. We have over 74 countries represented in our organisation.

Chairman: I accept and I understand that.

Mr. Billy Hann: Everyone is free to apply for our jobs and if they do apply and obtain the relevant permits, we will be completely happy to take them on, for sure.

Chairman: The company is not looking to bring people in from abroad through the work permit process.

Mr. Billy Hann: We work closely with the EURES, which is a European co-operation network of employment services within the European Union.

Chairman: The company is not actively engaging with drivers outside of the EU at the moment.

Mr. Billy Hann: We are waiting for that permit issue to be resolved before we can go down that-----

Chairman: That is, before the company can consider it. Is it the same position with Go-Ahead Ireland?

Mr. Andrew Edwards: We are in exactly the same position, Chairman.

Chairman: Turning now to Ms Graham, where exactly does that stand at the moment, because that is obviously a big issue, particularly with the commercial operators, who are quite frustrated by not being able to get drivers. Many of these operators are looking for South Africans because they drive on the same side of the road as ourselves. They speak the same language. They appear to integrate very well here. Where do things stand at the moment? We wrote to the RSA ourselves in recent days for an update.

Ms Anne Graham: It is the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Chairman: The responsibility is twofold. It is the Department of Transport for the work permit.

Ms Anne Graham: It is the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Chairman: Yes, did I say the Department of Transport?

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Chairman: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment for the work permit and then the RSA deals with the exchange of the licence. The person can get a work permit when abroad, but the exchange of licence cannot be made until he or she is physically in Ireland and he or she has a PPS number.

Ms Anne Graham: We worked with the Department of Transport to put a submission to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Chairman: Mr. Gaston referred to that on the previous occasion when the NTA was before the committee.

Ms Anne Graham: That submission has gone to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. We hope to hear very shortly whether the bus drivers will be added to the list of critical skills for work permits. We do not know the timeframe for that.

Chairman: Did the submission go into the Department of Transport?

Ms Anne Graham: The Department of Transport made the application to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Chairman: Has the application been made?

Ms Anne Graham: Yes.

Chairman: We might follow up on that, or the NTA might follow it up in its own way and report back to the committee.

Ms Anne Graham: Yes, as soon as we know.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Does Go-Ahead expect that it will get through Christmas by hook or by crook? We will forget about the baling twine.

Mr. Andrew Edwards: Yes. We are working very hard to cover all the services.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Is it the same with Dublin Bus?

Mr. Billy Hann: Our colleagues are doing overtime and extra hours. They are delivering hard for our customers. It is exactly the same.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Is it the same sort of timeline? At this stage does Dublin Bus have the full complement of drivers it needs?

Mr. Billy Hann: We do not, but I might let Ms Keane come in with the details.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I am sorry. I apologise as I am fairly sure I am going over old ground.

Mr. Billy Hann: That is fine.

Ms Andrea Keane: That is no problem at all. We have updated the committee that we are 120 drivers short at present. With the number of live applications that we have, and the

throughput into our training school, we estimate that it will be the end of the first quarter, probably March, before we have that gap fully bridged. There will be incremental improvements every week. We have updated the committee to the effect that we had 39 drivers come through the system up to mid-December, since we were last here with the committee on 8 November. That has certainly helped and, as Mr. Rogan noted, it will help for the Christmas period. We are probably talking about the end of March before we have the full 120.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Okay. Is Dublin Bus fairly happy that it has a sufficient amount of throughput, and that it will not be a difficulty, even without the issue of the critical skills list being addressed?

Ms Andrea Keane: What we found is that the vast majority of our current applications are coming through our open days and recruitment fairs, where people are able to interact with us on the day and in person. That is throwing up a significant number of applications. We have 229 live applications that are currently ongoing. I did make the point that safety is the critical piece for us given that being a driver is a safety-critical role, and a highly professional one. What we tend to find is that, on average, we accept just slightly more than a third of all applications, who make it into employment with us. That is to give context to the 229 applications.

I did also advise the committee that we had more than 500 people register for our open days and some of those were not able to attend, but have since followed up with us via email. We do have a good pipeline, but it is an area of key focus and will continue to be throughout 2023.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I accept that. What are retention levels like? Are they fairly good?

Ms Andrea Keane: They are very good in Dublin Bus. We would lose approximately 70 drivers to planned retirements every year. Our staff turnover would tend to be about 2.5% to 3%, which is very good within the industry. We would lose between 70 and 80 people for a variety of reasons.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: There has been a fair amount in the public domain about the safety of drivers. Has that impacted in terms of driver retention?

Ms Andrea Keane: No. The driver retention levels have been fairly static, but that is not to diminish in any way the focus the company puts on the safety of our employees and customers. Mr. Hann gave a very good overview earlier, and we would be quite happy to go through that with him again.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: I can go back. I will not put the witnesses through that.

I congratulate Mr. Hann. It was remiss of me not to say it earlier. Many speakers have commented on my absolute ignorance in any case.

There was discussion of customer complaints. Was there input from Twitter?

Mr. Billy Hann: It was me.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: It is a pretty dangerous place to take one's lead from.

Mr. Billy Hann: It is, but we have an extensive programme for monitoring our Twitter feeds to get feedback from our customers. None of us wants complaints about our services, but at the same time, it is a very valuable source of information. Twitter happens to be one of

the platforms in which we have invested heavily to engage with customers and to try to resolve their issues upfront.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In fairness, it is instant and it is easy in that sense. I remember someone saying about customer service that we should always pay attention to those who are bothered enough to complain. That is how to improve the service. They care enough to do it in the first place. Politicians and others are best to ignore half of what they deal with on Twitter. Does Mr. Hann find it useful from a customer service point of view?

Mr. Billy Hann: Absolutely. It gives us an opportunity to get feedback on a real-time basis, on which we can respond to customers straight away. Then there are official complaints as well. It is a combination of both of them; one feeds into the other. Plus, the information we get back from this committee that helps us to investigate where the concerns and issues are to improve our services.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That shows the wonders of this committee.

I already know the answer to my last question anyway. Will we be no further on with the tax-saver issue until the new ticketing system is in play?

Ms Anne Graham: No. We have kind of given up on that as a project. Unfortunately, we just found it too difficult to put in place on the existing equipment that we have. We are engaged with both the Departments to see what is a more appropriate tax-based system for the future. We would welcome any suggestions on that in terms of how that could be done in the future. The benefit that we would get from the next generation ticketing, NGT, in terms of customers having their account, knowing exactly what travel they have done over any period, gives them the data they could use then to seek tax benefits.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Where is the tendering system at the moment?

Ms Anne Graham: We are in the middle of the tendering process for NGT. We hope to award a contract next year.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: Gabhaim buíochas.

Chairman: I have just a few very quick questions, two on Limerick. It was announced that 20 electric buses are coming to Limerick in 2023. When will they arrive?

Ms Anne Graham: I will have to check that for you, Chairman.

Chairman: Are they still on target to come to Limerick in 2023?

Ms Anne Graham: I think so. Yes.

Chairman: That is good. I compliment Mr. Gaston in particular on the new 310 route. The 307 and 308 routes have been discontinued in Limerick. It covers Limerick city, the Ballysimon Road, the Groody Road, and the Northern Trust up into Castletroy and down into the University of Limerick. It is a hugely positive service. It happened very quickly and the route is working well. However, the signs along the route are for the 307 and 308. When will those signs be replaced?

Ms Anne Graham: Is it the signs in the bus stops?

Chairman: Yes.

Ms Anne Graham: We will check that out.

Chairman: We should acknowledge when something effective was done. The route was discontinued overnight. It is back up and running now with Dublin Bus and the route itself is probably a better route.

Ms Anne Graham: I do not think Dublin Bus is operating in Limerick. It is Dublin Coach.

Chairman: Yes, Dublin Coach. I am sorry. I apologise. It is late at night. No disrespect is intended to either party. It has probably turned out to be a better route. Like everything else, it has teething problems but it is working well at the moment and there is just the issue of the signs.

On a technical point, I got a query from a taxi driver in Limerick regarding the dates for the extension due to age. I should have brought this up earlier. If a taxi was purchased in 2010, it would be due to finish in 2020 but it gets five years up to 2025; for a taxi purchased in 2015, the date is 2025 and it gets no extension of time; and a taxi purchased in 2014 gets a three-year extension after ten years, which takes it up to 2027. Why is there that cut-off?

Ms Anne Graham: This is an emergency contingency measure. It is really down to the fact that vehicles just are not available for the industry. It is very hard to give a measure that is equal across everybody, and it just so happens that some of the older vehicles will benefit more than the newer ones. That is just the way it is when one does an extension on a date like that. As I said, it is an emergency contingency measure. We want to get back to the ten-year maximum age as quickly as possible.

Chairman: What is the deadline date for that?

Ms Anne Graham: I do not have that with me.

Chairman: I thank Ms Graham for coming in. In summary, the National Transport Authority has made considerable progress both with Dublin Bus and Go-Ahead. It is probably still not perfect but it is a significant improvement. For me, it is that metric where, effectively, at peak times Go-Ahead has improved from 83% to 97% and Dublin Bus from 91.5% to 95%. The NTA is effectively getting there. The real-time public information, RTPI, system is still not perfect. However, one must acknowledge that in the five weeks since the NTA was before us last, there has been considerable improvement. Go-Ahead has recruited 50 staff and Dublin Bus has recruited 39 staff, and both are on a recruitment drive, although there is a shortfall of 120 in Dublin Bus and a shortfall of 25 in Go-Ahead. The NTA has overseen the RTPI improvements. We ask that, as the regulator, the NTA would work very closely with the two operators to ensure we do not have a situation over the Christmas period where people are in any way stranded. I assume the NTA modelling for both companies would very much feed into what it expects to happen over the period. We will wait to see what the public view is but one must acknowledge the NTA has made considerable progress in that time period. I call Deputy Ó Murchú.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: In my meanderings, I forgot about an issue that I brought up previously in regard to Dublin Bus and assistance dogs for those with disabilities. I was specifically referring to a particular issue involving a young autistic man being refused entry onto the bus. Perhaps the driver did not recognise that it was an assistance dog. Has Dublin Bus looked at rectifying that? I am not talking about the specifics of that particular case but about some sort of education process internally. We are in a very changed world and we are dealing with people who have been provided with assistance dogs from the point of view of giving them the

framework and the scope to be able to travel independently.

Chairman: We need to finish by 10 p.m. I must ask the Deputy to conclude.

Mr. Billy Hann: I will make a general comment and then hand over to Mr. Rogan, who will give the Deputy the details. As the Deputy knows, Dublin Bus would absolutely support 100% accessibility for all customers, and that is first and foremost. We would train all of our drivers on these issues. I will let Mr. Rogan come back to the Deputy on the details of that event.

Mr. Ciarán Rogan: With regard to that specific event, there was correspondence back and forth with the mother of the boy involved. We followed up with a phone call to make sure she is entirely content with the situation, so that situation is resolved. We have gone back and taken a look to make sure that our policy in regard to assistance dogs is clear, and we are following up on the communications to drivers and individual garages. It is an area where we cannot do enough communication and it is always useful to remind people of what we are expected to do.

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú: That goes for all of us. That is worthwhile. I appreciate it.

Chairman: With that, we wish everyone well for the Christmas period. I thank all of the witnesses for coming in to assist the committee in this important matter. The next meeting of the joint committee will be in public session in committee room 4 tomorrow morning at the earlier time of 9.30 a.m.

The joint committee adjourned at 9.56 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 14 December 2022.