

OIFIG UACHTARÁN FHIANNA FÁIL



Dermot O'Leary,
National Bus and Rail Union,
Tom Darby House,
54 Parnell Square,
Dublin 1.

21/05/2020

Dear Dermot,

Thank you for your recent correspondence with me on the subject of Ireland's public transport system and the implications of Covid-19 for its future operation. I have given its contents my full consideration.

First, I share with you a wholehearted commitment to improving Ireland's public transport system. As you have alluded to in your letter, strong investment in public transport is one of our surest means of reducing Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions, as well as improving living standards, and increasing overall economic efficiency. The next government must pursue these benefits with urgency.

Covid-19 will have considerable ramifications for how public transport is operated in Ireland, beginning with the impacts of maintaining social distancing onboard. In the short term, capacity will be effectively reduced as a result of social distancing measures. We must consider all options when it comes to managing this, such as staggering starting times for schools, third-level institutions and workplaces as well supporting those who wish to work from home.

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As with all workplaces, we must take seriously the implications of Covid-19 for employee health and safety for public transport operators. Drivers must be directly represented in decision making and planning around transport provisions, and I am fully supportive of your request to the NTA that the NBRU and other representative bodies be included in this process. Their first-hand expertise must not be forgotten in this complex process, and it is of course vital that their safety and operational concerns be heard.

Fianna Fáil is supportive of establishing a Public Transport Advisory Council, and during the last Dáil session successfully introduced a motion calling for the establishment of an Advisory Council as set out in section 17 of the 2008 Dublin Transport Authority Act. It is our belief that such a body is needed in order to improve the provision of public transport in Ireland.

Covid-19 and its corresponding restrictions have already had huge impacts on passenger numbers across public transport. This is already having a worrying effect on the financial health of public transport companies. As an entirely commercial service, the Expressway service has been particularly exposed to a sudden drop in revenue, something which is particularly disappointing given the importance of this service to underserved towns and villages and Bus Eireann's recent return to financial viability. Fianna Fáil Transport Spokesperson Marc MacSharry has written to the Minister for Transport to express his concerns over the future of this service. Increased investment must be provided to this and other services, if we are to avoid a loss of services and operators.

The absence of traffic from our cities and urban areas in the past weeks has opened our eyes to the potential of our cities. Bus journey times have fallen considerably along key routes at peak times, resulting in greater efficiency and consistency. We must preserve this momentum to create cleaner, more liveable towns and cities.

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In the short to medium term, key actions are needed to improve Ireland's public transport system. We must advance plans to increase the availability of segregated bus lanes and better bus shelters. This must take into account the views of affected communities, as well as public transport operators and employees. For the sake of our air quality, we must gradually eliminate diesel-only buses from our fleet and introduce hydrogen and electric models.

In many areas of Ireland, the population density is best suited to either conventional bus services or Bus Rapid Transit routes. As you highlight, Bus Rapid Transit provides considerable capacity, often on par with that of light rail services, but can be considerably cheaper and quicker to construct. As such, serious consideration should be given to the possibility of developing Bus Rapid Transit corridors in our cities, particularly along routes that are established and popular.

Our housing and transport crises are tightly intertwined, and the reality is that investment will be needed to bring better transport links to affordable homes. While we appreciate the NBRU's concerns regarding rail projects, we do believe targeted investment in rail infrastructure has a place within the broader public transport system. Consideration must be given to key projects, such as the Navan rail extension project and the Western Rail corridor. This being said, investment in rail should not come at the expense of investment in Ireland's bus network, particularly given that bus remains the most popular mode of public transport in Ireland.

In addition to new projects, more must be done to increase the efficiency of our existing system. Fianna Fáil believes that we must prioritize the electrification of our existent rail network within the available financial resources, given the benefits of electrification for journey time and speed.

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We support a move toward multiannual transport allocations to public transport companies to allow for better planning and management. To ensure that as many communities as possible can use public transport, we propose increasing investment in Park and Ride facilities for both rail and bus services.

We believe that these plans marry the type of ambition that is needed to address Ireland's transport and housing crises with the pragmatism that will be needed to deliver improvements in what will be a challenging economic climate. They represent the type of modern and inclusive Ireland which Fianna Fáil is seeking to build.

Once again, I thank you for sharing your insights with me.

Your sincerely,

Micheál Martin TD