

UK Covid-19 Inquiry Module 9

WITNESS STATEMENT OF RONAN O' DOHERTY

I, Ronan O' Doherty, will say as follows:

1. 'Translink' is the brand name of the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, a public corporation established under the Transport Act (Northern Ireland) 1967. Translink provides public transport services across the region of Northern Ireland, as well as operating rail and bus services to and from the Republic of Ireland (including the Enterprise Rail service; a cross-border rail service jointly operated by Iarnród Éireann (Irish Rail) and Translink Northern Ireland Railways).
2. Translink operate the public transport network in Northern Ireland under a public services agreement entered into with the Department for Infrastructure, a devolved government department.

PART A

Financial impact of the pandemic on Translink

3. The pandemic has had significant and long-term consequences for the public transport network in Northern Ireland. These are further outlined in detail in subsequent questions but in summary these were:
 - Significant short term commercial revenue loss as passenger volumes plummeted, with passenger volumes only returning to pre-pandemic levels in early 2025.
 - A lost opportunity to maintain the growth trajectory being seen in passenger volumes prior to the emergence of the pandemic.
 - A three-year period without any inflationary-linked fare increases as we focussed on providing a critical public transport service for key healthcare and other workers during the pandemic.
 - An ongoing change in commuter patterns with the emergence of hybrid working which continues to the present day.

- A period of needing to rebuild passenger confidence in the safety of public transport as we emerged from the pandemic.
 - Withdrawing from the leisure travel market we operated as Ulsterbus Tours.
4. Translink's cash reserves as of March 2020 were £24m which was equivalent to just over one month's normal operational cost-base. Due to the significant and immediate drop in fare paying passenger revenues it was critical that revised financial forecasts and cashflows were prepared on a time critical basis and monitored closely. We liaised with our sponsor government department, the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland, on an ongoing basis to appraise them of our financial position and emergency funding requirements, which was essential.
 5. Translink operate a public transport network in Northern Ireland under a public services agreement with the Department for Infrastructure. Each year, Translink would prepare a budget which (after Board approval) is approved by the Department for Infrastructure and Translink are then authorised to manage financial performance within that budget envelope. Whilst the Departmental funding element of our overall revenues (including fare paying passengers) may not always have necessarily ensured Translink operated at a break-even position or better, cash reserves were always considered sufficient to manage commercial challenges appropriately.
 6. Translink's business model was predicated on the fact that passenger growth and fare increases would broadly offset any inflationary pressures on our cost base. As passenger journey numbers fell significantly and fare increases did not happen for a period of 3 years this was a major challenge to our operating model and led to operating losses, so additional short-term government funding during the pandemic was crucial to ensure Translink remained sustainable, and in a position to provide an essential public transport network.
 7. Under the Public Service Agreement, Translink were obliged to continue to operate a comprehensive public transport network on an ongoing basis but regardless of that legal requirement Translink were aware of their societal obligation. Throughout the pandemic Translink staff have been at the frontline helping the NHS, and other key workers and vulnerable people get to where they need to be – to their jobs, to their homes and to their families.
 8. The impact of the pandemic emerged during the last fortnight of Translink's 2019/20 financial year and had a modest impact on passenger numbers in that year. In 2019/20 Translink carried 83m passenger journeys and in 2020/21 we carried 26m passenger journeys so there was a year-on-year reduction of 70%. However, during 2020/21 journey volumes fell, at times, by 90%. Passenger journeys have been recovering steadily since

that time, but it is only now in early 2025 that monthly passenger journeys have returned to pre-pandemic levels.

9. Over the period specified as relevant, we would estimate we have lost £120m of revenue which includes the fact that was a period when no fare increases were applied. That decision to freeze fares was agreed as appropriate in conjunction with the Department for Infrastructure, as that was a period when we were carrying a large proportion of essential healthcare and other key workers who travelled throughout the pandemic.
10. There was ongoing liaison and interaction with the Department for Infrastructure on both the financial implications faced by Translink with the priority being that Translink could remain sustainable and in a position not just to provide an essential public transport network throughout the pandemic but also to be in a position to come out of that period sustainably.
11. This included costings on any safety measures, signage or initiatives that were implemented in line with guidance or legislation through the pandemic. Examples include:
 - Encouraging contactless payments and introducing a no change policy, with the remainder donated to NHS Charities Together and Cancer Focus NI.
 - Delivering high cleaning and sanitisation standards - with regular enhanced deep cleaning of vehicles and facilities, and mobile cleaning teams out during the day sanitising common touch areas.
 - Introducing protective screens in stations and on buses and ensuring hand sanitiser was available in all main bus and train stations.
 - Supporting requirements to wear a face covering on public transport - face coverings were given out in stations and on board to help people understand and adapt to guidance.
 - Introduction of social distancing on board public transport vehicles and at depots/stations/head office locations
 - Back-office staff policy to work from home
 - Issuing a briefing document to key stakeholders and businesses to help them provide up to date travel advice to their employees as more people returned to public transport.
12. COVID had an immediate impact in the implementation of a wide range of projects from COVID working restrictions directly on building sites or through issues impacting the supply chain which resulted in delay and increased project costs.
13. Throughout COVID, project costs were seen to increase as a result of materials, labour and energy cost increases. Extraordinary inflation of 10-11% was experienced, though the

price increases of some construction materials and anticipated labour costs were also higher.

14. Ultimately COVID led to a reduced output for transport projects due to increasing project costs within the overall capital funding envelope.

PART B

Economic support for Northern Ireland's transport network

15. £120m emergency funding was received, to reflect revenue loss experienced.
16. Funding was aligned to evolving financial forecasts. Translink's cash reserves remained broadly consistent between March 2020 and March 2023.
17. Translink had not received emergency funding in relation to any previous crises of the scale of COVID in the past. Whilst, for example, some small amounts of funding might be received in relation to exceptional events like storm damage these were very small by comparison. Thus whilst there were protocols for receiving additional monies and exchanging information, the scale of COVID and the rapidly evolving guidance meant it was an unprecedented situation so there were learnings and new engagements between staff at a number of levels in both organisations as a result.
18. Translink had approved a 2020/21 budget for approval by the Department for Infrastructure in early March 2020. Within weeks of this the pandemic emerged and this budget was superseded. Translink in the next 2 months liaised on an ongoing basis with the Department for Infrastructure on passenger journey patterns and resultant revenue implications. Following the gathering of data over this period to provide a clearer understanding of how passenger journey volumes and patterns were changing, a new budget was finalised in June 2020 which reflected this new reality. Key parameters were also revisited, e.g. the provision of a slightly reduced network that still met all the requirements of the Public Service Agreement and allowed key workers to travel, and the removal of an anticipated inflation-linked fare increase.
19. This collaborative process with the Department for Infrastructure identified the necessary funding required to offset lost commercial revenues in the 2020/21 financial year and was amended via reforecasts as the year progressed. Identifying the funding required and overlaying this with cashflow forecasts ensured there was an understood plan and funding requirement throughout. This remained an ongoing process throughout the pandemic.
20. Translink worked on a collaborative basis with the Department for Infrastructure. Budgets, reforecasts, monthly performance and Key Performance Indicators were shared throughout the pandemic. In September 2020, a few months into the pandemic, Translink collated a document "A Responsible Recovery" which outlined how Translink was

continuing to maintain a comprehensive public transport network to help Northern Ireland recover from the pandemic and build back responsibly and sustainably ROD/01-INQ000613872]. It outlined the impact on the public transport sector both locally and globally, how Translink had amended their operating model to adapt to the pandemic and the health and safety, and communication, protocols that had been introduced. This document reflected the views and testimonies of a number of our stakeholders and sought to provide assurance to our passenger base during a difficult period.

21. Translink considers the financial support received to be adequate. Translink historically has sought to maintain cash reserves by targeting a break-even financial position. Following the emergence of the pandemic it was agreed in principle with the Department for Infrastructure that continuing on that basis and seeking to maintain Translink's level of cash reserves throughout the pandemic by funding the resulting passenger revenue losses (net of any cost reductions achieved) was appropriate and equitable. This resulted in Translink exiting the pandemic with equivalent cash reserves (albeit the longer-term trajectory was impacted, as is noted in other parts of this statement).
22. Translink's priority was to work collaboratively with the Department for Infrastructure to ensure that Translink emerged from the pandemic in no weaker a financial position in terms of cash reserves than it did entering the pandemic. Translink has a long-term working relationship with the Department for Infrastructure, as it is its sponsor department within the devolved institutions. Whilst there was constructive challenge and query of our forecasts as they emerged and were reworked with emerging health guidance around social distancing etc., there were no significant issues faced. The longer-term financial support impact was addressed in the next two paragraphs and this has been discussed and shared with the Department for Infrastructure to assist in longer term support discussions, for example through normal scheduled governance meetings which were in place before the pandemic.
23. Whilst this was achieved, it is undoubtedly the case that a combination of factors has depressed the longer-term trajectory that Translink were experiencing prior to the pandemic, namely:
 - A number of years without an inflationary-linked fare increase has impacted yields.
 - Translink were growing fare paying passenger journeys at over 1m+ per annum prior to the emergence of the pandemic. Five years after the emergence of the pandemic we are only now returning to that level of journeys so, whilst rebuilding to pre-pandemic levels is a significant achievement (and something that was at times considered unfeasible in wider market commentary) there has effectively been a period of stagnation and lost growth opportunity.

24. It should be noted that these consequences, whilst impacting long term financial planning, are not linked to the financial support received during the pandemic which was sufficient during that period.
25. A key underlying requirement which was necessary was the ability for key staff across the business to be able to work from home to allow for rapid financial forecasting and analysis to be prepared. On the basis this was possible the key lessons learned included:
- Ensuring that real-time data on passenger journeys and yields can be interpreted quickly and used to dynamically adjust service provision.
 - Ensuring clear lines of communication remained open with the Department for Infrastructure, and both teams worked collaboratively.
 - That senior management and operational teams met (online) regularly to assess and respond to a constantly evolving situation.
26. Translink continue to prepare a rolling three-year Corporate Plan as part of their financial planning. However, resource and capital budgets are allocated by the Northern Ireland Executive on a one-year period, so the principal focus naturally remains aligned with that timeframe.
27. Otherwise, no budgetary provision is made for potential economic shocks as a result of civil emergencies and projections are prepared on an ongoing 'business as usual' approach.

PART C

Lessons Learned and Reflections

28. The previously mentioned document "A Responsible Recovery" was issued in September 2020 which included economic analysis of the impact of the pandemic and showed the 'revenue gap', as well as outlining Translink's recovery plans for our passenger base. A copy is exhibited as requested.
29. Translink has no specific recommendations for the Chair to consider in order to improve the economic response to a future pandemic.

REQUEST FOR DOCUMENTS

30. Given the rapid and evolving nature of the response to the pandemic, contact with the Department for Infrastructure's officials during this period was predominately through video call (Microsoft Teams, CISCO etc.) or telephone calls.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Personal Data

Ronan O'Doherty

29 August 2025