



Northern Ireland Audit Office

# MEDIA RELEASE

## The effectiveness of public transport in Northern Ireland

Mr. Kieran Donnelly, the Comptroller and Auditor General, today published his report on the effectiveness of public transport in Northern Ireland. The report assesses the performance, funding and structure of public transport against Department for Regional Development (DRD) initiatives and targets over the period 2002 - 2014. It also benchmarks Northern Ireland and Belfast with public transport services in other comparable countries and cities.

Mr. Donnelly said *'Public transport has enjoyed substantial investment of £1.1 billion in the first decade of this century. However, passenger numbers have not increased significantly and the car remains the dominant mode of transport. DRD needs to do more to attract people onto public transport and make it their choice mode of travel.'*

## Background

Northern Ireland public transport is heavily regulated. DRD regulates, sponsors and controls the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (NITHC), a public corporation which has three subsidiary transport companies – Ulsterbus, Metro and Northern Ireland Railways (NIR) – which operate under the brand Translink.

## Main Findings

### Performance

- A substantial investment of £1.1 billion, prompted by the Regional Transport Strategy (2002), has vastly improved the public transport infrastructure and has transformed rail travel with passenger journeys doubling to 13.2 million
- In contrast, total bus passenger journeys have increased by just 1.5 per cent (to 66.9 million journeys)
- Despite a strategic commitment that public transport should service a higher proportion of journeys by providing an alternative to the private car, there has been no modal shift
- Rush hour bus speeds in Belfast are falling
- The Belfast Rapid Transit System, originally planned to be operational in March 2012 has been delayed until Autumn 2017

### Benchmarking

- Ulsterbus and Metro services performed relatively well in terms of operating cost per bus and staff per bus, however, staff wages tended to be higher as did the ratio of operating staff to management
- Ulsterbus provides a higher level of service than comparable regions in Great Britain
- Metro service levels compared less favourably than similar city regions in Great Britain
- Bus fares in Belfast are relatively competitive with other British cities

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- Passengers on Metro and Ulsterbus enjoy relatively high levels of comfort, however, Metro customers were less satisfied than bus customers in other parts of Great Britain.
- In general terms, NIR services operated as efficiently as benchmark comparators
- Rail fares are generally cheaper than in other parts of the United Kingdom but rail journeys remain relatively slow
- Rail customer satisfaction ratings compared very favourably to their counterparts in Great Britain.

### **Funding**

Despite the increased levels of investment in public transport, DRD have made little progress in shifting the balance of funding from roads to public transport. DRD told us that the allocation of funding reflects the maintenance needs of the road and rail network and significant investment in the strategic road network to build connectivity and address the legacy of under investment.

While increased funding alone cannot change commuter's habits and entice them onto public transport, in our view, the mix of public transport and roads funding still has an important role to play in helping to reduce car dependence and to encourage public transport usage. It is vital, therefore, that the costs incurred on road maintenance should not jeopardise the strategic commitment to modal shift.

### **Structure**

In 2002, DRD planned to create an Agency, independent from DRD, to regulate, sponsor and control NITHC. However, this Agency was never created and instead, a separate Division of DRD was created in April 2013 – Transport NI. This consisted of the former Executive Agency – Roads Service – and the public transport facing Branches of DRD. The staff and resources allocated to roads in this new Division greatly outnumbered the staff and resources allocated to public transport.

We found a paucity of professional public transport skills available within DRD. This limits their ability to influence public transport services and effectively hold NITHC/Translink to account.

#### **Notes for Editors**

1. The Comptroller and Auditor General is Head of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (the Audit Office). He, and the NIAO, are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of Government Departments and a range of other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to report to the Assembly on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and public bodies use their resources. His reports are published as Assembly papers.
2. This report is available on the Audit Office website at [www.niauditoffice.gov.uk](http://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk). The report is embargoed until 00.01 hrs on Tuesday 21 April 2015.
3. Background briefing can be obtained from the Audit Office by contacting Sean McKay (028 9025 1075) or Alan Orme (028 9025 1136).