

Trevor Clarke (DUP), Chair for the Committee for Regional Development

So, my name is Trevor Clarke, I'm a DUP Assembly Member for South Antrim, and I'm also the Chair of the Regional Development Committee. That committee is responsible for scrutinising the Department for Regional Development, should it be roads, should it be bus services, trains, and all those associated with the transport sector.

Enhancing transport links between roads and airports, and ports

One of the issues that we would be looking at is better connectivity between our airports and, indeed, our ports themselves, and the road infrastructure they have. So that's one of the areas.

And another area that we will be looking at, and we had a meeting recently with one of the European Commissioners, was a project called "Motorway of the Seas." And they would look at areas particularly that would do-- that there'd be an effect, in terms of the connectivity, between our main road infrastructure and, indeed, our ports.

So in that meeting, we looked at two areas in Northern Ireland, one in Warrenpoint, and one in Belfast. So there's a hope and an expectation that we may be successful in drawing down European funding for that.

And, I mean, the need for these projects, obviously, is to continue the connectivity between ourselves and our partners within Europe, and actually makes us to trade more readily and it makes for more cost effectiveness for the businesses here in Northern Ireland if that connectivity is done right.

Sustainable Transport

In relation to sustainable transport, there would be a program for government targets, for example, in cycling. So the committee itself was involved in a piece of work in relation to the cycling strategy, and I've worked closely with the department.

Some people may say, "Well, what is the benefit in cycling?" There's many aspects of that. It doesn't only feed into the transport, but actually feeds into health and wellbeing as well. So the more promotion that we have, given that we have the responsibility for the regional development side of the business, that that actually feeds in with health and other aspects as well.

That aside, which is one of the interesting facts from recently, is that there are companies who are actually based in Northern Ireland, and they have invested about £40 million into Northern Ireland with the creation of the businesses which are actually focusing on cycling. So, cycling does play a big part, and as I said, it does feed into people's health and well-being also.

Roads

So, another part of our remit would be scrutinising the department in relation to roads, and the budget and how to spend that particular pot of money. It's widely known that there's been under-investment in Northern Ireland under the period of direct rule. Currently, today,

it would take approximately £850 million to bring our roads up to a good standard, a safe standard. So that gives you an indication of how far behind we are. Annually, we're spending about £130 million on maintenance. This year we have spent approximately £13 million on maintenance. So it's actually trying to work with the department to try and make sure that their focus is in the right areas of their business.

I mean, roads are important because, obviously, there's evidence to suggest that if the roads are not in a good state, then there's more likelihood that there's collisions and unfortunately, and deaths. So as I've been pushing the department to make sure that the focus of the business is in the right direction, but it's going to be difficult, given the shortfall or the under-investment they have in Northern Ireland even during the periods of direct rule and we're really playing catch-up. But given the amount of money we have in Northern Ireland, it's going to be a difficult task.