



Passenger Trends &
“The Drivers of Growth”
on PSO Services

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1. Background & Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic in March 2020 had a significant impact on the use of public transport across all modes in Ireland. Passenger numbers on PSO (public service obligation) services initially fell to between 10%-20% of pre COVID levels experienced in the previous year, as reduced timetables were introduced and capacity restrictions were imposed across the public transport network.

Since that time restrictions have been lifted and the economy has shown signs of recovery, however passenger growth and other new challenges have emerged. In February this year, in response to a sharp increase in price inflation across the economy, the government announced a package of measures to mitigate the impacts of increasing cost of living expenses and to incentivise a return to public transport.

Part of this package was to introduce a reduction in all fares on PSO services by an average of 20%, initially until the end of 2022. The 20% reduction in fares was in addition to previously announced Young Adult fares, as part of Budget 2022, which now provide young people aged 19-23 with an average 50% discount of equivalent adult Leap fares. The 2022 fares determination brought both initiatives into effect along with a new flat child fare in regional cities; proposals to extend the validity of existing Tax saver tickets by three months, and the extension of the Cork commuter rail area to include Mallow.

In recent years the Authority has also, in partnership with operators, continued to invest heavily in public transport services, to improve the transport network and to ensure that a better service can be provided to the travelling public as patterns of travel demand evolve. In Dublin, this has included the launch of three phases of the BusConnects network, namely the H & C spines on the Malahide and Maynooth bus corridors and new orbital services in the north of the city.

Regional bus services within towns and rural areas have also benefitted from investment through the governments stimulus programme, such as enhanced timetables and increased service provision, which has facilitated significant improvements in connectivity both within and between towns and the wider public transport network.

The purpose of this note is to assess the effectiveness of interventions such as fares adjustments and service enhancement measures, as the key drivers of growth in patronage on PSO public transport services across the country.

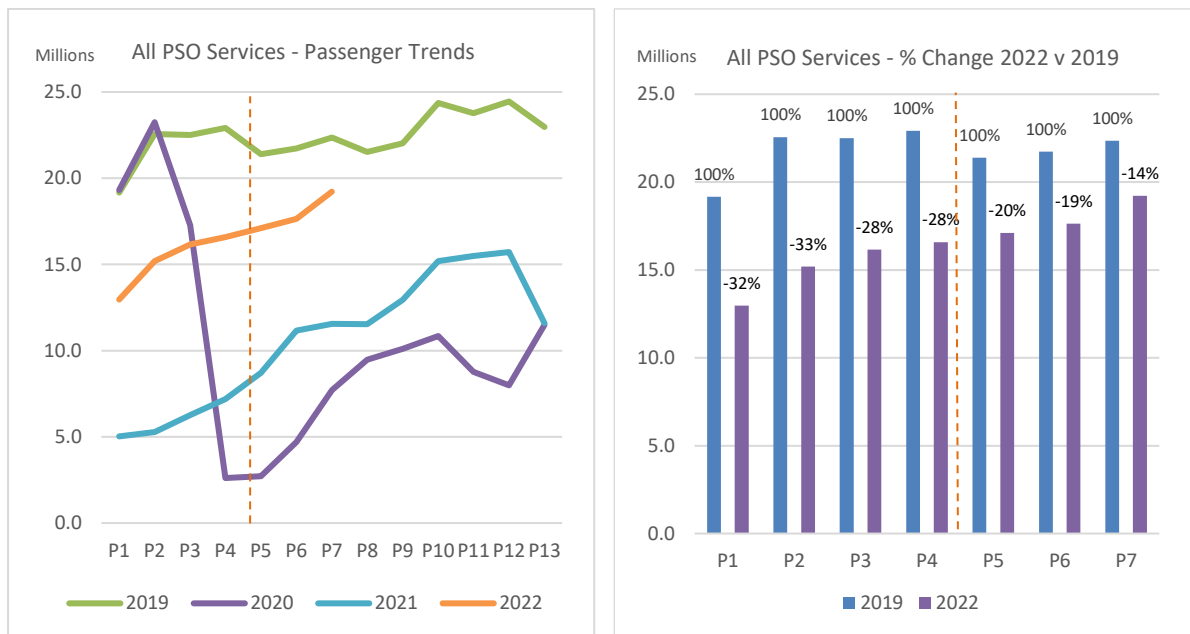
2. Factors influencing passenger behaviours

- **Remote, blended and flexible working** - The pandemic has altered the way in which some businesses and organisations operate, with employees now being permitted to choose a more varied pattern of work which does not require them to attend the workplace all of the time. The government has also ensured through the “Making remote work”¹ strategy that home and remote working should be the norm for 20% of the public sector. This has undoubtedly been a factor in a more gradual return to public transport particularly during the morning and evening peaks, however the volume of inter-peak and weekend travel is once again approaching and in some cases exceeding pre pandemic levels, suggesting that the way in which passengers use public transport may have been altered as opposed to impacting on overall usage.
- **Passenger confidence** - Research commissioned by the Authority concerning the use and attitudes towards public transport in January 2021 suggested that there were significant challenges surrounding the use of public transport during periods of restricted capacity, with confidence in the public transport system being safe from COVID being a factor for almost half of respondents. At that time, research indicated that there could be a 26% decline in the use of public transport post COVID. The same research carried out in July 2022 has shown a significant change with almost two thirds stating that they had confidence in the safety of public transport from COVID transmission. The expected decline in use of public transport has also fallen to 18%, which without taking into consideration population growth and increased economic activity, may be overstated.
- **Cost of living concerns & fares adjustments** - Data from the Central Statistics Office states that the Consumer Price Index (CPI), which is the measurement of change in the average level of prices of consumer goods and services, rose to 9.1% in the 12 months to July 2022. This increase was the highest rise in CPI since 1984, fuelled by the soaring cost of petrol and diesel as well as utilities such as gas and electric and other basic commodities. Increased pressures on household incomes may force consumers to look for cheaper alternatives to the car for everyday travel and commuting. This combined with the introduction of more attractive fares on public transport may further incentivise a return to greater use of bus and rail services as an alternative to the private car.

¹ “Making Remote Work” Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, January 2021

3. PSO Summary

The graph to the left below shows total passenger numbers on PSO services each year from 2019, with an evident slump in March 2020 arising from the global pandemic, followed by a modest return to growth in 2021 of 2.1% for the year. The most pronounced gains in 2021 came in September (P8-P9 below), coinciding with the lifting of all remaining capacity restrictions on public transport services. 2019 represented a record year for the use of public transport in Ireland, with the initial months of 2020 having shown promise of a continuation of that trend.



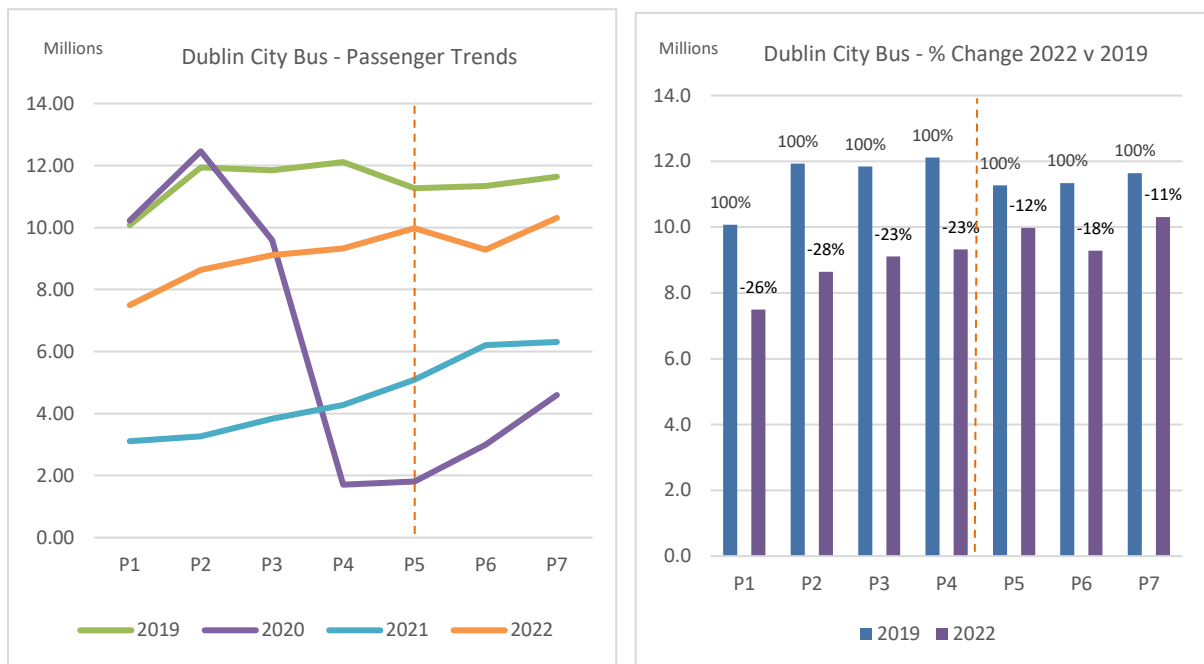
The graph to the right above shows total passenger journeys on PSO services during the first half of the year in 2022, compared with the same period in 2019 when passenger numbers were at their highest. The percentages show the month on month difference between each year. The orange dotted line also indicates the implementation date of the 2022 fares determination at the beginning of May (P5), which saw the introduction of the 20% cost of living fares reduction and 50% discounted Young Adult fares on Leap. What we can observe is a notable acceleration of passenger journey growth since that time, to the extent that the traditional seasonal drop off during the Easter holidays (noticeable in 2019 figures) has been reversed in 2022, with month on month increases to July (P7) averaging 7%. By comparison to 2019, passenger numbers between P1 and P4 2022 (January to April) averaged -30%, while the outturn following the introduction of the fares reduction has went from -20% in June (P5) to -14% in July (P7).

Recent findings from research commissioned by the Authority in relation to the awareness and impact of fares reductions, would also appear to support the premise that passengers are likely to use public transport services more often as a result. Of a sample of 2.5k fare paying public transport users in July 2022, 69% stated that they had an awareness of the introduction of cost of living fares reductions, and from this cohort, 55% (941) stated that this had influenced them to use public transport on a more frequent basis. These 941 participants were then asked how many additional trips they were taking per week, to which the average was 2.7, suggesting that the fares intervention has had a meaningful impact on passenger behaviours.

4. Operator Trends

▪ Dublin city bus²

Dublin city bus services typically carry more than half of the total passenger journeys in Ireland (56.1% in 2021). Passenger journeys on Dublin city bus services increased by an average of 4.5% each year to 2019, reaching a peak of 152.7 million. In recent years this has been the result of additional services and passenger growth associated with the transfer of services to Go Ahead Ireland, along with the provision of additional services by Dublin Bus. Patronage on Dublin city bus services fell by 49.2% in 2020 and grew modestly by 2.1% in 2021, as a result of continued pandemic related restrictions.

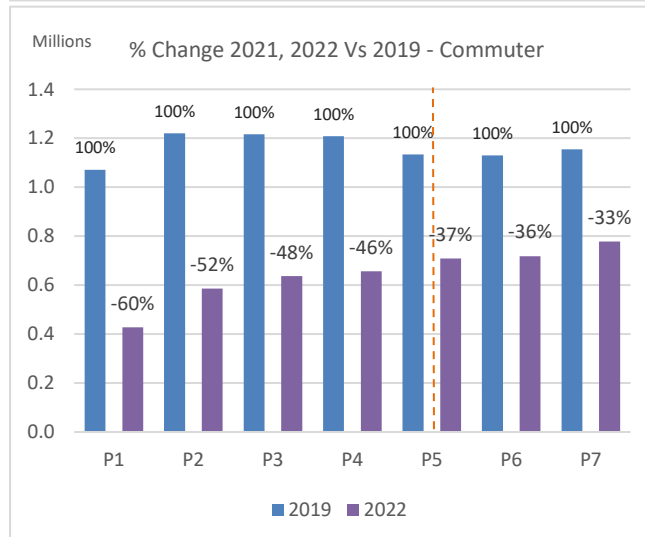
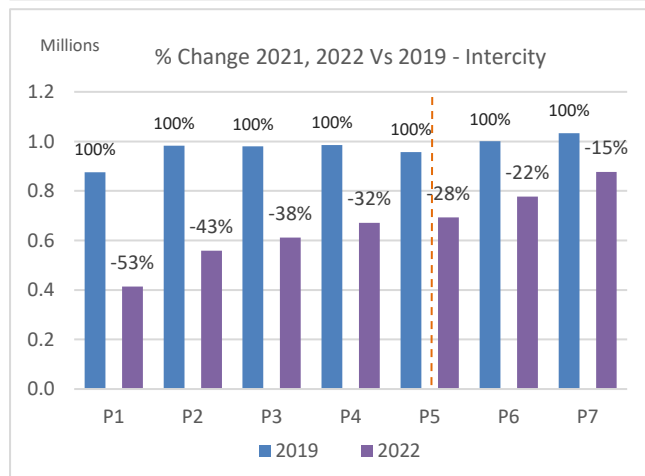
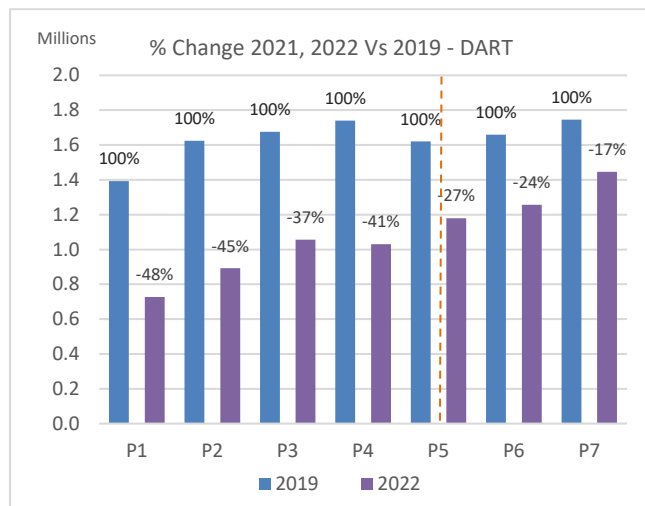


Patronage on Dublin city bus services in 2022 has risen period on period, with the exception of P6 which may be the result of expected seasonal variations. Overall passenger numbers averaged -25% lower than 2019 levels at the beginning of the year up to April (P1-P4). What we can see in P5, after the implementation of the fares reduction, is a step change resulting in an increase of almost 650k bus passenger journeys in the Dublin area. When we compare this change to 2019 levels, patronage increased from -23% to -12%. The position in late June/early July (P7) has continued to strengthen, with total Dublin city bus journeys being within 11% of pre pandemic levels.

² Dublin city Bus includes services operated by Dublin Bus and also services operated by Go Ahead Ireland in the outer Dublin metropolitan area

▪ **Irish Rail**

Rail services enjoyed average annual growth in excess of 5% in the 5 years up to 2019, reaching record passenger journeys of 50.1 million. This was supported by the introduction of a 10-minute Dart service in the latter part of 2018 as well as service enhancements on Intercity and commuter services, providing additional capacity. Rail services, particularly Commuter and Dart services, suffered the most significant downturn in 2020 of all modes, with a 64% decrease in patronage as a result of the pandemic. 2021 saw a further decline in patronage of -2.5% as significant numbers of commuters continued to work from home.



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Irish Rail operates within three distinct markets, each of which have shown their own characteristics in relation to passenger trends as we have emerged from the pandemic.

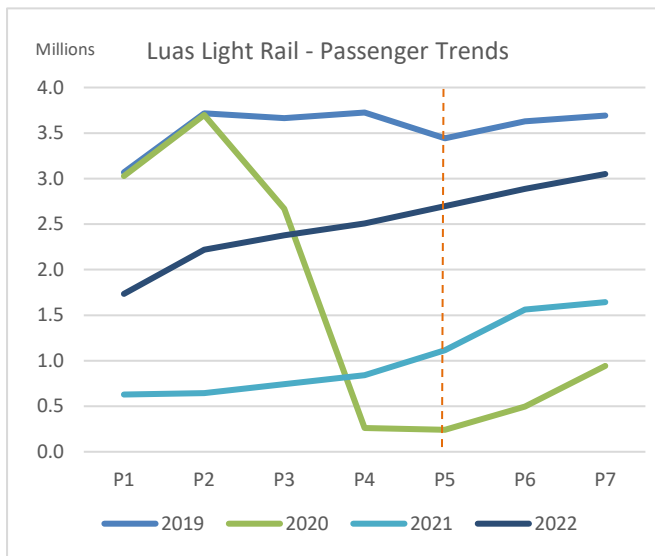
The charts show the relative performance of each rail market during the first half of the year in 2022, compared with the same period in 2019 when passenger numbers were at their highest. The percentages show the month on month difference between each year. The orange dotted line also indicates the introduction of the 20% cost of living fares reduction.

When compared to 2019, all three markets started the year between 48% and 60% below what had been recorded in 2019. Dart and Intercity have shown similar trajectories over the early months of 2022, recovering to between -41% and -32% of 2019 levels in the months up to April (P4). The commuter market has seen the most significant decline and the slowest recovery on rail services in 2022, remaining at almost half 2019 levels (-46%) in April 2022 (P4), with working practices and travel demands having evolved post pandemic.

Despite the traditional drop in patronage following the Easter holidays (noticeable in the falloff between P4 and P5 2019), the introduction of the 20% cost of living fares reduction in May has coincided with significant upturns in passenger numbers. This was most pronounced on Dart where a 14% period on period increase relative to 2019 was recorded. Sustained growth has been seen up to late June/early July this year (P7) with Dart and Intercity services returning to within -17% and -15% of passenger levels for the same period in 2019.

▪ **Luas Light Rail**

Passenger journeys on Luas services operated by Transdev Dublin Light Rail Limited have largely followed the pattern of other operators with patronage trending upwards until 2019, where a year on year increase of 15.6% resulted in 48.3 million passenger journeys. The opening of Luas CrossCity on 9th December 2017 undoubtedly influenced the growth of passenger journeys seen in recent years, combined with the introduction of new extended trams on the Green Line in 2019, providing extra passenger capacity. Like other operators, however, the pandemic in 2020 resulted in a steep decline in passenger numbers of -60.3% in 2020, as passengers were advised to avoid public transport unless for essential purposes, with figures for 2021 resulting in a marginal return to growth of 1.6%.



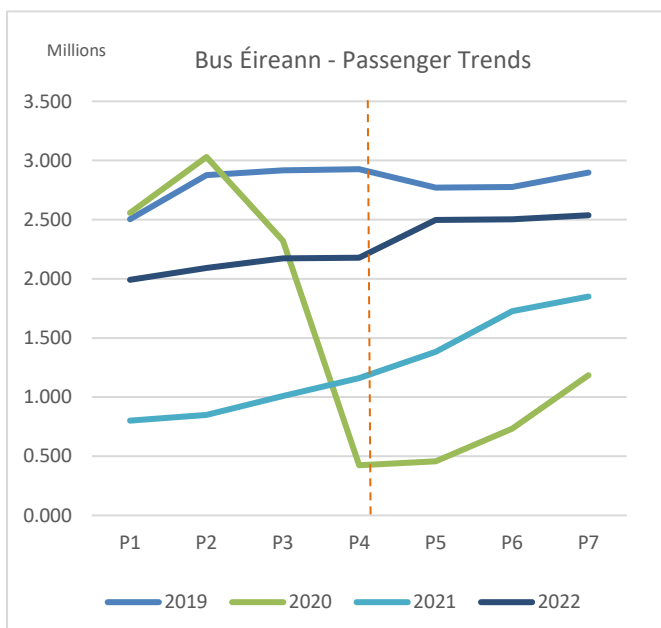
Patronage on Luas services in 2022 grew each period from 1.7 million in P1 to 2.5 million in P4, however these levels represented an average decline of -38% compared to 2019.

Luas services have suffered from varying performance related issues in 2022, particularly on the Red line, which has only recently returned to peak vehicle requirement (PVR). This may have caused passengers to choose alternative modes of travel, which in turn may have resulted in a more gradual return to passenger growth in 2022.

The introduction of the fares reduction in May, has, however, resulted in an acceleration of

passenger journey growth with increasing numbers each period up to July, returning to within 17% of levels last seen in 2019.

▪ **Bus Éireann and outside Dublin**



Overall passenger numbers on Bus Éireann services followed a similar pattern to that of other Operators with relatively moderate levels of growth in the years between 2011 and 2017, before patronage grew in excess of 13% in 2018 and 2019 (reaching 39.9 million journeys in 2019) following investment by the Authority in additional services and improved frequencies. As with all other PSO services, patronage fell by almost half to 20.0 million in 2020 before moderate gains of 7% were experienced in 2021. A similar pattern has been evident in the first quarter of 2022, with patronage growing by an average of 3%.

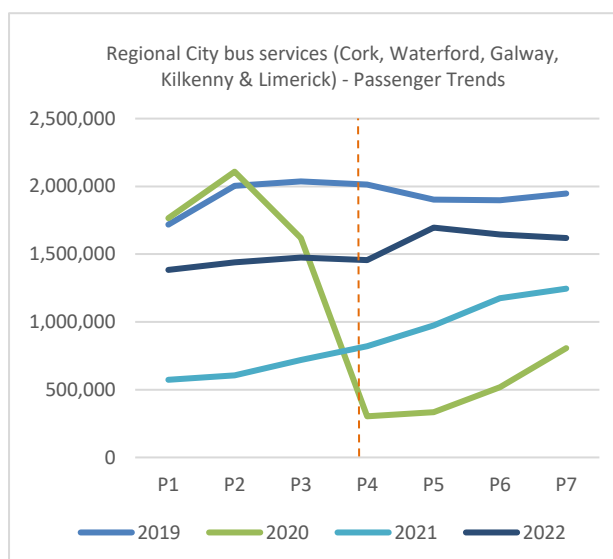
Due to the technical ability of Bus Éireann and some other Operators to implement the

government’s 20% cost of living fares reduction a number of weeks before that of those operating in Dublin, the orange dotted line shown below is positioned slightly earlier, with reduced fares coming into effect in mid-April, as opposed to early May. It is at this point we can see an upturn in patronage, with in excess of 300k extra passenger journeys recorded in P5 compared to the previous period.

As has been seen the case for PSO services as a whole, Bus Éireann has seen a reversal of the seasonal trend in 2022 whereby passenger numbers traditionally fall slightly following the Easter holidays. The introduction of lower fares has coincided with the overall passenger journey trend for Bus Éireann moving from -25% less than 2019 from P1-P4 2022, to -10% between P5 and P7.

✓ Cities

Regional city bus services typically represent two thirds of all passengers on Bus Éireann bus services and as such, a significant cohort of the overall public transport customer base. The graph to the right shows patronage over the first 7 periods of each year from 2019 to 2022 and displays a similar pattern to that of overall patronage on PSO services.



The provision of bus services in our regional cities has improved markedly in recent years, through enhanced timetables, the promotion of Leap, fleet improvements and the competitive tendering of services in Waterford and Kilkenny³. It is likely that these interventions helped cushion the decline of patronage during the pandemic, but also contribute to the return to growth that has been seen during 2021 and into early 2022, with an additional 800,000 passengers in P1 2022 compared to the previous year.

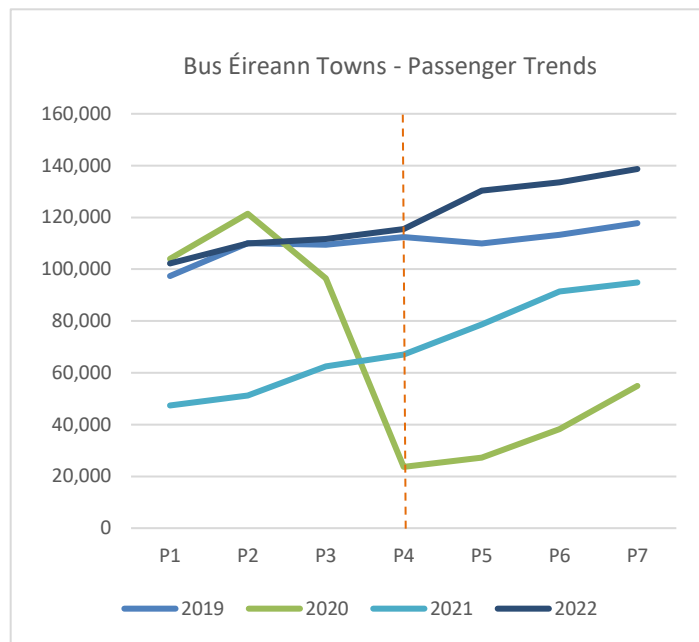
As previously mentioned, the earlier introduction of the 20% cost of living fares reduction in mid-April (shown below by the dotted orange line) has coincided with a noticeable upturn in patronage on city bus services. Average periodic growth between January 2021 and March 2022 was 6%. The following month seen growth rise to 16% in P5, with patronage in P5 2022 returning to within 10% of the figure reported for the same period in 2019. This effectively reversed the seasonal trend seen in 2019, before moderating in the last two periods.

✓ Towns

Despite the fact that town bus services only represent an average of 5% of overall passenger numbers on Bus Éireann services, we can detect the same pattern as that seen in other Bus Éireann markets. The graph below shows patronage over the first 7 periods of each year from 2019 to 2022. Town services have benefitted from significant service enhancements in the last two years; the expansion of the TFI network is providing greater connectivity and integration with mainstream PSO services; the introduction of accessible bus stops, and an improved ticketing offering via TFI Go.

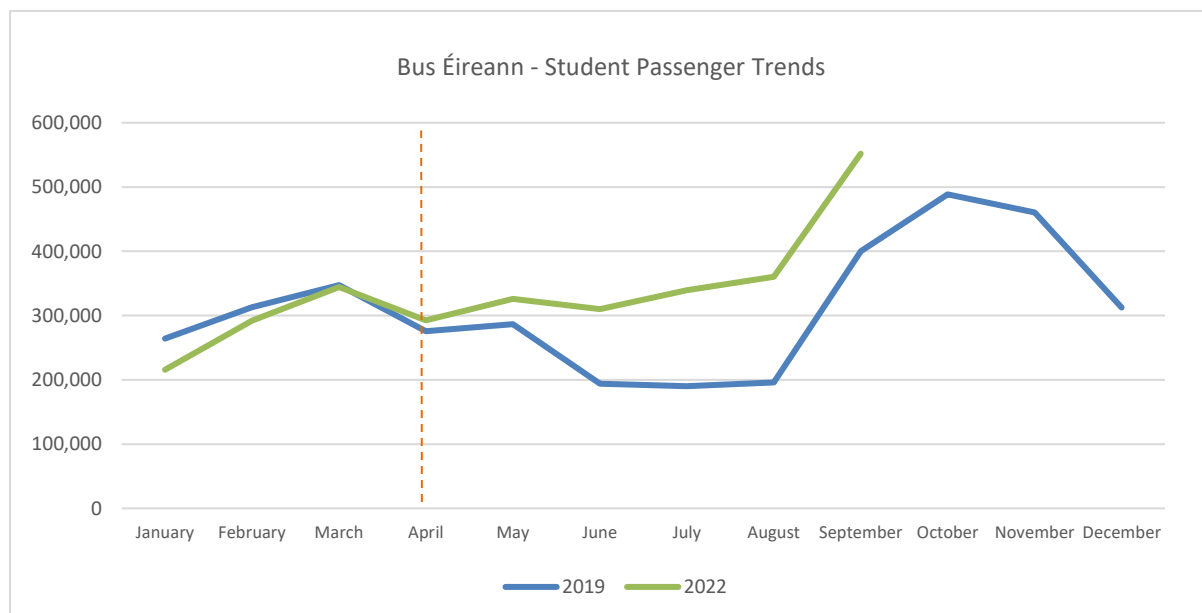
³ Bus services in Kilkenny city are operated under gross cost contract to the Authority by City Direct Ltd.

As with other PSO services, we can observe patronage increasing year on year following the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. What is more pronounced, however, is the upturn in 2022, which has returned consistently higher passenger numbers compared to the same periods in 2019. What is also evident is a significant upturn in patronage in P5 of this year compared to 2019, representing an uplift of some 19% year on year. The introduction of the cost of living fares reductions on all Bus Éireann and Local Link services (shown by the orange dotted line) in mid-April, is likely to have been a significant factor in this.



5. Passenger Type Trends

In overall terms, the proportion of adults, children and student passengers using public transport services tend to remain relatively consistent over time, with expected seasonal variations. On occasion, observable patterns may emerge where the Authority adjusts fares or runs certain promotions such as “Kids Go Free”, which is a Leap campaign that was last held in the summer of 2019 for a period of one month. One noticeable pattern has emerged in recent months, whereby the number of student passengers has marginally increased. This has been most evident on Bus Éireann services where student fares have been available for a long period of time on all stage carriage, city and town services.



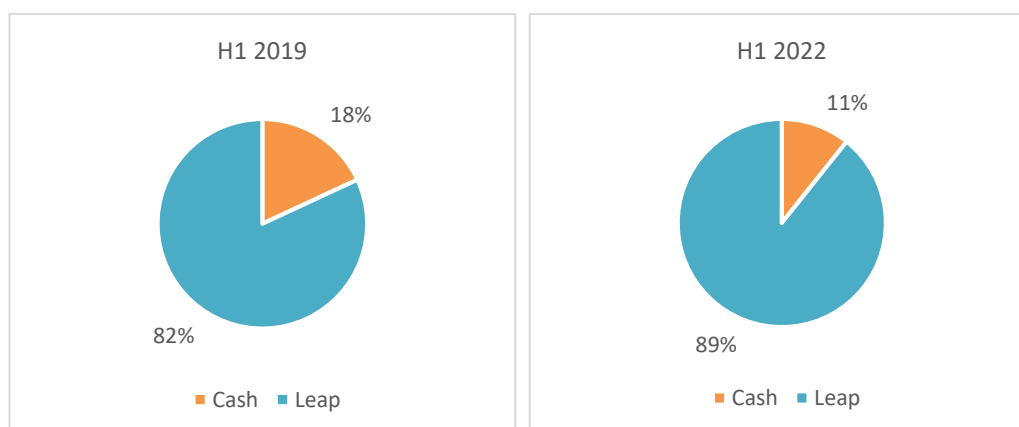
The graph above shows the total number of student passengers in 2019 in blue, which depicts the seasonal variations we would typically see, i.e. a drop in patronage during the summer holiday months followed by a significant uptake when new terms begin in September. 2022 student patronage is shown by the green line, with

student passenger journeys reaching 2019 levels in March. The introduction of the 20% cost of living fares reduction is shown by the orange dotted line, which also coincided with the launch of Young Adult Leap fares on PSO services, providing those aged 19-23 with fares at 50% of the equivalent adult fare. What we can observe is that overall student passenger journeys have been greater than 2019 for each consecutive month since this intervention (+84% in August), to the extent that we have not seen the traditional summer drop off.

6. Cash v Leap transition

Passengers preferred choice of payment method on public transport services has also been changing in recent years. Since the introduction of Leap, there has been a gradual transition away from cash as the convenience and value of the Leap card has become more commonly known. The transition seems, however, to have accelerated when we compare pre-pandemic and post pandemic transactions. This may have been a result of lowering confidence in the cleanliness of coins and notes during this time, however it may also have been a result of individual cohorts of passengers who may be naturally predisposed to preferring alternative means of payment (e.g. contactless) continuing to use public transport post pandemic.

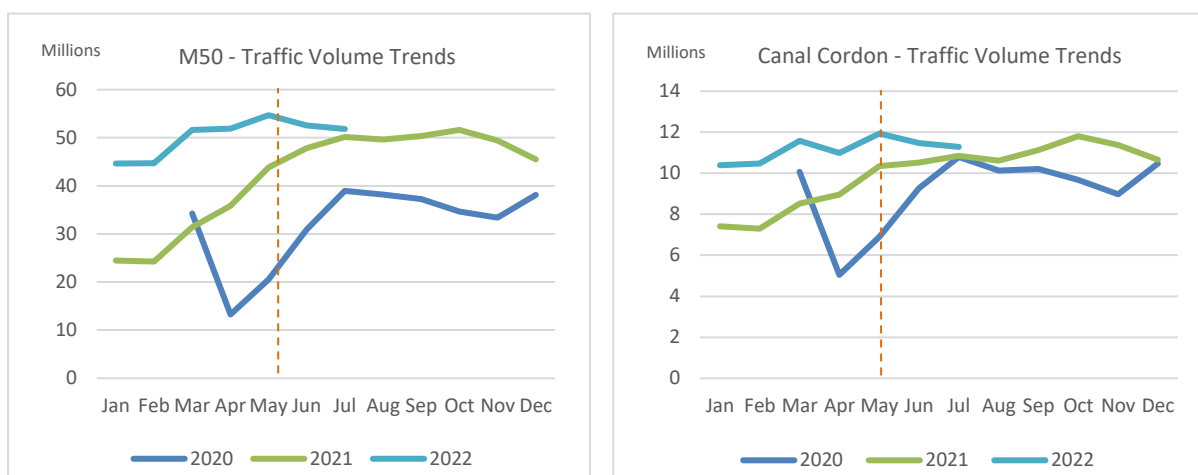
The chart below represents Dublin Bus passengers means of payment in the first 6 months of 2019 (H1 2019) compared to the first 6 months of 2022 (H1 2022). The total number of transactions also exclude other tickets, such as period products and free travel passes.



During the first 6 months of 2019 there were a total of 47 million cash and Leap transactions on Dublin bus services, compared to 42 million during the same period in 2022, representing an 11% decline. This is indicative of the overall pattern on bus services in Dublin, however, the proportion of passengers using Leap as a means of payment in 2022 has increased by 7%, to almost 9 out of every 10 transactions. Total Leap transactions will also have been bolstered by the introduction of the Young Adult Card, with a total of 24,600 new cards since launch in May this year.

7. M50 & Canal Cordon Traffic Trends

The most recent annual report released by Transport Infrastructure Ireland⁴ (TII) has shown that toll income on the country’s busiest road, the M50 in Dublin, increased by 13% to €140 million in 2021 as traffic volumes have increased significantly back towards pre pandemic levels (€160 million in 2019). These findings are consistent with anecdotal evidence of modal transfer to car during periods of capacity restrictions on public transport in 2020 and 2021. The graphs below show the monthly volume of traffic recorded on the M50, as well as the volume of traffic passing through the Dublin city canal cordon with data commencing at the beginning of March 2020, immediately prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.



What we can observe on both graphs is the significant upturn in traffic volume during 2021. Journeys on the M50 saw monthly increases averaging 6%, with an average of 3.6% being recorded each month at the canal cordon. These trends looked to be continuing on a similar trajectory between January and May 2022, with the M50 growing at 5.4% and trips passing through the canal cordon growing at 3.7%. The orange dotted line highlights the introduction of the 20% cost of living fares reduction and Young Adult fares on public transport services in the Dublin metropolitan area. This coincides with traffic volumes at both locations falling in June by -3.9%. A further decline was recorded in July of -1.4% on the M50 and -1.6% at the canal cordon. Whilst we cannot say that this is as a direct result of the fares reduction (with fuel price increases inevitably being a factor), the timing of these changes are very similar and have coincided with a relative upturn in passenger journeys on public transport services in the capital.

⁴ 2021 TII Annual Report and Accounts

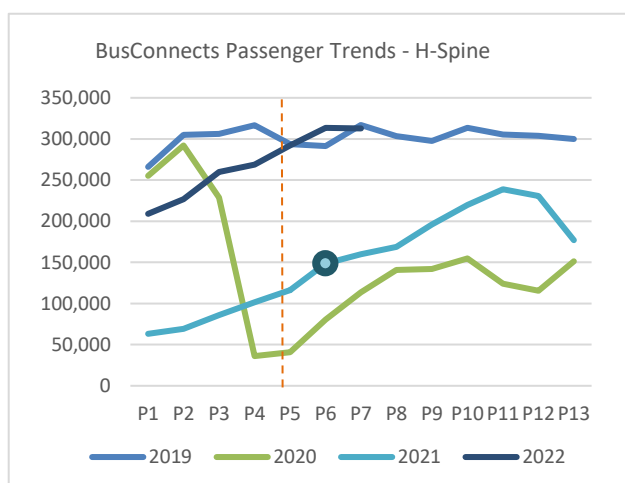
8. Public Transport service enhancements

▪ BusConnects Dublin

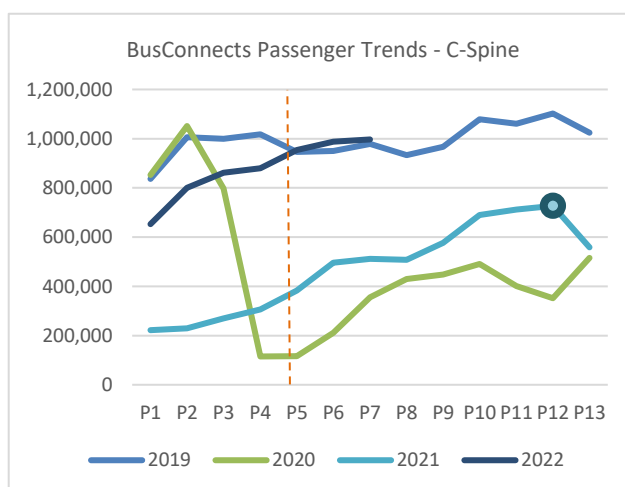
The BusConnects programme is intended to improve bus and sustainable transport services in the Dublin metropolitan area, through the restructuring of the network to increase provision, improve coverage with orbital accessibility and increased service frequencies through the creation of core bus corridors. The programme is split into a number of phases, the first three of which have been implemented as follows:

- ✓ H-Spine (Phase 1) - June 2021. This comprised of changes to services between the city centre and the Howth Road, Howth, Baldoyle, Portmarnock and Malahide. (3 services with 2 additional variants transitioning to become 3 new services⁵).
- ✓ C-Spine (Phase 2) - November 2021. This comprised of services running across the city centre covering an area between Sandymount and Maynooth, including Celbridge, Leixlip, Adamstown, Lucan, Liffey Valley and Chapelizod. (11 services with 1 additional variant transitioning to become 20 new services⁶).
- ✓ Northern Orbitals (Phase 3) - May 2022. This comprises of 2 services operating between Blanchardstown and the Point and Finglas and Howth, replacing 2 former services⁷.

The graphs illustrate changes in patronage on newly introduced and restructured services for each phase of implementation. The date of implementation for each phase is shown by the coloured dot on the relevant year line. Patronage shown prior to implementation of each phase represents all former Dublin city bus services (operated by Dublin Bus and Go ahead) operating in each respective area of the city. The orange dotted line also denotes the introduction of the cost of living fares reduction and Young Adult fares in May 2022.



As restrictions were lifted during 2021, patronage on Dublin city bus services operating in the areas of the C and H spines reflected the national trend, increasing to within approximately 33% of pre-covid levels. The introduction of restructured H spine services in June 2021 and C spine services in November 2021 with improved frequencies has coincided with an acceleration in passenger journey growth, averaging in excess of +5% between launch and July this year (P7). Patronage on both spines, supported by fares reductions, have since surpassed levels seen pre-covid.



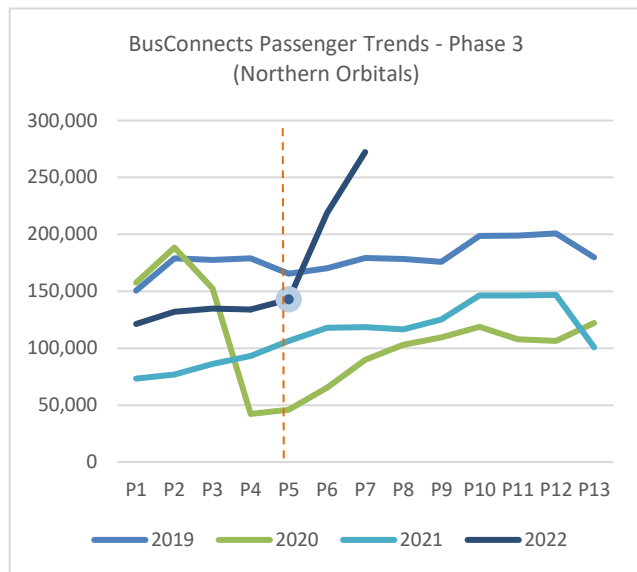
⁵ TFI - H Spine

⁶ TFI - C Spine

⁷ TFI - Northern Orbitals

The graph opposite shows passenger journeys on services in the area covered by phase 3 of BusConnects implementation. These orbital services are key to the redesign of the bus network, operating around the city providing greater connectivity between suburbs and towns and also much improved levels of interchange between other bus services and modes.

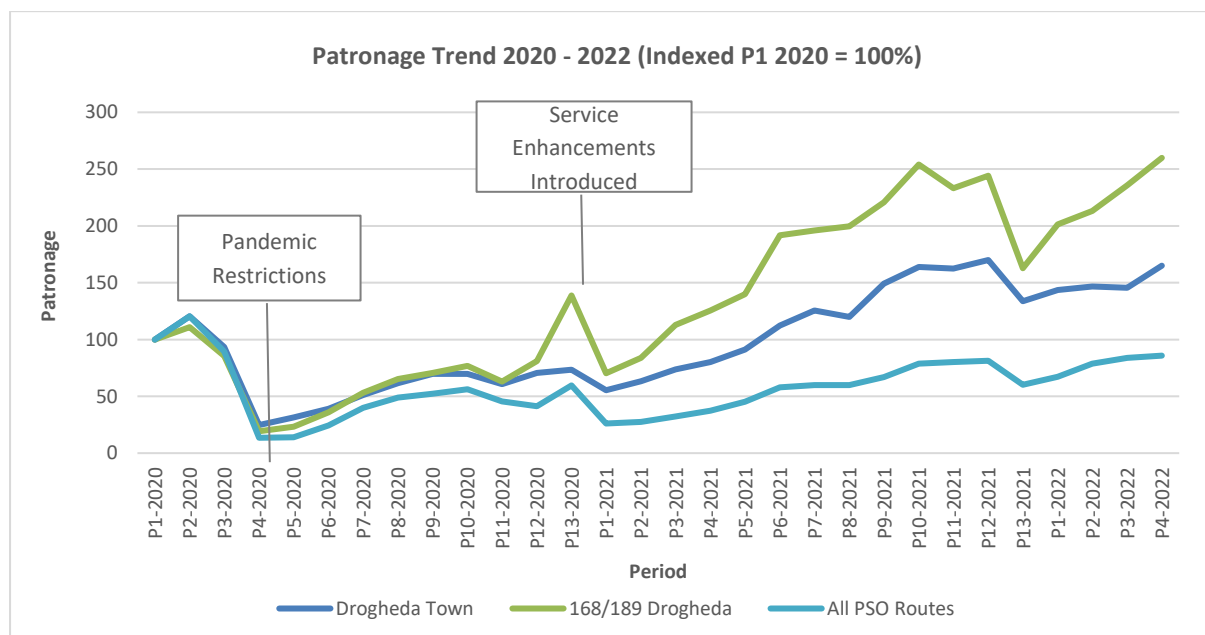
Patronage on services formerly operating within the footprint of phase 3 grew during 2021, but to a lesser extent than on other city services. Phase 3 launched in May 2022, coinciding with the introduction of reduced fares. What we have seen since that time has been a significant upturn in passenger journeys, as service frequencies have been increased and the catchment area of new services has expanded.



▪ **Drogheda Town Services**

In December 2020 under the Government stimulus programme a range of service enhancements were introduced in Drogheda town. This included introduction of 2 new cross town services building on the success of the D1 and D2, 7 days a week. The 168 route was merged with the 189 to provide an enhanced Monday to Saturday and a new Sunday service offering a continuous service between Drogheda and Dundalk via the coastal alignment and better connections with rail and intercity bus services.

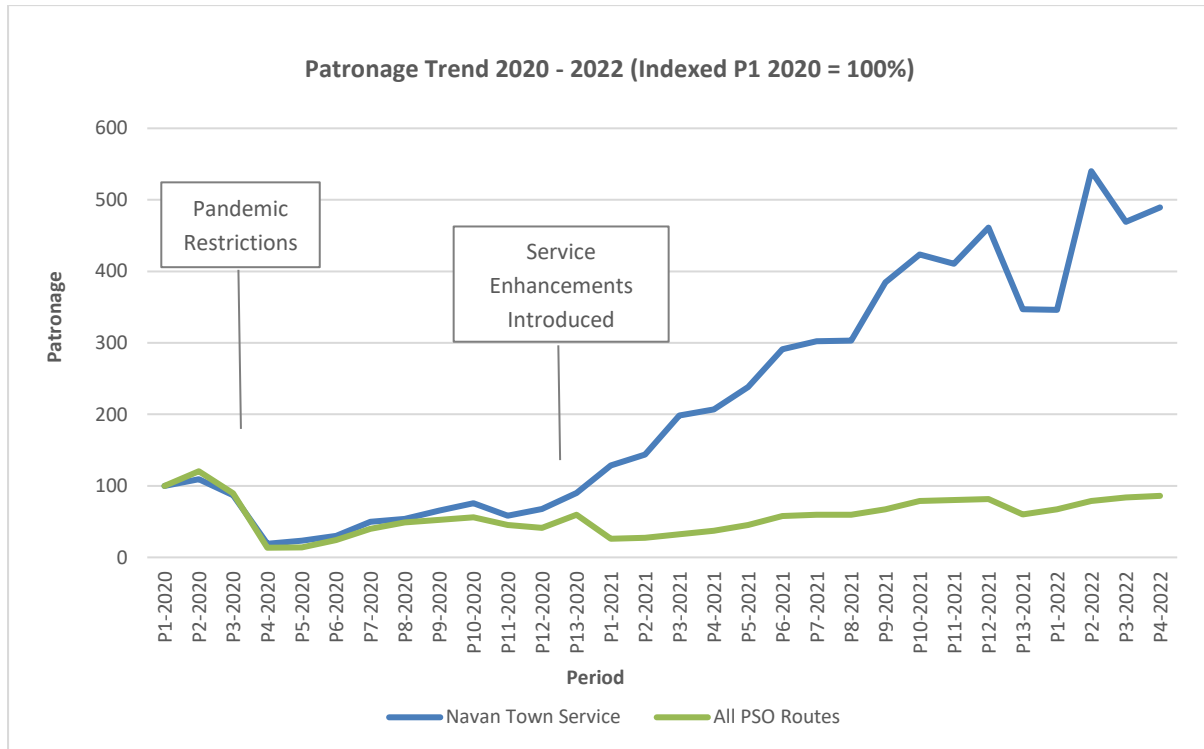
By period 4, 2022 patronage on the enhanced Drogheda services were more than double pre-pandemic patronage and significantly bucked the national trend of suppressed demand wrought by the pandemic.



▪ **Navan Town Services**

In December 2020 under the Government stimulus programme the NTA introduced an enhanced town service for Navan. The new service provided for 2 new cross town routes (N1 and N2) operating a 30 minute frequency, 7 days a week. This service replaced the existing 110A, B and C services which were no longer fit for purpose.

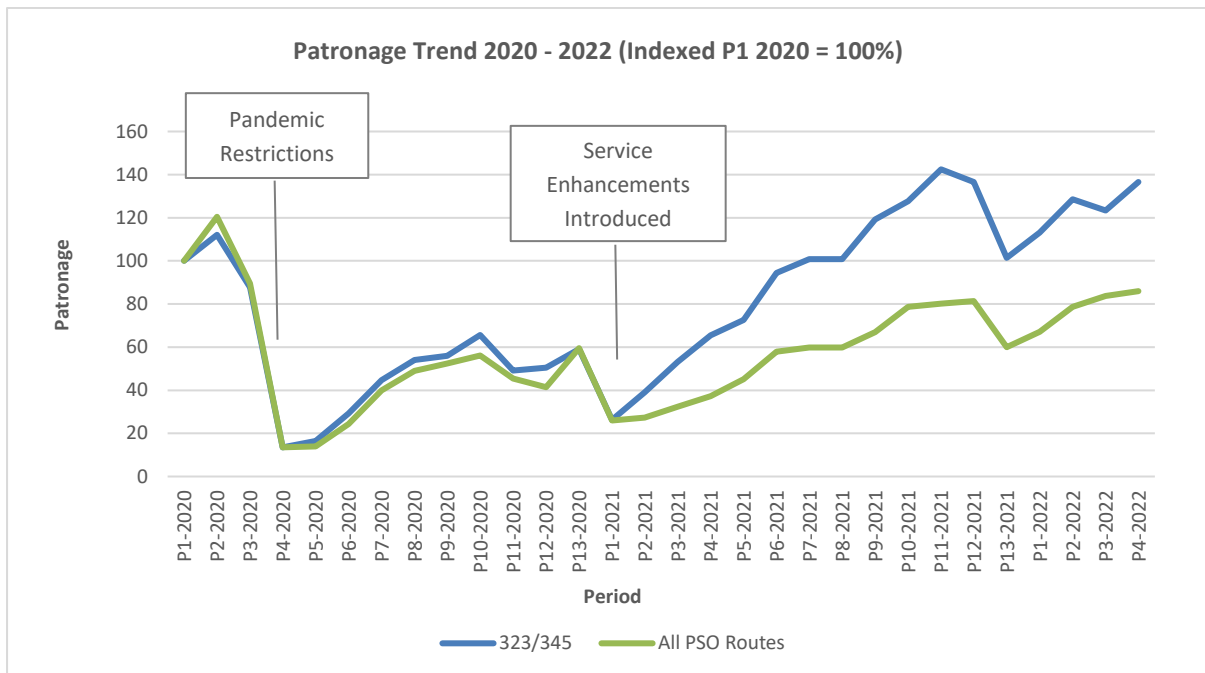
Since introduction and despite movement restrictions, patronage on the Navan town service has grown significantly with the service now carrying almost 20,000 passenger trips per period as compared to c. 4,000 per period pre-pandemic.



▪ **East Clare, Tipperary, Limerick Inter Urban Services**

In January 2021 under the Government stimulus programme the NTA reconfigured and improved the level of service on the 323 and 345 services to provide enhanced connectivity between east Clare and Tipperary towns into Limerick City and UL.

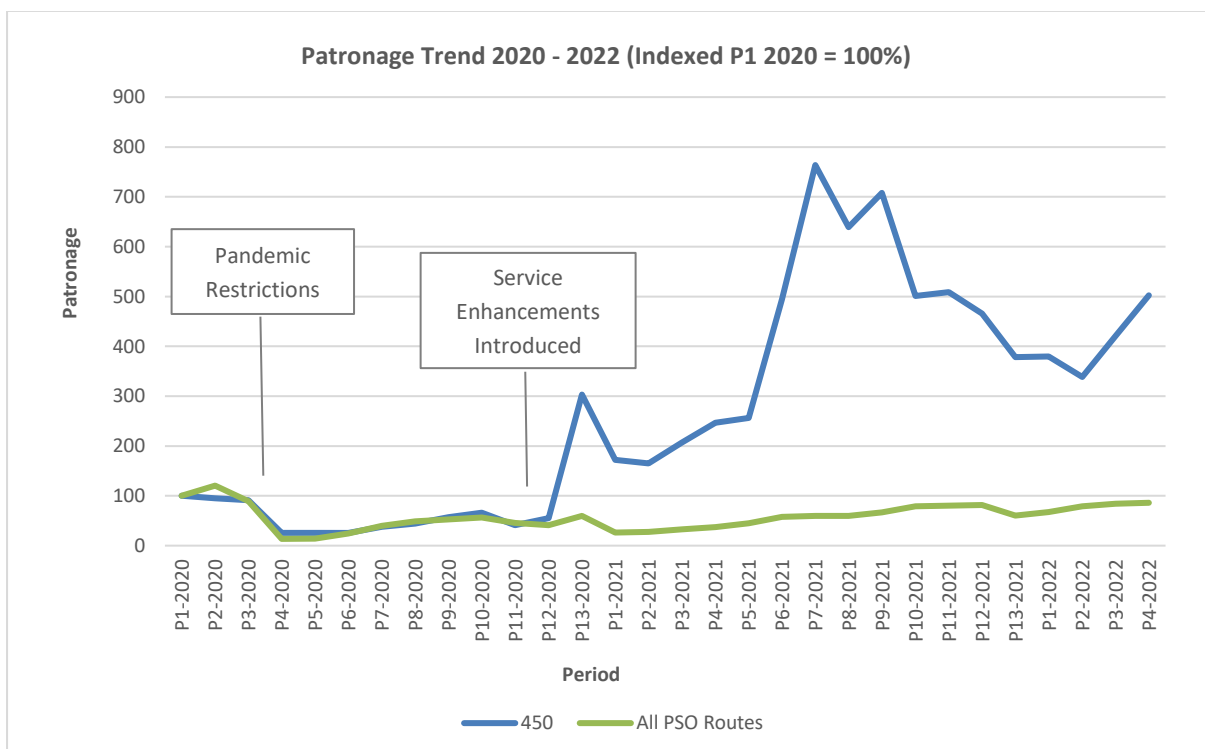
Unlike the vast majority of inter urban services in particular, patronage on these services has grown significantly since introduction and is now in excess of pre-pandemic levels and expected to grow further once travel patterns at UL re-establish post pandemic.



▪ **Westport Achill local Services**

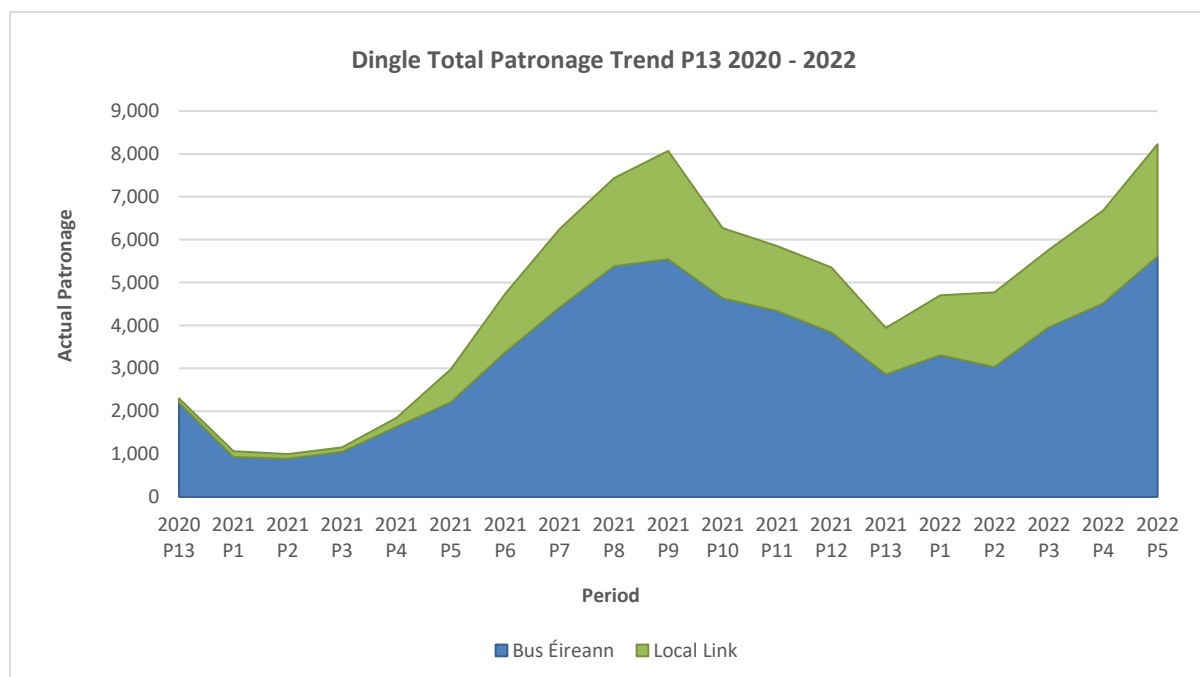
In November 2020 under the Government stimulus programme the NTA reconfigured and rationalised the routes 450 and 440a serving Westport, Achill and Louisburgh in County Mayo. The level of service was enhanced including provision of weekend and off peak services.

On introduction of the enhanced services, patronage increased 5 fold. Despite movement restrictions during the summer, the service carried 4,200 people per period. Currently the service carries almost 3,000 passenger trips per period as compared to c.300 per period before being improved.



▪ **Dingle Peninsula Services**

As part of the Government’s July Stimulus Plan in 2020, TFI Local Link and Bus Éireann services on the Dingle peninsula, were re-organised and enhanced with the final phase of improvements introduced for TFI Local Link services in April 2021. Passenger numbers for these services continue to increase, with 941 passenger journeys on the Local link service in the first week of June 2022 compared to the peak in 2021 of 738 passenger journeys which occurred in late August (see graph below). Joint promotional activity has taken place between TFI Local Link and Bus Éireann to highlight the increased frequency and connectivity for passengers between these services.

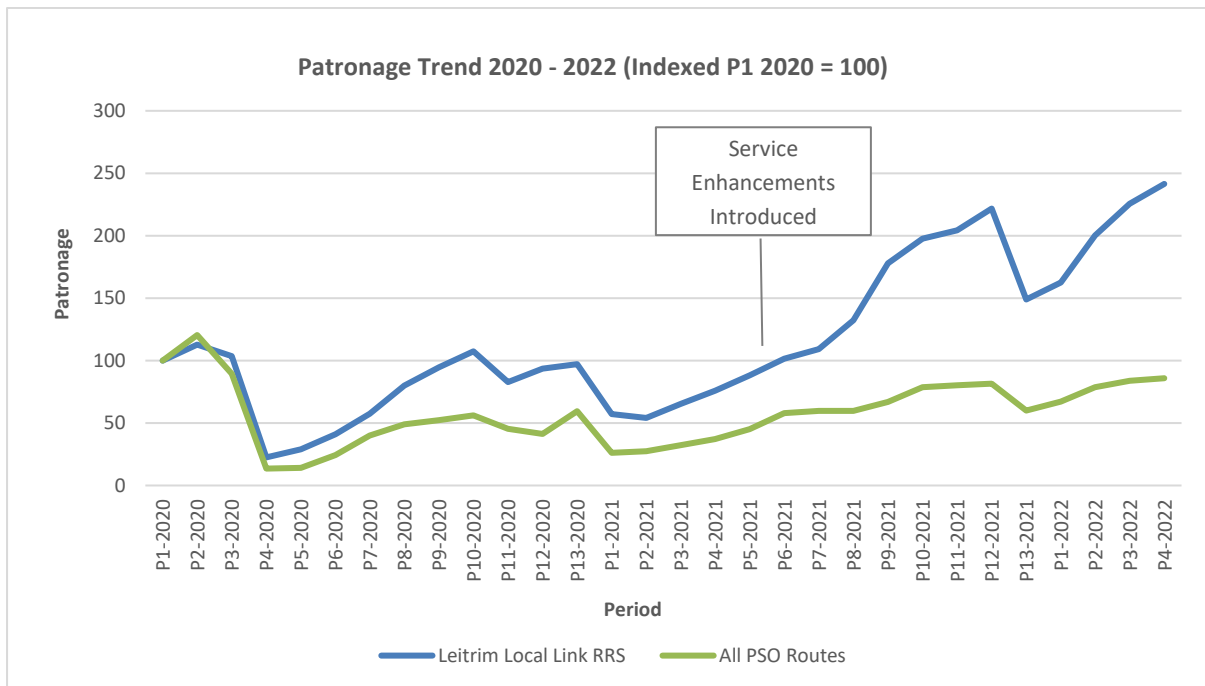


▪ **Leitrim Local Link**

The Authority and the Donegal Sligo Leitrim Transport Coordination Unit (TCU) working closely with the HSE to plan and develop a revised network of TFI Local Link services for Co. Leitrim. The services are designed to meet the needs of mainstream public transport users as well as the transport needs of passengers accessing (non-emergency) health care services. The first phase was implemented on 28th June 2021, with all services now introduced.

The improvements included provision of an enhanced number of services over an expanded schedule with an increase in Regular Rural Services (RRS) routes. Increase in annual vehicle km’s of service in excess of 450,000.

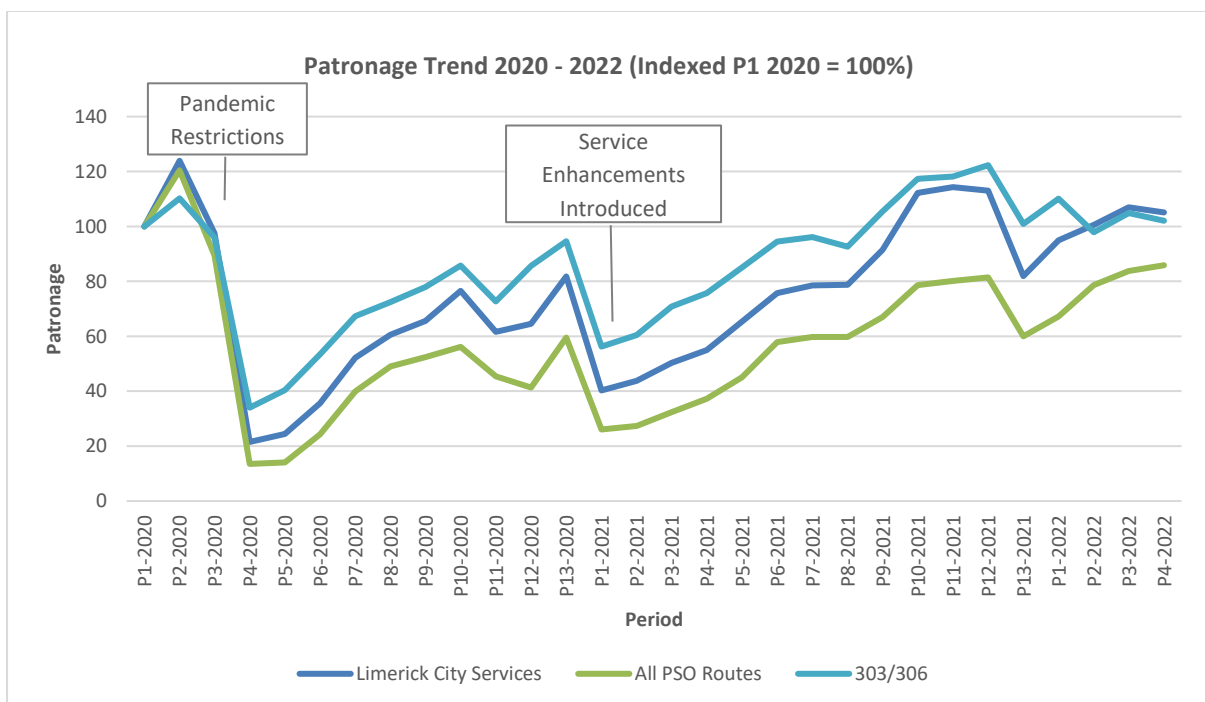
Since the introduction of the enhanced TFI Local Link network in Leitrim, passenger numbers have continued to increase with the service now carrying almost 10,000 passenger trips per period more than double, the pre-pandemic patronage levels.



▪ **Limerick City Services**

In January 2021 under the Government stimulus programme the NTA reconfigured and increased the level of service on the route 303 and provided an enhanced off peak and evening level of service on the 306 serving Limerick City.

Despite suppressed demand for office based commuting trips in metropolitan areas in particular, patronage on the improved routes remained at 20 - 25% above the national trend throughout the pandemic and had returned to pre-pandemic levels by October 2021.



▪ **Kildare Rail Services**

In 2016, the Authority approved the introduction of new rail services between stations on the Kildare corridor and Grand Canal Dock via the refurbished Phoenix Park Tunnel and calling at Connolly, Tara Street and Pearse Street stations. On 20 November 2016, the new morning and evening peak services were introduced. December 2018 additional off peak and evening services were added on the corridor.

Since service improvements on the corridor daily boarding had more than doubled between 2015 and 2019. This rate of growth was significantly higher than that on comparable GDA commuter lines over the same period of time and across the wider network.

